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Kelly H. Crosby
Gettysburg College

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Abstract

Southern plantation women experienced a shift in identity over the course of the Civil War. Through the diaries of Catherine Edmondston and Eliza Fain, historians note the discrepancy between the ideal and real roles women had while the men were off fighting. Unique perspectives and hidden voices in their writings offer valuable insight into the life of plantation women and the hybrid identity they gained despite the Confederate loss.

Keywords

Civil War, home front, Confederacy, Catherine Edmondston, Eliza Fain, plantation, Southern society, slavery, plantation mistress

Disciplines

African American Studies | Cultural History | History | History of Gender | Social History | United States History | Women's History | Women's Studies

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History Thesis

THE IDEAL AND THE REAL:
SOUTHERN PLANTATION WOMEN OF THE CIVIL WAR

Kelly Crosby
Dr. Carmichael
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Just two months into the Civil War, Eliza Fain sensed an irrevocable shift on the Southern home front. In her journal entry dated June 2, 1861, she recalled waking “with a feeling of indescribable grief” as “darkness” rolled over East Tennessee. Union troops continued to advance, and her husband Richard and five of their sons had left to take up arms for Southern “Liberty.” However, the liberty to which she referred did not include African Americans. Like all elite plantation owners, Eliza Fain and her family lived off slave labor. Without it, life as they knew it could not exist. “Why O why have our Northern brethren meddled with our domestic institution of slavery?” Fain asked. “How little they know of the deep anguish many of us feel in regard to our servants for their immortal souls.” Deeply religious Fain wanted to think the best of her slaves. She appreciated that “they seem to do everything they can to make one happy, no words, no looks of indifference...” They even missed the Fain men as much as she did. Gus, one of her most faithful servants, told her, “Miss Liza I never have felt so troubled when Master Richard was from home.” Whether this was true or not does not matter. Her diary captures the benevolence she imagined she had as an elite slaveholder and her struggle to accept the shifting reality of plantation life during the war. She reveals that, despite her men’s quest for liberty and her slaves’ supposed loyalty in their absence, she “felt so greatly troubled.” “We all seem to be so broken up,” Fain lamented. “Our Union has long since been obliterated if not done away with.” Furthermore, she recognized the underlying cause of this: “The sacredness of the home circle has been invaded – perhaps never again to be as it has been; our family alter has been broken.” Fain’s insight was correct; the Southern

plantation did not return to its antebellum state. Nor was her role in it ever the same again.¹

The Civil War brought a revolution to the elite Southern slaveholding system. Tennessean Eliza Fain and Catherine Edmondston of North Carolina were caught in the crossfire. How did upheaval in the Southern household effect women's gender roles within this society? Through journal writings historians have been able to follow female thought and behavior over the course of the war. The importance of the journal was not just what was stated, but also what was omitted that told the story of their experience. Diaries become more than recorders of thought. They were the stage on which women performed in the way they wished to be perceived. Historians who study this have noted a shift in women's positions and relations on the family plantation over the course of the war. With men off fighting, women were forced to break away from their traditional roles as passive, pious symbols of the Southern home and the Confederate cause. They assumed the duties of household manager, overseer and slave master. With this increased responsibility came new confrontations with the enslaved and the fighting and returning men. A discrepancy between the ideal and real identity of women developed and led to an incremental merge of their place in public and private spheres. This disruption and redefining of women's roles contributed to the defeat of the Confederacy. However, Southern women gained a liberty of their own sort: increased authority and self-assurance rarely realized previously for women.

THE DIARY

¹ John N. Fain, ed., *Sanctified Trial: The Diary of Eliza Rhea Anderson Fain, A Confederate Woman in East Tennessee* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2004) 12-14.

The power and performance of elite white women grew during the early 1860s, both as they perceived it to be and as it really was. Diaries are invaluable in revealing these differences. Not only do they chronicle the daily happenings of southern plantation life from an elite woman's perspective, but they also disclose hidden aspirations and imagined realities that women believed to be true at the time. Furthermore, they expose the voices of others, those who interacted with and influenced the mistress: slaves, soldiers, family members and neighbors, religious leaders, and political figures. The diaries' themselves hold significance as material evidence for the greater multilayered story that their pages contain.

Diaries were not novelties for nineteenth century women. Catherine Edmondston, a prosperous plantation mistress from Halifax County, North Carolina, had volumes of journals over the course of her lifetime. Physically, they were made of almost anything. As a Christmas present from her husband Patrick in 1863, she received a "nice new blank book," bound and embossed with his name "P. M. Edmondston" on the cover. However, a year earlier she wrote in an old account book. She believed she could make up for its lack of "personal pulchritude... by the sincerity & delicacy of [her] record," with "words of truth... so rare that they will have a value of their own." By the end of her first entry, though, she exclaims the used book "does not seem natural to me at all" and "depresses me to write in it." Edmondston thought of "the hopes which cluster *around* the opening of a career so bright as that of the owner of this book & how they were clouded" by the war. She confessed it made her "shrink more into [herself & her] home duties & associations than ever" before. She sometimes regretted writing about "the fancies & follies" that occupied her "for the passing moment." Paper was expensive, but the South mostly used "home made

letter paper, whitey brown, or rather brownish-white,” as opposed to the bleached white paper the North preferred and considered more dignified. Due to the popularity of journal writing, though, it seems elite women did not hesitate to use whatever they could find on which to write their activities and thoughts. This showed a growing consideration for the value they had for themselves and their right to self-expression.²

