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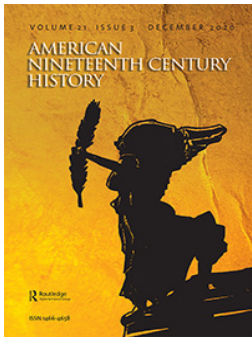
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## The Women's Fight: The Civil War's Battles for Home, Freedom, and Nation

by Thavolia Glymph, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020, Pp. 379, \$34.95 (hbk), ISBN 9781469653631

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To cite this article: Erik Mathisen (2020) The Women's Fight: The Civil War's Battles for Home, Freedom, and Nation, American Nineteenth Century History, 21:3, 313-314

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14664658.2020.1840743>



Published online: 11 Dec 2020.



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**The Women's Fight: The Civil War's Battles for Home, Freedom, and Nation,**  
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It is difficult to know when Louisa Smith realized that the Civil War had changed her life. Perhaps it was in the spring of 1863, when Louisa and her husband, Israel, fled to Goodrich's Landing, Louisiana; Israel mustered into the U.S. Colored Infantry, Louisa placed in a contraband camp. Perhaps it was three months later, when she sat by her husband's bed and watched him as he died. For much of the Civil War, Louisa lived the life of a refugee. Her war was dominated by constant movement: as a laundress for an African American regiment near Jackson, and as one of the thousands of refugees who had moved by the end of the war to Vicksburg, drawn to the possibility of work and a life in a city which was fast becoming home to a large, active black community. Louisa Smith's Civil War, like so many women who were witness to the conflict, was full of hard moments. Many of them were not of her choosing. But the experience was transformative. Her story, laid bare in a military pension file folder, offers glimpses of a fundamentally altered existence.

With care and the sensitivity that comes from having spent a career focused on the delicate, painful, deeply human stories wrought by slavery and emancipation, Thavolia Glymph's *The Women's Fight* provides powerful evidence of just how a pointillist study of the past can change the way that we think about events so often painted in broad brush strokes. Without sacrificing deeper analyses of gender, race, and class, Glymph presents a textured, intimate history of women across the traditional boundaries that so often carve up the history of the American Civil War. Building on the work of so many scholars – like Drew Gilpin Faust, Stephanie McCurry, Nina Silber, and others – who have long called for a doing away with the notion that women sit outside of the war, and therefore at a distance from the engine of history that propelled the republic through the conflict, Glymph is clear that “the spaces in which women live during times of war are no more inviolate than the spaces in which men fight” (p. 5). The result is an unblinking book and a rich historical tapestry.

Arrayed in three parts but with chapters in each that contrast women's experiences across traditional dividing lines in the literature, *The Women's Fight* demonstrates just how much women lived within the conflict, and not outside of it. The first three chapters, which deal in turn with elite white women, poorer white women, and African American women in the Confederate South, do not so much break new ground as they shade in the picture that scholars have already drawn. In these chapters, Glymph holds a variety of subjects up to the light. The cumulative result puts paid to the notion that women, no matter their position, could survive the war by staying put. Throughout these chapters, the evidence reveals a collective experience of jarring movement, brought about by the threat of onrushing armies and the inevitable dislocation that followed. This is particularly the case in the third chapter on African American women, where Glymph follows refugees across U.S. lines and into refugee camps. While she makes clear that they were anything but a refuge, Glymph argues that refugee camps could be spaces in which African American women could and did reconstitute communities, as well as build new ones. Moreover, she accords freedwomen their due for actively mobilizing their communities to help bring about slavery's demise.

Perhaps one of the most important interventions in *The Women's Fight* is the focus Glymph places on the differences among and between women. Just as in her earlier work, most notably

*Out of the House of Bondage* (2008), Glymph is committed to understanding her subject through the prism of class. *The Women's Fight* benefits greatly from this focus. If anything, class analysis serves as the fuel that propels the book forward. This is particularly true of the middle sections of the book that focus on northern women. Taking her cue from the work of scholars like Willie Lee Rose but also historians of the broader study of nineteenth-century imperialism, Glymph shows how white northern women viewed formerly enslaved peoples through a deeply racist and imperialist lens. Many women who travelled to the occupied South brought with them the conviction that their role was not so much to enable enslaved people, as it was to serve as better plantation mistresses than southern women had been. Some of those same women owed their wealth to slavery, making it ironically "easier for them to fight for the slave and to fight for women" (p. 157). Though the analysis throughout the book is softened by the stories she situates at the forefront, Glymph adds great detail to an argument that a broader, global history of imperialism and imperialist culture ought to inform our understanding of U.S. wartime occupation and Reconstruction.

The final sections of Glymph's book shatter the old dogma that women were peripheral to the war and its outcome. Whether in the direct collisions between southern women and U.S. army officers, or in the collective experience of African American women who were left to negotiate a conflict that threw up more challenges than opportunities for independence, armies "on the move or of occupation can erase for all practical purposes the line between combatants and noncombatants, between armed men and unarmed women" (p. 218). The very fact that black women and children were not counted as persons of concern by the U.S. military, even after emancipation, required that African American women press to be counted, in every way open to them. In doing so, Glymph argues that black women helped to shape the terrain of struggle on which all freedpeople would stand when the war ended. Moreover, inasmuch as the war brought about the creation of a republic on new foundations, that transformation did not alter everything in its path. The conflict "brought concrete and often transformative changes to women's lives, but it left the borders that had separated them fairly intact" (p. 259). Class and racial divisions between women withstood the war and, if anything, grew stronger in the last decades of the century.

Despite the implications in its title, *The Women's Fight* defies, at least in one sense, a heroic narrative. To be sure, Glymph holds up the collective experiences of women like Louisa Smith as extraordinary, and readers are left in no doubt as to why we ought to think them so too. But Glymph is after more than this. What this compact book accomplishes is a rendering of subtle argument from innumerable fragments. Like stained glass, each story in Glymph's book pulses with vibrant color when viewed close up. Stand back and observe from a distance, however, and a vast picture is revealed. *The Women's Fight* is a book that compels us to reckon not only with the wartime experience of women but the possibilities that can come from patient historical research. In both respects, Glymph succeeds brilliantly.

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/14664658.2020.1840743>

