BOOK REVIEWS

Southern Single Blessedness: Unmarried Women in the Urban South, 1800-1865 by Christine Jacobson Carter (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 220 pp., $35.00.

In the 1980s a new generation of scholars, determined to uncover the everyday life experience of women in early America, helped reconfigured how we think and write about history. As a result of their research, we know a good deal about the cult of domesticity, the experience of the plantation mistress, and even the challenges faced by working class women. In this study, Christine Jacobson Carter, opens a new chapter in our understanding of antebellum America by exploring the lives of unmarried, southern white women.

Southern society was socially and culturally "dependent on marriage," yet Carter discovered a large number of unmarried white women living in many southern cities (3). Fortunately, her archival research uncovered a group of highly literate, single women who documented their lives in letters and diaries. This evidence allows her to "peel back the layers of their identities and explore the communities, families, and activities that framed experiences of womanhood and singlehood" (9). Traditional interpretations hold that antebellum southern society cast women as weak and necessarily dependent on men and burdened with the duty of nurturing the next generation of southern belles and cavaliers, but Carter's work encourages us to rethink such assertions. While surveying the period 1800 to 1865, she demonstrates that a cadre of white, educated, middle class and unmarried women living Charleston, South Carolina and Savannah, Georgia made a variety of significant contributions to their society and culture.

Carter opens her work with a survey of the economic and social structure of Charleston and Savannah. As evidenced by warehouses filled with raw materials ready for export and wharves lined with boxes of imported consumer goods, trade networks connected both cities to the Atlantic World. Using the letters and the diaries of unmarried women like, Savannah's Mary Telfair and Charleston's Harriot Pinckney, Elizabeth Pringle, and Susan Middleton, Carter explores how each negotiated everyday life in a southern port city. For these women life on a plantation was "dull and deadening," but city life held out the promise of long lunches, teas, dinner parities and fancy balls (27). Compared to the rest of the South, the flow of German and Irish immigrants made the population noticeably diverse. These factors helped foster an intellectual culture, which as unmarried women, they were uniquely positioned to engage. Popular culture provided many women encouragement. Charleston and Savannah booksellers offered literature from around the world and Carter found that her subjects regularly purchased avidly read books by and about young unmarried women like themselves. Clues as to how unmarried women might make their lives useful and rewarding filled the pages of these works. Using the lives and

writings of authors like Susan King, Hannah More, Sarah Rutledge, Mary Lee and Maria Pickney, Carter demonstrates how unmarried white women used fiction and non-fiction as baedekers for their lives.

More so than their married counterparts, unmarried women living in Charleston and Savannah had opportunities to cultivate relationships within their extended family. As caretakers and surrogate mothers, unmarried aunts, sisters and cousins played vital roles while remaining within the social boundaries of southern womanhood. Furthermore, Carter adeptly uses the correspondence of many unmarried women from Charleston and Savannah to demonstrate how they nurtured friendships with others. For many, these relationships proved to be the most important influences in their lives. Unmarried women had interests that extended beyond their family and close friends. Most became key figures in a number of organizations. Searching for a sense of purpose, community, and independence, they integrated themselves into a web of benevolent societies. The women in Carter's study helped establish the Ladies Benevolent Society, the Charleston Ladies' Seamen Friends Society, the Savannah Female Society, and the Savannah Free School among others. The efforts of one South Carolina woman, Ann P. Cunningham, brought attention to the efforts to restore George Washington's home. She played an instrumental role in the establishment of and success of the Mount Vernon Ladies Association. Preserving Washington's home became only part of the group's efforts. By joining together women, from Maine to Texas into a common cause in the 1850s, when sectional tensions were high between the North and the South, the group promoted national unity. Eventually, the American Civil War ripped apart the country, but there is little doubt the women who joined the Mount Vernon Ladies Association and other benevolent organizations would put their pre-war organizational experiences to good use after the War.