Unfortunately, as the Civil War continued, women destroyed some of their diaries. They feared their chronicles would be stolen and their secrets revealed. In April 1865 Edmondston sent her journal into “darkness & solitude” because it was “too bulky to be kept out, exposed to prying Yankee eyes and theivish [sic] Yankee fingers.” She contemplated “how Sheridan’s bumming officers would seize upon the ‘Journal of a Secesh Lady – a complete record of a daily life spent in the Southern Confederacy from July 1860 to April 65’ & how [she] would feel thus dragged from the recesses of private life & ... published for the amusement of a censorious, curious, and critical public?” (It eventually was published, albeit for its historical significance, not as a vengeful act.) In the place of a bound book, Edmondston vowed to keep her thoughts “on scraps of paper, backs of letters, or old memorandum books which [she could] secrete” for the time being. She later organized and recorded them in a new book for ease of reading.³

Today, historians have access to what is left: the diaries that were not torn apart and burned to ashes but lost in basements, attics and closets and discovered years later. Preserved in dusty boxes and disintegrated bindings, words of plantation women scrawled across faded paper, their significance multifold. At the most basic understand, Civil War

² Beth Gilbert Crabtree and James W. Patton, eds., *Journal of a Secesh Lady: The Diary of Catherine Ann Devereux Edmondston, 1860-1866* (Raleigh: Division of Archives and History, 1979), 348-349, 274-275, and 337.

³ *Ibid*, 692.

diaries recount stories of everyday life. However, there is so much more to them than this. In *The Rhetoric of Rebel Women*, English professor Kimberly Harrison tells of the many purposes diaries served for elite white women in the Civil War. “For some, they were confidants, friends, allowing space for personal reflection.”⁴ Catherine Edmondston makes great use of this technique, much more so than Eliza Fain. On September 11, 1862 she confessed, “It is lonely here tonight, so Journal, as you are my only companion, I feel like having a long chat with you. Let me see, there are many topics which fill my heart & thoughts. We will discuss them.”⁵ Just as friends do, diaries kept secrets too. A few days later Edmondston disclosed a secret about a military blunder by a man “who it seems misunderstood the orders.” She followed it with the assurance, “you are a Journal of honour, I know you will not importune me to betray it.”⁶ This confession and profession of trust manifests itself in the personification of the diary. It served, in part, to fill the empty space left by great human loss. It is no surprise, then, that diaries became a popular source of comfort to elite women.

Harrison also recognizes diaries’ practical purpose as ancestral archives and “records of personal, educational, and spiritual growth.”⁷ In between observations about the world in which the author lived were private thoughts and feelings about the author herself. Through the act of writing, women “could consider traumatic external events and their role within them.” Then, they could “challenge [those] antebellum gender roles and ideals.”⁸ Harvard’s first female president and historian Drew Gilpin Faust takes this idea

⁴ Kimberly Harrison, *The Rhetoric of Rebel Women: Civil War Diaries and Confederate Persuasion* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2013), 8.

⁵ Crabtree and Patton, *Journal of a Secesh Lady*, 254.

⁶ Ibid, 261.

⁷ Harrison, *Rhetoric*, 8.

⁸ Ibid, 7.

further in her book *Mothers of Invention*. She says, “writing about one’s experiences... required self-reflection, the acknowledgement of self as individual and subject.”⁹

Edmondston does this in her September 8, 1863 entry when she writes, “in the isolated life I lead it is a pleasure to me to *write myself out* as it were.”¹⁰ Here she reveals the lack of opportunities available to women to speak their mind. However, she also demonstrates how diaries served to solve this problem. They exemplified “how conflict shaped, limited and expanded privileged white women’s opportunities to speak.”¹¹ In the introduction of Eliza Fain’s published diary, literary scholar Amy Wink is quoted in saying that diaries “reveal how women can ‘act creatively and individually even within the limited and culturally imposed structure.’”¹² Diaries became tools of introspection and self-discovery for plantation women that aided in their shift in identity over the course of the war.

Finally, diaries served as a space to reflect on previously written experiences. Edmondston frequently read past entries and commented on the changes that transpired. On July 8 just three months into the war, she confesses, “looking back over my Journal... it has gradually ceased to be an echo of my own doings.” She cannot bring herself to record “plantation matters & the thousand and one little things which in Patrick’s absence devolved upon [her]” due to “the sorrow [she] was under & the great loneliness [she] felt.” Instead, she performed her “daily duties, housekeeping, gardening, sewing, playing chess, etc.... almost mechanically,” without writing them down. Almost a year later, on June 1, she reflected again, exclaiming, “what a change has come over the country.... battles and sieges, bloodshed, and the suffering of a mighty country occupy every thought.” To make up for it,

⁹ Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers of Invention* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 162.

¹⁰ Crabtree and Patton, *Journal of a Secesh Lady*, 462.

¹¹ Harrison, *Rhetoric*, 7.

