

### Women, Work, And Worship In Lincoln\'s Country: The Dumville Family Letters

Bao Bui

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## Review

**Bui, Bao**

**Fall 2016**

**Heinz, Anne M. and Heinz, John P..** *Women, Work, and Worship in Lincoln's Country: The Dumville Family Letters*. University of Illinois Press, \$40.00 ISBN 9780252039959

### Four Women's Stories

In 1840 the Dumville family left England and settled in the American Midwest. They joined the millions of European, chiefly German and Irish, who immigrated to United States in the 1840s and 1850s. Thanks to the meticulous research by the editors of *Women, Work, and Worship in Lincoln's Country: The Dumville Family Letters* readers can view a photo of the ship's manifest showing Dumvilles' names upon arrival in New York City. Thomas Dumville, the patriarch, died two years later, leaving his wife Ann a widow tasked with raising three girls - Elizabeth, Jemima, and Hephzibah - amidst the farm country of central Illinois. The four women's lives cover three centuries. In 1796, the year of Anne Dumville's birth, George Washington urged his compatriots to refrain from entanglement with the politics of a fractious Europe. Anne's second daughter, Jemima, died in 1919, the year when millions of American troops were returning home from Europe after decisively intervening in Europe's "Great War."

The lives of rural middle-class women in the Civil War era come to light thanks to Anne M. Heinz and John P. Heinz's fine edition of the Dumville letters, now archived at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library in Springfield, Illinois. In the preface to *Women, Work, and Worship* the Heinzs provide a backstory to the letters and a helpful discussion of the writing conventions of the mid-nineteenth century. As the editors have noted, the three Dumville daughters improved in spelling, grammar, and syntax as the years progressed. Writers with modest income had to be economical since paper, envelopes, and stamps were relatively expensive. Yet, as other scholars have pointed out, the antebellum period saw a revolution in communication and transportation that transformed

American social, economic, and political life. The Dumville sisters entered adulthood and the start of their epistolary careers at time when commoners could afford to write on a regular basis and had access to a nationwide postal system.

The commentary at the beginning of each section provides a useful primer for readers unfamiliar with the major social, political, and economic trends in the antebellum period. Along with their well-crafted and well-researched footnotes, the editorial notes greatly enhance the reader's engagement with the letters and the world that the Dumville women inhabited. The commentary by itself is a worth a read; the editors write in a very accessible style and they show a deft understanding of the historical trends and issues of the era.

Religion, specifically of the Methodist persuasion, permeated the lives of the Dumville women. The Dumvilles sincerely believed in the doctrines of the faith and proved themselves articulate, intelligent, and observant of both religious precepts and of the human condition. Yet, women did not hold positions of leadership in the Methodist congregations. Like most women, the Dumvilles had little access to the channels of formal power in this most powerful of human social institutions.

The letters frequently mention revivals, pastors and preachers, and conversions, and deathbed reconciliations with the Almighty. Indeed, death and disease provided a steady staple of epistolary content. The letters contain frequent references to measles, scarlet fever, "tyfoid," "bilious fever," and "congestion of the brain." One of the earliest letters in the collection, dated "July the 18th 1852" mentions "the death of Mr. Louis" who "has left a Widow and Six Childeron [sic] to mourn his lost." (27) Other topics also made regular appearances. Hephzibah suggested in one letter to her sister Jemima in 1857, "I will try to write a few words on the topics which are attracting general attention, which are Matrimony, Cold Weather, and Small Pocks." (67) On the subject of matrimony, all three Dumville daughters went on to marry, though Jemima and Hephzibah did not enter the conjugal state until both women were in their early thirties.

Though far removed from the corridors of national power, central Illinois in the last two decades of before the Civil War felt the full force of transnational events. The housing shortage in Jacksonville, where the Jemima and Hephzibah lived during their teenage years, arose in part to the large wave of Irish and German immigrants settling in the area. Though Hephzibah proclaimed in 1856

that “I do not desire” the “privilege of voting,” the sisters’ writings strongly suggest that they were invested in the political controversies of the time. The letters, especially from Hephzibah, contain numerous references to leading Illinois politicians like John Yates, Stephen Douglass, and Abraham Lincoln. Hephzibah even referred to Lincoln in March 1861 as “the man for the hour.” A century before the historians reached a consensus on the issue, Hephzibah in a September 1856 letter hit dead-on the fundamental root cause of the nation’s political troubles: “the Southern states with their African slavery, the desire of some to extend it and determination of others to abolish it.” (62) Jemima in an 1859 letter mentions “poor Brown who was taken at Harpers Ferry” and other “awful events in Virginia.” (101) By mid-war, the Dumville sisters, like many other Northerners, had turned decisively against slavery. In March 1862 Jemima wrote, “I firmly believe peace never will be restored unto us until we as a nation...place our feet upon the neck of the monster slavery.” (143)

What the Dumville women thought of emancipation and Reconstruction remains a mystery. As the editors admit, missing is “the complete record of their correspondence” in the postwar years. (xv) Still, what we do have tell a remarkable story of the everyday lives and extraordinary events of mid-nineteenth century America. The editors have made a strong case for the vibrancy and historical significance of women’s personal writings. “The Dumville letters,” they correctly point out, “are a small counterweight to the dominant, elite, masculine perspective.” (21) Like intellectual fingerprints on the ledger of history, each letter reveals the distinctiveness of each woman’s view of herself and the world around her. Thanks to the solid editorial work by the Heinzs, the voices of commoners, of lower-class people, of women in the American heartland struggling to control their destinies, are now heard and cherished.

*L. Bao Bui is a Visiting Assistant Professor in the Department of History at Ball State University.*