

Civil War Nurse Narratives, 1863-1870

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Civil War Nurse Narratives, 1863–1870, by Daneen Wardrop. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2015. ix, 267 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$55.00 paperback.

Reviewer Theresa McDevitt is Resident Librarian for the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indiana University of Pennsylvania. She is the author of “‘A Melody Before Unknown’: The Civil War Experiences of Mary and Amanda Shelton” (*Annals of Iowa*, 2004).

Eager recruits joined the Union army at the start of the Civil War, but the military was ill equipped to deal with their unprecedented numbers. Camps were hurriedly organized with inadequate housing, clothing, food, and sanitary conditions. Almost immediately, soldiers began falling ill and dying from camp diseases. It did not take long for reports of miserable camp conditions to filter back to women at home who wished to support the war effort and who felt responsible for the health and well-being of their friends and relatives—and of all soldiers risking their lives for the sake of the nation. Prior to the war, a vocal group of women had been pushing for a greater role in society and defying conventions by taking more public roles in reform work associated with protection of the family and moral improvement. The wartime crisis led many women to take a further step—the daring choice to serve as wartime nurse/relief worker. At the time, nursing outside the home was not a respectable profession for women, and traveling across the county unchaperoned to reach men in need was perceived as a reckless act that endangered life, limb, and reputation. Nonetheless, in the course of the war at least 20,000 American women provided relief services in one form or another. Between 1863 and 1870, at least 12 of those women wrote book-length narratives chronicling their wartime experiences.

In the present volume, Daneen Wardrop, who has written before about the literature of the Civil War era, takes a new look at seven of the works from that “first wave” of wartime narratives, classifying them as distinct from later memoirs and as a subgenre of Civil War literature whose authors adopted the rhetoric of antebellum reform to engage their readers and explain their wartime experiences. Chapters treat each of the seven women’s writings and diverse experiences, but all provide basic information on their lives prior to the war, their travels, their motivations for volunteering, and the difficulties they encountered when they brought their domestic expertise to what they often perceived as the professionalized, cold, and overly bureaucratic hospital setting.

Authors examined differed. Some (such as Louisa May Alcott) were well known during the war; others wrote anonymously. Some served for long periods perilously near the front; others arrived at calmer locations behind the lines after the fighting had ended and stayed for short

periods. In spite of the differences, Wardrop is able to discuss common themes in all the works, specifically those relating to the woman question, interracial interactions, and development of a national character through patriotism.

More comprehensive studies of women's wartime relief work have been written—Jane Schultz's *Women at the Front: Hospital Workers in Civil War America* (2004) is probably the most comprehensive—along with hundreds of individual studies of Civil War nurses' writings, but this work is unique in its focus on this subset of wartime writings that appeared during the war or shortly thereafter. Also, its focus on the works as narratives crafted in response to the most significant cultural themes of the period, and how they differed from later nurse narratives, is a novel and interesting interpretation that is valuable in telling the wartime story of these women while also illustrating the cultural context in which they lived. None of the women discussed was from Iowa, but their stories are quite similar to those of Iowa relief workers such as Annie Turner Wittenmyer (who wrote her wartime narrative later), and the interpretive framework might be applied to those works as well.

Empire and Liberty: The Civil War and the West, edited by Virginia Scharff. Oakland: Autry National Center of the American West in association with University of California Press, 2015. xv, 224 pp. Map, illustrations, notes, index. \$34.95 hardcover.

Reviewer Ginette Aley is adjunct professor of history at Washburn University and a Carey Fellow at Kansas State University. She coedited *Union Heartland: The Midwestern Home Front during the Civil War* (2013).

The Civil War not only embroiled the North and South as a sectional conflict, but encompassed the entire nation. The driving wedge, as historian and editor Virginia Scharff notes, was westward expansion. *Empire and Liberty: The Civil War and the West* is a nicely illustrated collection of 11 essays edited by Scharff, a companion volume to the *Civil War and the West* exhibit at the Autry National Center curated by Carolyn Brucken. One of the volume's strengths is its overriding focus on the exhibit's material culture and the narrative contexts of the items in an otherwise wide-ranging and exceptionally well-written set of essays.

The narratives of westward expansion often fail to highlight the tragic ironies and the ways liberty was asserted by some yet denied to others. Brenda E. Stevenson's "The Price of Slavery across Empire" offers an engaging description of how the cost of slavery went far beyond the bill of sale for the enslaved people brought to Texas in the 1850s.