¹² Fain, *Sanctified Trial*, xxxvi.

she goes on to give a brief account of the activities that occupied her day in the summer of 1862. Similarly, in December of the same year, she admitted to “reading some of the first parts of my Journal” and being overtaken by “a sense of sadness to see how changed its tone is.” Again, she notes the lack of domestic accounts from her daily life; in its place, “War! war! it absorbs all my thoughts my anxieties my interests!”¹³ This realization was helpful, though. Edmondston “[learned] from [her] past experiences” and worked toward “[cultivating] agency through the act of writing,” and improving “self-contemplation and self-definition” by reading and commenting on her “[book] of memory.”¹⁴

However, it is important to keep in mind that all diaries were written through a specific lens: that of the individual elite plantation woman. As British historian Peter Burke points out in his book *What is Cultural History?*, every source has filters that admit and omit selective information based on the diarist’s conscious and subconscious understanding and representation of reality.¹⁵ Harrison agrees with Burke when she describes diaries as lacking “present pure, unfiltered, rhetorical evidence.” There is always a “slant by which an event was recounted or the details omitted to support the desired image, ...whether imagined or real.”¹⁶ In Eliza Fain’s case, the introduction makes it clear that she was “always in control of what she wrote, and her diary appears to be the carefully crafted expression” of what she believed.¹⁷ Catherine Edmondston, on the other hand, recognizes her diaries’ shortcomings. In her entry dated June 26, 1862, she complains how “Journals are not correct exponents of peoples thoughts, wishes or feelings. ...It is partly the habit of

¹³ Crabtree and Patton, *Journal of a Secesh Lady*, 73, 185, and 328.

¹⁴ Harrison, *Rhetoric*, 17 and 146.

¹⁵ Peter Burke, *What is Cultural History?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), 56.

¹⁶ Harrison, *Rhetoric*, 20.

¹⁷ Fain, *Sanctified Trial*, xl.

reticence... & partly mortification at the exceeding pettiness of some of the causes of annoyance which ...make up [her] happiness or unhappiness.”¹⁸ In both cases, this is what they “believed at the time they wrote” their thoughts, and in that there is validity and value.¹⁹ “Such uncertainties do not negate the value of evidence found in diaries,” Harrison says.²⁰

After the Civil War, diaries became symbols of dashed hopes and dreams for a Southern Confederacy. Harrison writes prophetically, “many diarists’ pens slowed or stopped altogether” when the white flag of Southern surrender waved.²¹ Edmondston asked her diary on May 7, 1865, “What use is there in my writing this record? What profit, what pleasure, do I find in it? None! none!”²² Entries cease shortly afterwards. However, as a whole, diaries “helped [women] to foster detachment from myriad concerns and fears, to seek meaning beyond their immediate contexts, and to work toward clarity on religious issues,” for example.²³ They helped chronicle women’s performances in the Confederate cause, both ideologically and in reality. Diaries were a stage, on the pages of which women acted out their daily life. However, over the course of the war, they worked through their conflicting role as mothers of the Confederacy and heads of the household, and talked about and cast forth opinions on their supporting cast of characters: slaves, enemy soldiers, family men and female friends. This, then, helped develop their new roles at home and in Southern society.

THE IDEAL

¹⁸ Crabtree and Patton, *Journal of a Secesh Lady*, 201.

¹⁹ Fain, *Sanctified Trial*, 283.

²⁰ Harrison, *Rhetoric*, 20.

²¹ *Ibid*, 146.

²² Crabtree and Patton, *Journal of a Secesh Lady*, 708.

²³ Harrison, *Rhetoric*, 132.

The impact of the Civil War on the Southern household depended upon class position. Plantation owners were considered part of the aristocracy and had specific social standards they were expected to follow. Elite white women, in particular, faced high Victorian ideals that required they maintain faith, honor and propriety. When secession spread across the southern states, and war broke out soon after, the ideal began to shift. Yet, it was a paradoxical transformation. On one hand, the idyllic female identity became more rigid and romanticized. Women epitomized piety, purity and perfection of traditional Southern households, and consequently, were weak creatures desperate for male protection. They symbolized the Lost Cause of the Confederacy for which men so bravely fought. The outcome of the war (for the South) balanced on this cycle: to preserve the Southern woman and greater society, men left the plantation and fought; to encourage men to fight, women were called to uphold their ideal identity by sacrificing, serving and suffering. On the other hand, as the war lingered on, spiraling out of Confederate hands, it became more difficult for women to behave properly. Maintaining acceptable femininity while simultaneously confronting new challenges on the home front stretched women beyond their traditional capacity and propelled them into new roles.

Diary entries, as well as other writings and visual images provide evidence for the picture-perfect plantation life Southerners understood to be true and aspired to save. The *Southern Literary Messenger's* "A Sketch of Plantation Life in Louisiana," written in March 1863, nixes the negative assumptions of slavery and bolsters the benevolent paternalism of masters. Out in the fragrant orange groves, "the negro roves," sings a "cheerful evening

song,” and “gaily speeds” home.²⁴ The author of the poem credits the “all indulgent master” for this “sweet peace pervading all.” He is able to put his slaves at ease with “his paternal kindness” so that soon “faith, mutual service, and good will unite/ the white race and the black.” The poem continues to claim false the idea that plantation owners are “tyrants” to the poor black slaves. Rather, “society appears like one vast family;” the “thoughtless negro bears” “no anxious cares” but is “like a trusting child” to his faithful master.²⁵ This poem paints an idealized image of Southern plantation life and, more specifically, the institution of slavery on which it depends. In doing so it supports the Confederate cause and encourages slave owners to continue acting as they are because they would like to think this is how they come across to their slaves. When the Civil War came, women fell into this position, so they would have identified with this line of thought.