The war brought a new set of challenges to unmarried urban women. Carter explores the war's impact on the public and private lives of unmarried women. Not only did they protect the family's property and/or business assets, but also they had the time, inclination and opportunity to use their benevolent work to help the war effort. They formed new organizations, including sewing societies, knitting societies, and large scale fund-raising projects. Most helped in the efforts to improve the lives of soldiers. For example in July 1861, 191 women formed the Ladies Volunteer Aid Society of Charleston and together they sewed new clothing for hundreds of soldiers and officers. With Charleston and Savannah blockaded during the war, food was in short supply and expensive. Many moved into the countryside, leaving their urban lives and friends behind. Carter found that often these women, accustomed as they were to the social and benevolent activities that city life offered, reported that they felt like refugees. Life in the upland, however, offered new challenges and possibilities. As its economy declined, many took jobs as teachers. At first, they taught only as a means of contributing to the family economy, but they quickly found that paychecks

provided a sense of independence. Carter found that those who did not engage in benevolent work or teaching were overwhelmed by feelings of uselessness. For example, Narcissa Varner's diaries and letters reveal often overwhelmed by the war and without "energy or life enough to execute anything" (176). But Varner, like many others, found teaching gave life a purpose. After the Civil War, this work made them ready to make contributions and often take on leadership roles. Whether they would become teachers, organize a bible study, help returning veterans, or found new benevolent organizations, unmarried women recognized that the War was forever changing their lives and their community.

The unmarried women in Carter's work had opportunities to engage in social, cultural and intellectual pursuits while making valuable contributions to their family. Other historians, like Drew Gilpin Faust, Suzanne Lebsock, and Elisabeth Fox-Genovese, explored the lives of women, living in the North and the South, who came of age and married in the years before the American Civil War, but by exploring the lives of unmarried women Carter offers a new, and significant, perspective on how gender roles worked in the antebellum South. Although this is an important study, it has shortcomings. The work desperately needs a conclusion. Without a final post Civil War chapter, the reader is left to wonder to what extent the conflict changed the lives and goals of these women. The work is, at times, disjointed; the chapters do not build on each other and, for the reader, it is often difficult to see how – aside from the fact that they are all unmarried white women living in Savannah or Charleston – they represent a cohesive group. Also, there is little information here on working class and free black or enslaved women in Savannah or Charleston. Equally troubling is the lack of attention Carter pays to the institution that provided the means – directly or indirectly – for unmarried white women to have lives of leisure: slavery. Readers are sure to wonder about the extent to which the women in her study understood slavery's influence on their gender roles, but Carter – much like her subjects – fail to acknowledge how their freedom was made possible only with the enslavement of others. Despite such weaknesses, Carter has added a good deal of complexity and richness to our understanding of the lives of white women in southern cities. Urban, social and especially gender historians will find this work useful in both their undergraduate and graduate seminars, while general readers will discover it provides a new perspective on Charleston, Savannah and the young women who called them home in years before the American Civil War.

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Wartime Shipyard: A Study in Social Disunity by Katherine Archibald (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 336 pp., $ 25.00.

Politicians and their pundits, the talking heads on television and self-appointed experts in the blogosphere hold to the conventional wisdom that suggests America unites in times of war. Judging from the titles of recent popular histories – *Band of Brothers,* for one – that sparked a resurgence in interest in the World War II era, it seems unthinkable that anything but a "united" America worked together to defeat the Axis forces in Europe, Africa and Asia. Yet, this classic study of working class peoples in wartime America challenges the contemporary memory of life during wartime. Katherine Archibald's *Wartime Shipyard* reveals a socially divided, ethnically and racially conflicted, and economically split workforce that was anything but united. A truly groundbreaking sociological study first published in 1947 by the University of California Press, Archibald's first-hand observations of life in a wartime shipyard – where some 40,000 people per day worked – reminds the reader that conflict within class is the norm.

The structure of *Wartime Shipyard* reflects the divisions within the working class that Archibald witnessed. "As I became adjusted to my new environment," Archibald writes, "the magnitude of fact dwarfed my simple preconceptions"(6). Surprised by the depth of divisions within the workers of the shipyard, Archibald "found the intolerance of slight linguistic and cultural differences so great that the ghosts of feudal snobbery seemed to have come alive"(6). Organized in chapters entitled "Negroes," "Okies," "Women in the Shipyard," etc. it is immediately clear that Archibald's observations of life at the shipyard painted a picture she hoped she would not see: class consciousness as myth. Workers were acutely aware of their differences, whether in gender, ethnicity, race or region, and this awareness allowed the development of a hierarchical society within the yard.

Beyond discovering the discord within a group her academic training taught her should be united, Archibald also found that realty in the shipyard did not quite mesh with society's wartime conception. Indeed, there was little unity for the cause of defeating the Germans or Japanese. Rather than subscribe to a broader sense of purpose, Archibald informs us that ceremonial performances of unity, such as standing during the Star Spangled Banner," meant little more than a "schoolchild's morning pledge of allegiance to the flag"(185). Moreover, contributing financially to war cause was an act of "opportunity" because the workers – whose wages were higher than ever thanks to the war – bought bonds as a form of investment (188). In short, the "unity" Archibald found was one of opportunity. Even those workers who seemed to genuinely buy into the patriotism of the war revealed the limits of their nationalism, as one recently

naturalized Greek native referred to Americans in the third person when speaking with Archibald.

