Battle Scars: Gender and Sexuality in the American Civil War.

Reviewed by Jenny Barrett

Battle Scars: Gender and Sexuality in the American Civil War may be a collection of essays more likely to appeal to the American Civil War scholar than the gender studies scholar, it being essentially one in a line of very welcome historical scholarship that breaks with the tradition of knowing the war only from the perspective of its celebrated male participants, the household names of Lincoln, Lee, Chamberlain and Jackson. However, knowledge of the war is far from essential and so the curious mind of anyone open to new perspectives on gender in an American historical context will find this volume stimulating, shocking and enlightening. Clinton and Silber’s previous collaboration, Divided Houses: Gender and the Civil War (Oxford University Press, 1992), was a groundbreaking collection of new scholarship that placed gender at the very core of political processes and social experiences during the war, including sexist antagonism between cultures, feminist activity in the abolitionist movement and new expectations of masculinity brought by the military conflict. This more recent publication continues in this vein with more original insights into the crises, the suffering and the triumphs of men and women caught up in a bloody and traumatic war.

Both clear and accessible, Virginia Gould’s essay on the Catholic nuns of the South reveals that the women of this religious order enjoyed a relative freedom from the control of patriarchy in contrast with their secular sisters. The nuns’ bravery in their aid to the starving and the destitute, their resourcefulness and autonomy, even in comparison to male clergy, was such that, Gould claims, ‘a habit went further than a robe and collar’ (p. 50). At the very least their actions were in service to their God; politically speaking it was a form of ‘social activism within the language and behavior of piety and fervour’ (p. 55). Clinton’s own chapter on ‘public women’ presents evidence of the dramatic rise in prostitution amongst women, held responsible for spreading fear, disease and prejudice in urban environments such as Richmond and New Orleans. More revealing is the treatment of starving, working-class women after the Richmond Bread Riot of 1863, in which women driven to steal food and clothes were reported in the press as being already very familiar with courtrooms, not starving but greedy and, it was insinuated, women of the street. Essays such as these, as diverse as their topics of study, help the reader to view the American Civil
War afresh, indeed to appreciate history more fully by its closer eye on ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances.

A number of the essays are not easy reading, down to the nature of their subject matter rather than any academic density. Jim Downs’ chapter about the treatment of freedwomen and their children after the resolution of the war puts nineteenth-century African-American emancipation into an entirely new perspective in which these never-enfranchised families were separated from their labouring husbands and fathers and left to fend for themselves. Despite dozens of benevolent aid societies, many of these women and children suffered starvation, disease and insanity. Lisa Cardyn’s chapter on sexual violence in the Reconstruction South reveals, in sobering detail, some of the practices of certain white supremacist groups, seeking to re-establish a dominant white, patriarchal hierarchy after the end of the war. Most commendable, perhaps, is Cardyn’s choice to list the names of some of the black men and women who were raped and terrorised, and those of their white attackers, allowing them a place in our history books previously ignored by tidy histories of the American Civil War, highlighted most poignantly by the fact that courtrooms would often refuse to record full details of the attacks because they were so disturbing.

Other essays include Elizabeth D. Leonard’s perspectives on Dr Mary Walker, MD, whose flagrant disobedience of gender expectations won her the only Medal of Honor awarded to a woman, and on Mary Surratt, the woman found guilty and hanged for a conspiracy to kidnap Abraham Lincoln, according to distinctly circumstantial evidence. Leonard’s chapter concludes that patriarchy in its various wartime and postbellum forms, the law, the press, the medical establishment, had to work hard to keep women ‘in their place’ after a period of such disruption to the status quo. Similarly, John Stanffer argues in his chapter that the war presented a masculine crisis which was embodied by ‘a backlash against feminine virtues and a masculinization of culture after the war’ (p. 122), having a strong influence on the literature and politics of both men and women from that period. Equally engaging is Anne Sarah Rubin’s study of Southern women’s fictional anti-Federal ‘newsletters’ and Thomas J. Brown’s thoughts on the inconsistency of approach towards the design of Confederate memorials to their glorious fighting men and the women of the South.

Each of the essays in the volume turns the reader’s eye away from the much lauded leaders and officers of the American Civil War, men – and occasionally women – whose lives have been scrutinised and commemorated in numerous academic and popular books, magazines, journals, statues and films, towards the previously unseen people of the 1860s. Stephen Kantrowitz, for example, in his exploration of the contrasts between black and white abolitionism in Massachusetts, takes several pages before mentioning, in passing, the more commonly known black regiment, the 54th Massachusetts and its officer, Robert Gould Shaw. It is history ‘from the bottom up,’ a type of historiography that seeks to gain a fuller understanding of the past in which lesser known, and indeed unknown, lives are placed at the centre of the query. Thus the collection is part of a revisionist historiography dating back to the 1960s which sought, and continues to seek, to understand many pasts, not only the master narratives written in the service of the privileged few. As such, and because the Civil War period is one of such dramatic social change, the collection makes for thought-provoking reading.