Men were not the only ones to sacrifice, serve and suffer during the war; women gave up time, talent, and tears for the Confederacy in ways that aligned with their ideal identity. “Virginia’s Tribute to Her Daughters” is a poem written anonymously for the September 1863 *Southern Literary Messenger*. In it, the personified state of Virginia praises her women for their “firm devotion to the cause” of the war and to the Confederacy.²⁶ They “eagerly” – meaning without hesitation; connoting an air of easy excitement and willingness – sent their husbands, brothers, sons and male friends into “the invader’s tracks” to fight for “Liberty” against the Union. Virginia then asks her women to “weep her

²⁴ C.L., “A Sketch of Plantation Life in Louisiana,” *Southern Literary Messenger* 37, no. 9 (Sept 1863): 532, accessed October 3, 2014,

<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/moajrnl/acf2679.0037.009/536:6?rgn=full+text;view=image>.

²⁵ Ibid, 533.

²⁶ “Virginia’s Tribute to Her Daughters,” *Southern Literary Messenger* 37, no. 3 (March 1863): 169, accessed October 3, 2014,

<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/moajrnl/acf2679.0037.003/173:10?page=root;rgn=full+text;size=100;view=image>.

country's woes in imbecile despair." They are to "sacrifice each luxury" and "bend the knee in prayer." Moreover, Virginia suggests her women "smooth the soldier's bed, go watch and cure and work for him who has for freedom bled."²⁷ This poem serves as propaganda to encourage and empower women to find their inner passion for aiding Confederate soldiers.

Participating in selfless acts provided a platform for women to strengthen their ideal selves for the greater good of the South. On November 4 1863, Fain recounts a sermon dedicated to 'the spirit of Southern mothers' who "freely" gave up "their darling boys" for the war efforts. Surrendering her six men to the cause was a great risk; one she knew could bring devastating loss. She would have to give up her beloved "other half" and "babies" as well as the security and protection they provided. Yet, she did it anyway, because that was what a good plantation mistress and soldier's wife did. Further into the sermon, Fain's pastor calls the "Mothers of the South" to "awake, awake to the mighty work which is before [them]." Fain answered by making trips to the hospital to visit "the sick and wounded."²⁸ She also helped feed, shelter and care for soldiers who passed by her house during battle.

Edmondston did not have the same close and frequent contact with random rebel fighters as Fain did. Rather, she took up her knitting needles. In May 1861, she "sewed all day on Patrick's fatigue Uniform, Grey trimmed with Green." She hosted groups at her house particularly focused on making warm gloves and socks. She was not unique in this. "Ladies all over the country had formed themselves into Hospital associations & were at work on quilted comfortables, [sic], shirts, drawers, etc. for the sick and wounded;" "all seemed absorbed in it." Even she was "struck" by "the universality & the eagerness with

²⁷ Ibid, 170.

²⁸ Fain, *Sanctified Trial*, 119 and 146.

which the women entered into the struggle! They worked as many of them had never worked before, steadily & faithfully.”²⁹ Their dedication to sacrifice and service was remarkable, exceeding expectations in the first few months of war.

In her book *Confederate Reckoning*, University of Pennsylvania history professor Stephanie McCurry recalls the “ritual and symbolic value” of these acts during the war. “Ladies sewing societies,” for example, were not just groups in which “each [contributed] their mite of labor and money, making tents and uniforms, knitting socks, rolling lint, and generally trying to outfit the volunteers for duty.” They also displayed “patriotic service and usefulness” to reinforce the ideal for women as “symbols of the nation.”³⁰ American historian Elizabeth Fox-Genovese takes this idea one-step further in her book *Within the Plantation Household*. Such public acts of sacrifice and service “carried serious responsibilities for the expression and reinforcement of social order” in the South as a whole.³¹ As a result women gained an unexpected power in society and in and of themselves that they continued to build upon as the fighting continued. It became especially important when their acts of suffering were no longer acts.

Most famous of these primary works about the Southern ideal are the written and visual versions of *The Burial of Latané*. Inspired by a true story, the poem was written by John R. Thompson in 1862. It chronicles the funeral of a cavalryman who died fighting during the Peninsula Campaign but was unable to be buried by his family. Thus, Confederate women intervened to give him a proper Southern funeral despite the

²⁹ Crabtree and Patton, *Journal of a Secesh Lady*, 60, 88 and 87.

³⁰ Stephanie McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Civil War South* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 91-92.

