



9-19-2016

Beneath the Mulberry Tree: Sarah Edmonds and Women in Memory

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Jensen, Anika N., "Beneath the Mulberry Tree: Sarah Edmonds and Women in Memory" (2016). *The Gettysburg Compiler: On the Front Lines of History*. 202.

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Abstract

In her memoir *Nurse and Spy in the Union Army*, Sarah Emma Edmonds, a woman fighting in the Union Army disguised as a man, employed florid diction and a subtle romantic flare to illustrate an emotional and confounding moment in the aftermath of the Battle of Antietam: discovering another woman undercover. Edmonds writes of the “pale, sweet face of a youthful soldier,” of a boy trembling from blood loss who, she knew, had only a few more minutes on earth. He tasted his last sip of water, and with his remaining breaths the soldier beckoned Edmonds closer and uttered a secret: that he was really she, a woman who had enlisted and seen her brother, her only family, die upon the same field just a few hours before. The soldier confessed to being a devout Christian and asked only that she be buried by Emma, so no other might discover her true identity. She then died, “calm and peaceful.” Emma obliged the soldier’s request and buried her beneath a mulberry tree; she would be separated from her fallen comrades but rest upon the same field. Emma wrote of the woman soldier, “There she sleeps in that beautiful forest where the soft southern breezes sigh mournfully through the foliage, and the little birds sing sweetly above her grave.”

[*excerpt*]

Keywords

Gettysburg College, Civil War, Union Army, feminism, women, history

Disciplines

Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies | History | Military History | Public History | United States History

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This blog post originally appeared in [The Gettysburg Compiler](#) and was created by students at Gettysburg College.

THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Beneath the Mulberry Tree: Sarah Edmonds and Women in Memory

By Annika Jensen '18

In her memoir *Nurse and Spy in the Union Army*, Sarah Emma Edmonds, a woman fighting in the Union Army disguised as a man, employed florid diction and a subtle romantic flare to illustrate an emotional and confounding moment in the aftermath of the Battle of Antietam: discovering another woman undercover. Edmonds writes of the “pale, sweet face of a youthful soldier,” of a boy trembling from blood loss who, she knew, had only a few more minutes on earth. He tasted his last sip of water, and with his remaining breaths the soldier beckoned Edmonds closer and uttered a secret: that he was really she, a woman who had enlisted and seen her brother, her only family, die upon the same field just a few hours before. The soldier confessed to being a devout Christian and asked only that she be buried by Emma, so no other might discover her true identity. She then died, “calm and peaceful.” Emma obliged the soldier’s request and buried her beneath a mulberry tree; she would be separated from her fallen comrades but rest upon the same field. Emma wrote of the woman soldier, “There she sleeps in that beautiful forest where the soft southern breezes sigh mournfully through the foliage, and the little birds sing sweetly above her grave.”

Through the lens of gender or feminist criticism, which analyzes the social and political status of women as well as their relationships within and without their gender, this is perhaps the most evocative and compelling anecdote of Edmonds’ memoir; not only is the fallen soldier made a romantic hero by the overwhelming, illustrious language, but the interaction between Edmonds and the unnamed is depicted as one between two women, not two women pretending to be men. Essentially, Emma reverts back to her true gender—her truest self—in this instance, and it is clear that the anonymous soldier found, in choosing to reveal her secret upon her death, solace in her womanhood.



Sarah Emma Edmonds, alias Franklin Thompson, served as a soldier, nurse, and spy in the 2nd Michigan Infantry. Photo via Wikimedia Commons.

Edmonds' memory is touching and beautifully depicted, a compelling glance into the nature of a womanhood so long suppressed and the bonds that women form even beneath the guise of masculinity. At the end of the anecdote, Edmonds even composed a poem for the mystery woman:

Her race is run. In Southern clime She rests among the brave; Where perfumed blossoms gently fall, Like tears, around her grave. No loving friends are near to weep Or plant bright flowers there; But birdlings

chant a requiem sweet, And strangers breathe a prayer. She sleeps in peace; yes, sweetly sleeps, Her sorrows all are o'er; With her the storms of life are past: She's found the heavenly shore.

The verse is replete with Romantic influence and carries an early Wordsworthian tone, honoring death not with human grief but with the resplendence and resilience of nature.

All of that is fine and good and provides an excellent source for examination through a gender-critical lens, but there is something else interesting going on here: it is believed that the 2nd Michigan, Edmonds' regiment, was not present during the Battle of Antietam or in its aftermath. The Civil War Archive's history of the Michigan regiments records the 2nd Michigan as marching "up the Potomac to Leesburg, thence to Falmouth, Va" from September 3 to October 11. Michigan Genealogy on the Web, which is part of the [USGenWeb Project](#), makes no note of the regiment being engaged at Antietam; it writes that in early September of 1862 "the Regiment made several short marches, finally reaching Fort Ward [in Alexandria, VA], where it encamped until the 25th, then marched to Upton's Hill, when in October the III Corp, in which the Regiment was serving, made a reconnaissance up the Potomac River as far as Edward's Ferry, Md." Furthermore, the III Corps was not involved in the Maryland Campaign, essentially eliminating the possibility that Edmonds was in Sharpsburg on September 17.



Confederate dead at Antietam. It is unlikely that Emma would have been present at this battle, thus insinuating that the story about the female soldier in her memoir is fiction. Photo via Wikimedia Commons.

Thus, it is unlikely that this event ever occurred. Disappointing? Perhaps, but nevertheless fascinating, as this poses a new series of questions: why did Emma fabricate this event? Was she blurring reality with thought? Did she have a similar experience with a woman undercover?

We are not certain, but perhaps Edmonds wanted to include this narrative for the sake of emphasizing the importance of female relationships and identity, particularly her own. For one, Emma knew the role of gender in her life and maintained a clear distinction between her woman-self and her man-self; she writes of “a suspicion well founded” in examining the Antietam soldier, indicating that she knew of the soldier’s true identity, a conclusion reached through her understanding of her own gender. Likewise, Edmonds’ respect for the woman in question is immense; not only did she honor the request for secrecy (her memoir account notwithstanding), she carried out her promise to give the woman a proper soldier’s burial on the battlefield where she had died. There also existed in the account an intrinsic bond between the two that resulted in the mystery soldier’s immediate trust of Emma.

Thus, Emma could have fabricated the event for the sake of bringing light to women’s lives and struggles.

Unfortunately, we can’t do much more than interpret, but we (or at least I) can conclude that Edmonds would have held a special respect and admiration for women, particularly those undercover. The idea that she would have met another female soldier is more of a fool’s hope, but it is my belief that an account such as the one at Antietam, though most likely fake, must have come from a desire to portray women in uniform in their true nature, not in a way perceived by the outside world. Perhaps the event occurred in a different context, and Emma simply confused her dates; even if it did not, there is still much to be learned from it. For as much time as she spent under the guise of Frank Thompson, Edmonds never lost touch with her identity as a woman.

Sources

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