The copious research gathered by the Katherine Archibald presents the reader with a complete picture of one segment of industry in one region of the nation during a lengthy and complex war. Is *Wartime Shipyard* scholarship that can be extrapolated and used to explain life as a wartime working class American? How did working class unity differ in the various other, perhaps more skilled (or, at least, less labor intensive) industries? There are many questions left by this seminal work, and that is its strength. As a cultural historian by training, I believe its greatest strength is Archibald's continuous reminder that monolithic groups are rare and that we must often look more for the complexities within cultural or social groups presumed to be unified.

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Snow Flower and the Secret Fan by Lisa See. (New York: Random House, 2005), 269 pp., $14.00.

Snow Flower and the Secret Fan, a novel by Lisa See, engrosses the reader in a mesmerizing tale of haunting fiction about female friendship and the power that it provided two traditional Chinese women, Lily and Snow Flower. The setting of the story was Hunan County in nineteenth-century China. Lily and Snow Flower first met at the age of seven when they were paired together in a friendship match in which they became *laotong,* or "old sames." This purposeful match was meant to last a lifetime so both girls would have someone upon whom they could confide and rely in good times and bad. Throughout the book, as the girls matured and were restricted by the physical and emotional realities of their lives and situations, their *laotong* relationship provided them with the strength and camaraderie they needed to survive.

This book does more than tell a story of the friendship between two women and what happens to test and perhaps collapse that friendship. It shares a history and unfolds the background behind the practices of a culture as it describes Lily and Snow Flower's sisterhood. Practices such as footbinding and arranged marriages are explained through characters' experiences and dialogues. Gripped and held spellbound by descriptions of the footbinding process and the pain suffered by the young girls, the reader cannot help but reflect on his or her own culture's practices and the past and current traditions affecting women of other cultures. While reading one cannot help but consider the shrouded women in burkas in the Middle East and even the sometimes extreme cosmetic surgery many American women seek for the sake of beautification. However, when viewed from the perspective of the women of China who grew up with it, the reader comes to understand how footbinding was thought of as a treatment to beautify oneself and advance one's standing in the community. When done correctly, the woman's feet were perceived as erotic features that opened opportunities for them to be married into high-standing families of power and wealth. As the story of Lily and Snow Flower unfolds, the reader learns how their arranged marriages lead their lives in different directions, yet their relationship as *laotong* fortified them.

Probably the most compelling theme of this book is that it presents the Chinese view of women in the nineteenth century as a secret, supportive sisterhood. Women, although they were restricted to spending their days together sewing and working in one room of the house, found ways to communicate with each other and share their lives. Through a covert written language known as *nu shu* that only women could read, messages were stealthily passed from household to household to family members, *laotong,* and groups of friends known as "sworn sisters." These clandestine messages allowed women to express their hopes and dreams as well as their pain and sorrow. It was through *nu shu* that Lily and Snow Flower shared the most important events

in their lives. They wrote messages on a fan and composed stories on handkerchiefs. Through their messages they cried to each other about their loneliness and the tragedies of motherhood they endured. They consoled each other and told, as well, of their joys and dreams.

Viewed as inferior to males and of no more value than a cup of water except for the fact that they could bare male children to carry on the family name, women's positions in the household and community were mainly subservient. However, *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* tells a tale of love between two friends within the context of heartbreak for the Chinese women of the time.

Lisa See, author of several other notable and bestselling books about Chinese Americans, was named by the Organization of Chinese American Women as their National Woman of the Year in 2001. Being Chinese-American she grew up spending a lot of time in Los Angeles' Chinatown and witnessing the traditions women accepted stoically as just the way things were. See also spent time in China visiting family and doing research for her books. She researched ancient and current traditions by travelling into remote villages where some ancient practices still take place. Many of the practices she witnessed and conversations she engaged in with village women inspired events and dialogues in *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*. The author's website (www.lisasee.com) offers visitors information about her other books and the opportunity to join a discussion group about See's books.