³¹ Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 197.

circumstances of war. Thompson writes of the steps women perform in the burial. First, “the aged matron and the faithful slave/ approached with reverent feet the hero’s lowly grave.” They were “strangers, yet sisters, who... sat by the open tomb” and mourned under God. They then “read/ over his hallowed dust the ritual for the dead ” with a “soft and low” voice that “[trembled] with pity, [and was] touched with pathos.” It was a selfless act, but one that became women’s assumed responsibility as pious figures of the war. It was their job to mourn and remember the fallen heroes like the “early-lost, lamented Latané!”³² In this way they become heroes too.



³² John Reuben Thompson, “The Burial of Latané,” *Southern Literary Messenger* 34, no. 8 (Aug 1862): 475-476, accessed October 3, 2014, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/moajrnl/acf2679.0034.008/481:12?page=root;rgn=full+text;size=100;view=image>.

In 1864, William D. Washington captured this scene in a 36-by-46 inch oil painting (above) that “became a powerful symbol of Confederate women’s devotion to the Confederate cause.”³³ Faust analyzed the visual depiction of the iconic “makeshift funeral” and stressed how “it directly reflects prevailing notions of southern nationalism and the place of slavery within the Confederacy.” A bright light shines on the female pastor’s upturned face to “represent the illuminating power of God’s favor” from heaven. Four women and a young girl stand in the bottom right of the painting in mourning. They do not know the dead soldier, nor does he know them. However that did not matter; the groups were united “by the extraordinary circumstances of war” in honoring the “sacrifice of human life for the larger national cause.” Four slaves are present as well, in the opposite corner on the left side of the painting. They lean on their shovels in the shadows. They have “obviously contributed, as always in the South, their physical labor to make possible the ceremony worshiping both God and the fallen Confederate hero.”³⁴ The light difference between the races symbolized the carefully separated collaboration that occurred between whites and blacks in the South. In between the two groups, “physically linking them is a blonde child, a representation of southern innocence and purity.”³⁵

Symbolically, *The Burial of Latané* painting depicts the ideals of representation in gender roles. The man named Latané was buried without a coffin, in the only way the women knew how. No white men are present. Women contributed by officiating and suffering in prolonged mourning. This was their role. Who else was left to do it? More

³³ Caroline E. Janney, “*The Burial of Latané*,” *Encyclopedia Virginia*, last modified March 31, 2014, accessed October 19, 2014, http://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Burial_of_LatanAC.The#start_entry.

³⁴ Drew Gilpin Faust, *The Creation of Confederate Nationalism: Ideology and Identity in the Civil War South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), 69-70.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 71.

importantly, Faust recalls that mourning “fit neatly... with prevailing assumptions about the particular attributes of women.” They were pious, passive creatures, and “Christian grief encompassed above all resignation and submission.”³⁶ It seemed to be a match. Thus, mourning became Confederate women’s responsibility. And they were supposed to *want* to do it. It linked them to God and the Confederacy. It became their “cultural responsibility.”³⁷ It was a way for them to show Confederate nationalism and patriotism.³⁸ Thus, women gained power from grief and a new religious and political role in society.³⁹

The Burial of Latané is an intentionally over-romanticized interpretation of the Southern way of life. It resonated with plantation owners because it was the version of their world they wanted to preserve. However, women grew tired of burials, losing more and more of the men they prayed would stay alive through the fight. How much meaning and spirit can one get from suffering? From serving and sacrificing to no end, only to see no end in the future? Thus, the Confederate cause crumbled from the inside out.

THE REAL

The reality of the Southern household during the Civil War was that it was filled with tensions and frustrations. Women faced unprecedented challenges that forced them to break away from their idyllic nature. The departure of male protectors and the invasion of Union and Confederate soldiers required women to quickly assume greater social awareness and self-sufficiency. War, on top of the increasing instability associated with the institution of slavery, exacerbated tumultuous relationships between mistresses and their domestic and field help. Political unrest circulated the South, and sharp women like Fain

³⁶ Faust, *Mothers of Invention*, 188.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 189.

³⁸ Janney, “*The Burial of Latané*.”

³⁹ Harrison, *Rhetoric of Rebel Women*, 118.

and Edmondston took pains to become privy to this knowledge. They stepped out from behind the scenes and became a force on the plantation as well as in society. As a result, the lines between the private and public spheres blurred.

Diaries reflect only a portion of this reality. Diarists believed what they wrote to be true. Their written accounts are an accurate interpretation of personal experience. However, they have gaps and silences; valuable perspectives are not recorded. Historians cannot take them at face value. They do not tell the whole story. As Burke points out, “the mirror has been broken. Doubt has been cast on the assumption that a representation ‘corresponds’ with the object represented.”⁴⁰ Yet, these “mirrors” should be understood *with* the cracks and missing pieces. They were so deeply ingrained in the generational slaveholding society; they appeared natural, innate, even divinely ordained. It was the “reflection” that rang true to the female recorders. Historians apply this line of thought when studying how women navigated their twisted wartime reality in which ideal and real identities collided. Scholar George Rable observes in *Civil Wars* that the “common expectations about feminine frailty and dependence now clashed with calls for stoic endurance and heroic sacrifice.”⁴¹ This can be observed first in plantation mistress’ relations with men, be it with family members or unknown Confederate and Union soldiers.

Catherine Edmondston wholeheartedly accepted the Southern regime of truth for all it entailed: a life of comfort on a plantation in an elite social group with racial hierarchy and slavery justified through religion. Yet, she was not always the picture of the ideal woman, especially in the absence of her husband. On June 18, 1861 she bid Patrick adieu when he

⁴⁰ Burke, *What is Cultural History?*, 78.

