

Our Army Nurses: Stories from Women in the Civil War/Turn Backward, O Time: The Civil War Diary of Amanda Shelton

Theresa McDevitt

Indiana University of Pennsylvania

ISSN 0003-4827

Copyright © 2007 State Historical Society of Iowa. This article is posted here for personal use, not for redistribution.

Recommended Citation

McDevitt, Theresa. "Our Army Nurses: Stories from Women in the Civil War/Turn Backward, O Time: The Civil War Diary of Amanda Shelton." *The Annals of Iowa* 66 (2007), 85-87.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.1092>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

Our Army Nurses: Stories from Women in the Civil War, by Mary Gardner Holland. Roseville, MN: Edinborough Press, 2002. viii, 306 pp. Illustrations, index. \$19.95 paper.

Turn Backward, O Time: The Civil War Diary of Amanda Shelton, by Kathleen S. Hanson. Roseville, MN: Edinborough Press, 2006. vi, 148 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$14.95 paper.

Reviewer Theresa McDevitt is government documents/reference librarian at Indiana University of Pennsylvania Libraries. She is the author of "A Melody Before Unknown: The Civil War Experiences of Mary and Amanda Shelton," in the *Annals of Iowa* (Spring 2004).

In 1861 there were few hospitals in the United States. Those that existed were charitable operations where disease spread like wildfire, mortality rates were high, and only the most desperate went. With the exception of Roman Catholic sisters, the women who worked in such institutions were of the lowest classes, and they were suspected of having the lowest morals. Between 1861 and 1865 such attitudes changed when thousands of intrepid women defied the societal restraints of the antebellum era to engage in soldier-centered medical and sanitary relief efforts. When the war ended, the efforts of these women led to greater acceptance of middle-class women in medicine. The two works under review here, both published by Edinborough Press as part of its series on the History of Nursing, offer modern readers insights into the experience of a hundred or so of the women who offered medical services to soldiers during the war.

Our Army Nurses is a new edition of a late nineteenth-century publication that gathered the stories of 100 women volunteers. It was compiled 30 years after the close of the conflict by Mary Gardner Holland, herself a wartime nurse. The book is made up of individual autobiographical accounts, contributions by husbands or children of departed women, reprinted newspaper accounts, and descriptions of work of Roman Catholic sisters.

Although the stories are limited to white women loyal to the Union, offering little ethnic diversity, they offer insight into the varying experience and motivations of this group of female relief workers. The women were single, married, and widowed. They came from across the Union, including a number of women from Iowa. They went to the field accompanying soldier or physician spouses or rushed to the field to assist fallen brothers, husbands, or sons. They went alone or with other women, as independent workers or under the auspices of the federal government, the state, or of a number of commissions or local relief societies. Once there, some marched with the soldiers, nursed men in the field, or worked in hospitals in cities, isolated military en-

campments, or hospital transports. They worked as matrons or nurses, supervised linen rooms, oversaw special diet kitchens, or gathered and distributed relief supplies, witnessing major battles and the carnage and death that followed. In addition to providing medical services, they taught freedmen, worked as spies, buried the dead, and sent last words to the relatives of the deceased.

Although the accounts vary, they show common threads of women's bold and in fact revolutionary flights to the field. Women recalled encountering initial resistance from medical authorities and even religious missionaries already in the field who questioned women's abilities, endurance, motives, and morals. They told of their initial horror and eventual endurance of the carnage of the war and of their heroic efforts to comfort soldiers, nurse the hospitalized as shots flew around them, comb the battlefield for fallen soldiers left among the dead, and question medical authorities who were too willing to leave a man for dead or take off a limb unnecessarily. Some women died in the effort or were sent home worn out by illness and overwork. Others endured and overcame insults and resistance, setting the stage for increased participation of women in medical services and other reform work in the latter part of the century.

This new edition includes a modern introduction by Edinborough Press's Daniel J. Hoisington, a table of contents, an index, and a re-arrangement of the entries to alphabetical order by subject, making it easier to locate specific names. The editor has deleted some less essential textual material and some illustrations, but retained most images of the subjects of the accounts. The new version is more usable and offers much to modern readers by making the voices of 100 Civil War-era women available to modern audiences in a single volume.

Turn Backward, O Time is the diary of an articulate woman, who at 20 years of age left her comfortable home in Mt. Pleasant, Iowa, to travel to the war zone to work in Annie Turner Wittenmyer's diet kitchen program. The diary makes for fascinating reading for a number of reasons. Shelton was one of a small number of women who served in an experiment that sent middle-class women to supervise the cooking (not to serve as cooks) in military hospitals and to do missionary work with the soldiers. Going to the field with the highest expectations, Shelton encountered the horrors of mid-nineteenth-century hospitals, uncomfortable living quarters, and military-medical authorities who doubted her competence and the value of the program. In the course of her work, she encountered challenges of all sorts, from learning how to run the kitchens to dealing with men in the field, including doctors and ministers working for the Christian Commission who questioned not only her competence but ultimately her morals.

The diary shows her growing sophistication as she traveled across the nation gaining competence working in a man's world. It also offers unique insights into the postwar experience of wartime workers. Prior to the war, Shelton lost a teaching position to a male candidate. After the war, she was hired as a clerk in a mental institution, just the sort of positions increasingly available to women in the war's wake. Her accounts of the patients in the hospital are intriguing.

The diary was transcribed and annotated by Kathleen Hanson, an associate professor of nursing at Iowa College of Nursing. Her detailed notes help readers understand the diary. Appendixes include letters sent to Annie Wittenmyer relating to charges of immoral behavior leveled at Amanda and a postwar address written by Shelton in the early part of the twentieth century. Offering a window to the personal experience of a woman who worked closely with Iowa's Annie Wittenmyer as a "lady manager" in the U.S. Christian Commission diet kitchen program, this volume adds greatly to the few published materials that exist to document this fascinating chapter in the history of the Civil War.

Historians, women's studies scholars, and those interested in the history of nursing and the Civil War will welcome both of these volumes. They increase access to primary source material not readily available to modern readers, with the added value of background information and modern scholarly comment.

Bleed, Blister, and Purge: A History of Medicine on the American Frontier, by Volney Steele, M.D. Missoula, MT: Mountain Press Publishing Co., 2005. xxiii, 300 pp. Illustrations, notes, glossary, index, bibliography. \$15.00 paper.

Reviewer Lee Anderson is co-principal of A & P Historical Resources, Coralville. He is the author of several books and articles about Iowa medical history.

Professional historians might be inclined to give this book and its author short shrift. After all, the author is not a trained historian; nor does this work offer much in the way of new scholarship. Still, the book has much to offer. Its subject matter—life and death on the frontier—is important, and a good bit of the story applies to Iowa and the Midwest. Moreover, one can well imagine the years of patient reading and research that preceded the writing of this book; just as important, one can appreciate and applaud the author's straightforward writing style and his obvious enthusiasm for history.

Born in Arkansas in 1922, Volney Steele enrolled in the U.S. Navy V-12 Program in 1942 and graduated from the University of Arkansas