

Single, White, Slaveholding Women in the Nineteenth-Century American South

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Review

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Molloy, Marie S. *Single, White, Slaveholding Women in the Nineteenth-Century American South*. University of South Carolina Press, 2018. \$39.99 ISBN 9781611178708

Marie S. Molloy, a lecturer at Manchester Metropolitan University in the United Kingdom, has conducted an amazing amount of research for this book, consulting 83 separate collections in six different archives, as well as another 21 published primary sources and *Race, Slavery and Free Blacks: Petitions to Southern Legislatures, 1777-1867*. She culled these sources for letters, diaries, journals, and court cases and petitions by or about single white women born or living in slaveholding families between 1810 and 1860. Throughout the book, Molloy uses stories, excerpts, and wonderful quotes from the women she discovered in her research, and these glimpses into the lives of single women are the strongest aspect of this work.

Molloy's primary argument is that the seeds of the possibility for social, economic, and legal autonomy for single women were planted in the antebellum period, accelerated by the Civil War, and came to some fruition in the postbellum period. The first chapter discusses the social construction of femininity in the antebellum period. According to Molloy, southern women were expected to live up to the "Cult of True Womanhood," which required them to marry and become mothers, but some single women also adhered to the concept of the "Cult of Single Blessedness," which required them to exalt motherhood but choose to remain single and useful nonetheless. The primary way of remaining useful was to devote oneself to one's extended family as a devoted daughter, sister, or aunt, which is the subject of the second chapter. The third chapter explores single women's work, particularly planters, teachers, and nurses. Widows and women left for long periods by husbands away on business ran plantations in the antebellum era, but war and emancipation made this difficult for them. Women taught and nursed family members and others in the antebellum era, but the increased need for nurses and teachers and the economic need of women made this a much more common paying occupation for women during

and after the war. The fourth chapter about female friendships argues that close friendships between single women provided emotional sustenance. Those friendships that included close physical elements were accepted before the war, but by the end of the century were increasingly suspect as possible economic independence for single women made such relationships seem threatening to the social order. The last chapter on single women and the law considers divorce and widowhood, arguing that “the relationship between single women, property, and the law was constantly evolving throughout the nineteenth century.”

The strength of this work is Molloy’s extensive research. The conclusions drawn from that research are very general, echoing to some extent the recent works of other historians such as Kirsten Wood and Anya Jabour. Molloy also, however, relies upon older ideological frameworks that were based upon northern ideals of women’s lives, such as the “Cult of True Womanhood,” and “Cult of Single Blessedness.” While she acknowledges that those concepts were different in the South, she does not adequately explain how or why or if her sources indicate uniquely southern deviations from those ideals.

Also, the subject of the book is better described as single, white women in slaveholding families, as very little attention is paid to whether or not these women owned slaves themselves (except in one section of the chapter on work). Rather, it is the wealth and standing of these women as members of families in the planter class that the author explores. Molloy’s work has given voice to many single, southern women who successfully navigated a society in which marriage was supposedly the decisive measure of a woman’s worth, while noting the changes in their lives due to the Civil War.

Angela Boswell is professor of history and dean of Ellis College of Arts and Sciences at Henderson State University. She is the author of the recent, award-winning Women in Texas History (Texas A&M University Press) and co-editor of Women in Civil War Texas: Diversity and Dissidence in the Trans-Mississippi (University of North Texas Press).