⁴¹ George C. Rable, *Civil Wars: Women and the Crisis of Southern Nationalism* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 56.

left to fight the good fight not too far away from their North Carolina home. However, she did not publicly react the way she was supposed to. She “had no tears to shed.” This was unusual; most women “wept, sobbed, nay even shrieked aloud.” As sad as she was to see her husband leave with the throngs of other brave Confederate men, “the sentiment of exalted Patriotism which filled [her] heart found no echo in Lamentations, no vent in tears.” Instead, she “[sat] in the silence & solitude of this lonely house,” but she was proud of his absence from her side; he was fighting for the nation and for her.⁴² This conflicted reaction that “[wavered] between despair and hope” was common for soldier’s wives. George Rable writes, “One minute they envisioned their boys dying in a distant battlefield; the next moment, they look forward to a joyous homecoming;” then they “[worried] that domestic happiness had vanished forever.”⁴³ They had to learn to get along on their own in the meantime.

Women on the home front now were expected to fend for and defend themselves and the plantation they managed.⁴⁴ Eliza Fain bravely stood up to Yankee and Rebel soldiers when they invaded her home on multiple occasions. At 3 or 4 o’clock in the morning of October 20, 1863, Fain woke to “a noise in the back part of [her] house” and “felt all was not right.” She shouted, “Who is in my house?” multiple times while she quickly dressed and padded carefully downstairs. The intruders immediately blew out the candle they carried. Fain asked them when they finally emerged onto the porch, “if they had broken into [her] house. They replied no madam their pretext was hunting rebels. [She] told them...no rebels were hid about me.” After much reassurance, they finally “[took her] word for it.” She was

⁴² Crabtree and Patton, *Journal of a Secesh Lady*, 69-70.

⁴³ Rable, *Civil Wars*, 58.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 155.

not afraid throughout the episode; she even told them so. After they left she realized she had interrupted their venture to find a decent meal. She reported the bread, butter and a few chickens were missing.⁴⁵ Two additional major invasions occurred in December 1864 and April 1865. With each one, more of Fain's property was taken or destroyed.⁴⁶ However, in most other interactions with random soldiers, Fain often welcomed the hungry or lost into her home for dinner, medical aid or a place to rest. Such was her duty as a Confederate mistress. Through these experiences women made the important conversion from their weak, defenseless Victorian image to a more self-confident, self-sufficient role as protector of the household.

The significance of slavery on the plantation is evident in white women's reaction to its breakdown. The diaries of both Edmondston and Fain capture the harsh reality of plantation life as well as how they imaged themselves as elite slaveholders. They believed slaves were loyal to their "benevolent" masters. Love, mutual respect, and devotion cemented a paternalistic relationship in which whites were the parents and the enslaved were helpless children. However, the crushing reality of war tore down the physical and idealistic structure of the slaveholding regime. Slaves used its dislocation to challenge authority and call into question the very justification of human bondage. Women turned to their diary for refuge and self-preservation. It brought them stability to blame and silence slaves, poor whites and Unionists who threatened the Southern social order. Thus, while their diaries include some instances of mistress-slave interaction, they do not paint the whole picture.

⁴⁵ Fain, *Sanctified Trial*, 102.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 270 and 309.

In July during the early battles of the Civil War, Edmondston noted that “the servants, both house & plantation, behaved themselves extremely well & showed an amount of affection for & consideration to me that I had not beleived [sic] them capable!” One servant named Dolly tried to offer consolation to Edmondston and said, “Never mind. Master will not be gone long, for them folks won’t have the impudence to stand up now that Master himself is gone out again ‘em’!” Edmondston understands this to mean Dolly has a “child like confidence in her Master & contempt for [her shared] enemies.”⁴⁷ Unfortunately, this appearance of slave obedience does not last. On March 31, 1862, Edmondston is relieved and elated to return to her home at the Looking Glass plantation. However, she believes “these constant absences... are telling on the servants; they are getting so awkward, inefficient & even lazy! I mist put a stop to them.”⁴⁸ Chances are the slaves are not being lazy because of the frequent moves and absences but because of more pressing matters, like their impending chance at emancipation. This is what Burke means when he says sources often had multiple voices.⁴⁹ While Edmondston is imparting her perspective, she subconsciously shares that of the slaves as well.

Managing basic household duties was a great undertaking for mistresses, so of course they called on their slaves for assistance. In mid-April 1865, Fain writes of waking early to do lots of washing with her servant Glen while “El and Nate [assist] Lizzie about house cleaning, churning and dinner.”⁵⁰ Likewise, in May 1863, Edmondston specified how “every inch of woodwork in the house [was] to be washed, every carpet & mat shaken or sponged, every piece of furniture rubbed.” She tried to utilize the time and manpower

⁴⁷ Crabtree and Patton, *Journal of a Secesh Lady*, 74.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 142-143.

⁴⁹ Burke, *What is Cultural History?*, 54.