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Hypatia of Alexandria: Mathematician and Martyr, by Michael A. B. Deakin (Amherst, NY:Prometheus Books, 2007), 229 pp., $28.00

The city of Alexandria, home of the Museum and the Library, was one of the intellectual jewels of the ancient world; it was also a cultural crossroads where tensions ran high and often led to riots. In the early Fifth Century, a group of Christian zealots attacked and murdered a woman who was one of the last representatives of the rational tradition and was probably the preeminent mathematician of her time, Hypatia of Alexandria. In the centuries since her murder, Hypatia has become an icon of the conflict between reason and religion as well as a potent symbol of the problems that female intellectuals face in a male-dominated culture.

By the 18th Century, Hypatia's death had been adopted as a classic symbol of the conflict between reason and superstition, and since then her story has been retold by a succession of authors, including Voltaire, Henry Fielding, and Bertrand Russell. The lack of trustworthy historical sources has allowed later writers to embellish Hypatia's story to suit their own agenda and prejudices. For example, she was probably between 45 and 65 years old when she died, with the current author suggesting that the older value is more accurate. This has not deterred some authors from picturing her as a young woman. After all, that makes the story more poignant. In addition, various religious apologists have created their own accounts of her death to provide justification for Cyril and to demean the rationalist arguments. It is quite a challenge for Deakin, the current author, to shift through the accumulated chaff and determine what is most probably true.

Little is left of Hypatia's writings; we know her mainly through second-hand reports, including some that were written long after she died. It is worth noting that there were several other women who were described as philosophers who lived at approximately this time, but they have largely been forgotten. Hypatia was most famous as a teacher of philosophy and astronomy, attracting large numbers of people to her public lectures. In addition, she met regularly with a small, but influential, group of intellectuals, including the Governor of Alexandria. Much of our best information about Hypatia comes from the letters that one member of this group, a man named Synesius, wrote to her after he left Alexandria.

Was Hypatia killed because of her paganism? It seems unlikely. Her small discussion circle included both pagans and Christians, including three men who later became bishops in the early church. Theophilus, the previous bishop of Alexandria, does not seem to have objected to her teachings, even though he generally waged a campaign against paganism. It seems likely that Hypatia was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. Cyril, the bishop who followed Theophilus, was attempting to exert his control over the governor of Alexandria.

Since Hypatia was a close friend and advisor of the governor, her death was a convenient way to demonstrate religious power. There is little direct evidence whether Cyril specifically ordered her murder, but he certainly contributed to the witch hunt that led to her death. Based on his reading of the evidence, Deakin suggests Cyril was responsible.

What new contribution does this book make to our knowledge about Hypatia? First, and most important, Deakin is a mathematician by profession, so is uniquely qualified to discuss Hypatia's contributions in astronomy and mathematics, which were probably the areas where her work was most important. Deakin also presents translations of the historical documents that refer to Hypatia and logically analyzes the various arguments on each major question, so that readers are free to reach their own conclusions. This careful analysis and translation of the available historical documents is a significant contribution to evaluating the life of this extraordinary woman.

Probably the greatest strength of the book is also its greatest weakness. The writing is overly academic and fails to communicate the intellectual excitement that has kept this woman's name alive for so many centuries. Each chapter focuses on a single aspect of the historical record, for example, intellectual background, historical background, Hypatia's work, Hypatia's death, or Hypatia's philosophy. The result is a series of compartmentalized discussions that do not produce a coherent narrative. What probably attracts so many people to her story is the attempt to make sense of her murder. Deakin produces little new enlightenment on this question, but any such attempt may be futile, since the zealots who killed her seem to have cared little for reason.

Was Hypatia truly a martyr, as is claimed in the subtitle of this book, and if she was, what was the cause for which she gave her life? As noted above, she is often described as a martyr to rationalism, but it seems more likely that she was just a convenient target as religious and secular authority contended for dominance. That, however, begs the question of why she, among the circle of intellectuals who surrounded the Governor, was chosen as the most convenient target. It seems likely that she attracted the ire of the religious fanatics because she refused to conform to the conventional women's roles. Based on what we know about her, she was very aggressive about expressing her wish to be valued for her intellect, not her sex. This was not acceptable then, and there is some question whether it is accepted today. If she gave her life for any cause, it was because she defied the customs of her time and insisted on her right to determine how she would live her own life. That has always been a dangerous stance.

In the absence of impartial evidence, history can easily become a landscape of the imagination, an invitation to see reflections of current problems in the events of the past. Hypatia's story is compelling because it represents conflicts that continue to the present. We know just enough about her to make her a convenient symbol. As Marilyn Monroe once said, it is a terrible thing to

be a symbol, but if Hypatia must be reduced to being a symbol it should be one that she might have chosen for herself, not merely one that is convenient for someone else's agenda.

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