⁵⁰ Fain, *Sanctified Trial*, 317.

slaves provided but the older ones frequently retreated to their shacks to “rest” from their assorted “illnesses.”⁵¹ Fain notices a similar problem in September of the same year. She asked “old Ahab” to sit with a dying person, but he refused. “At last after much persuasion I got him and Frank off.”⁵² Edmondston sensed something amiss with her slaves too. On September 9, 1863, she confesses, “All of our negros have left.” She claims that having “negro property is worse than useless for they do no work unless they choose & the owners dare not correct them else off they go and report” them.⁵³ Whether they actually do or not is unclear. What is more important is that slaves started to exhibit greater degrees of disobedience and rebellion as the war continued and emancipation seemed like it might become a reality. Women would have to – and do – learn to get along without their slaves after they ran away.

However, accounts like these were few and far between in the dairies of women. Fox-Genovese concurs: “basic housekeeping did not figure prominently in the accounts of slaveholding women,” even though it was supposedly one of their most important responsibilities as a plantation mistress.⁵⁴ Nor did stories of punishment often make their way onto journal pages. “The tensions between mistress and servant could run high,” and their relations ranged “from angry blows to companionship,” Fox- Genovese says.⁵⁵ When slaves misbehaved, disobeyed or rebelled during the war, it became increasingly more difficult for women to call on male neighbors or slaves to preform physical punishments such as whipping. (Men were on the frontlines and slaves became more resistant to their

⁵¹Crabtree and Patton, *Journal of a Secesh Lady*, 398.

⁵² Fain, *Sanctified Trial*, 83.

⁵³ Crabtree and Patton, *Journal of a Secesh Lady*, 463.

⁵⁴ Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 119, 97.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 97.

demands.) Thus, they often resorted to passive-aggressive psychological tactics.⁵⁶

However, Edmondston and Fain did not waste words discussion these matters.

They also were shy to discuss males' relations with African American slave women. White men, like Fain's husband, did not behave as good Christians and frequently slept with black slave women. In the end Fain blames this miscegenation, not slavery, for the downfall of the "particular institution," and thus, the Confederacy. She was not alone in this. Many women could not "shake the loyalty...to the slave system" on which their life was built.⁵⁷

Perhaps the most underrated albeit most important shift in identity for women was their growing interest and involvement in politics over the course of the war. In *Confederate Reckoning*, Stephanie McCurry explains the contradictory demands on women in politics. First and foremost, the political arena was male-dominated, enforced by numerous laws that confined women under the legal power of their husbands.⁵⁸ Society followed suit and made it socially unacceptable and unladylike for women to discuss matters like presidential elections and military strategies. This did not mean, though, that women did not take an interest in these topics. Over the course of the war, as public and private spheres merged, women found it easier to voice their thoughts and engage in political activities. The pages of their diaries, the space they felt most powerful and free to share their thoughts, "reveal a complete absorption in national political affairs."⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 38.

⁵⁷ Rable, *Civil Wars*, 35.

⁵⁸ McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning*, 23.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 90.

On February 22, 1862, Edmondston was elated when the Confederacy's first president Jefferson Davis was inaugurated. She wrote her prayer for him, that "God grant him a prosperous & *peaceful* Administration! He is to be our ruler for six years. May we be a *united* people." About a year later, Lincoln passed the Emancipation Proclamation and Edmondston found it very "unpopular." She could not image Northerners going off to "fight for the '*nigger*' or initiating the "raising & drilling of Negro regiments. Think of it, armed negros! Think what it means!"⁶⁰

Edmondston's obsession with military affairs showed her growing political engagement as well. Pages and pages of her diary are dedicated to recounting every minute detail about action on the battlefields as well as conversations she had with friends and relatives, debating opinions and making projections. She did not care that it exceeded gender boundaries. It was her way of engaging in the conflict, taking part in the war effort. In fact, it became more acceptable – almost expected – of women to be informed about such crucial news and events.

Fain had similar political sentiments to Edmondston, though they were not as frequent or as blunt. On March 4, 1864, Fain remembered it had been "three years today since the inauguration of the renowned President of the United States. What years they have been. May we as a people never be called to pass thru more such years is my prayer." This was the entirety of her entry for the day. Its brevity emphasized her exasperation for the political condition of the nation, but took on an ever so slightly softer tone.⁶¹ Her discontent grows stronger and more personal two months later when she asks, "How long can this continue? Our country is drained of her best & bravest, our mothers are bereaved,

⁶⁰ Crabtree and Patton, *Journal of a Secesh Lady*, 125 and 357.

⁶¹ Fain, *Sanctified Trial*, 159.

our wives widowed, & still the tale of blood goes on!" She then wishes Lincoln could "feel the weight of human suffering" cause by his "wickedness."⁶² Clearly, she is an informed woman who has a personal stake in the world outside her plantation fence. Her passionate reaction to political activity is commendable. It exemplifies how much women did, in fact, suffer, sacrifice and serve for the Confederate cause. For those "who had given up so much for the cause, defeat became both a public and personal tragedy."⁶³ It also demonstrates the great political, social and home front advancements women experienced that contributed to an altered place and identity in Southern Society.

As plantation life crumbled under the pressures of war, women fused time-honored ideals with wartime realities to create for themselves a kind of hybrid identity. Mourning, praying, and sewing were traditional tasks assigned to women that became amplified during the Civil War. However, in addition mistresses had to take on more laborious jobs on the plantation and deal with uncooperative slaves. Meanwhile, they struggled to keep their families fed when invading soldiers stole their food. As a result women became more responsibly for themselves in the absence of their husbands and more politically aware about the nation as a whole. How do we know this? Diaries were a safe space for women like Fain and Edmondston to reflect on their day and voice their opinions. All this contributed to the subtle shift in identity women experiences as a result of the Civil War.

Historiography

Peter Burke's *What is Cultural History?* provides the basis for the paper's approach. In order to understand the complexities of the Southern household, it is helpful to explore

⁶² Ibid, 567.

⁶³ Rable, *Civil Wars*, 223.

the personal narratives of plantation women and their relationship with slaves, family members, friends and the greater society. Two Civil War Era diaries are central to the paper and act as case studies for the overarching shift in identity – imagined and real – that women made over the course of the war. The first, *Journal of a Secesh Lady: The Diary of Catherine Ann Devereux Edmondston, 1860-1866*, edited by Beth Gilbert Crabtree and James W. Patton, discloses Edmondston's passion for gardening and rare political interests. This is juxtaposed with *Sanctified Trial: The Diary of Eliza Rhea Anderson Fain, A Confederate Woman in East Tennessee*, edited by John N. Fain. For Fain, God is the center of her existence, so everything she writes filters through a religious lens. Both explore plantation life during the war and provide valuable individual perspectives within the larger context of the Civil War and its repercussions. Specific instances are highlighted to illustrate the difficulties they had with slavery, war, patriarchy, and new roles as women. These are revealed through specific language, multiple voices, lack of information, and certain cultural contours, as Burke suggests. They help differentiate between reality and imagined performances. Women sometimes acted against the traditional character they played at home and in the public eye through unprecedented opportunities that the Civil War provided.

In addition, both printed and painted works compliment the two female voices in expressing the explicit expectations and social standards women were to uphold at the time. The poem "A Sketch of Plantation Life in Louisiana," also printed in the *Southern Literary Messenger* paints a rose picture of plantation life. A happy African American slave goes about his tasks without complaint because the master is so willing to make it the best atmosphere for his beloved servants to work. "Virginia's Tribute to Her Daughters" from

the *Southern Literary Messenger* thanks women for giving their husbands, sons and brothers to the war effort. Then, it proceeds to ask the women to fight for the cause too, in continuing to care and support the men. The realities presented in these images are idealized. However, they offer a lens through which many Southerners understood their life.

Next, John Reuben Thompson, “The Burial of Latané,” found in, but not exclusive to, the *Southern Literary Messenger*, and William D. Washington’s 1864 oil painting of the same name became iconic visuals – through words and paint strokes – of the Civil War Era. Caroline E. Janney helps decode the symbolism behind the painting in her informed write-up on *Encyclopedia Virginia*. Faust, too, offers scholarly insight on “The Burial of Latané,” poem and painting, in his book *The Creation of Confederate Nationalism: Ideology and Identity in the Civil War South*.

Careful consideration of additional secondary sources provides context and greater analysis on primary source material. In *The Rhetoric of Rebel Women: Civil War Diaries and Confederate Persuasion*, Kimberly Harrison shares excerpts on Southern women – white mistresses and African American slaves. Of course, they argue that women exemplified honor in protecting themselves while resisting the invading Union army. This idea has an undertone of tradition, which supports the transitional period in identity that women experienced. Harrison’s thoughts pair nicely with Drew Gilpin Faust’s ideas in her book *Mothers of Invention*. This, too, provides anecdotes of Southern women in their conflicting roles that transform the Confederacy during the war. She pays special attention to the paternalistic nature of the plantation household and the tumultuous relationship between mistresses and their slaves.

Thavolia Glymph's *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* offers a somewhat contradicting perspective to Harrison and Faust. She takes a more graphic approach in describing the relationship between white plantation mistresses and their African American slaves. She argues the causes and effects of race and gender differences, violence and power relations, and the freedom and burdens of duty and citizenship. This is a great juxtaposition to the other secondary sources that approach the idea from a more elite white women position.

Similarly, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese's *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* compares and contrasts the life of both mistresses and slave women and goes into great detail about their interactions and reactions to each other. Ultimately, Fox-Genovese stresses how much elite women were able to derive privilege and authority from what they believe to be weakness among the slaves. As helpful supplement to *Within the Plantation Household*, George Rable's *Civil Wars* has a bit more compassion for mistresses and their slaves. He describes the great stake Southerners had in perpetuating slavery, but he believes mistresses did sympathize for their poor slaves at times too.

Finally, Stephanie McCurry's *Confederate Reckoning* focuses on the life of soldier's wives and their political role in Southern society. Unfortunately, she makes severe class distinction between elite plantation mistresses and yeomen soldier's wives to the point where they are almost mutually exclusive. However, she does a good job of chronicling the changing Confederate policy of women in politics. She also discusses the network of households that relied heavily on one another through the war.

Overall, the sources used in this microhistory seek to depict the complex Southern plantation life, and more specifically, illustrate the conflicting and shifting identity of white Confederate women during, and as a result of, the Civil War.

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