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## In Defense of Her Home: Cornelia McDonald's Use of Gendered Performance to Survive the Civil War

During the American Civil War, many women turned to literary forms of expression, most notably diaries and memoirs. According to scholar Dana McMichael, women's diaries and memoirs did not receive much scholarly attention until the 1980s.<sup>1</sup> Historians previously considered women's works to be too sentimental to be accurate.<sup>2</sup> Since the 1980s, women's dairies have gained popularity among historians for their readability because the diarists wrote with the expectations that future generations would read the diaries.<sup>3</sup> While historians often rely on these autobiographical writings for their wealth of information about the social and economic implications of the Civil War, the writings also provide key insights into the creation of gender through the act of autobiographical writing and the recording of gendered interactions with enemy soldiers.<sup>4</sup> In these interactions, women strategically acted both within and outside of socially accepted gender norms to increase their chances of survival under enemy occupation. From March 1862 through August 1863, Cornelia Peake McDonald's diary offers a record of her successful manipulation of gendered interactions to prevent the displacement and starvation of her family.

Cornelia Peake McDonald kept a diary from March 1862 through August 1863 because

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<sup>1</sup> Dana W. McMichael, *How Confederate Women Created New Self-Identities as the Civil War Progressed: A Study of Their Diaries* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2008), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Michael C. Nelson, "Writing During Wartime: Gender and Literacy in the American Civil War," *Journal of American Studies* 31, no. 1 (April 1997): 67, <http://www.jstor.org/discover/10.2307/27556220?uid=3739832&uid=2&uid=4&uid=3739256&sid=21102955449491> (accessed November 12, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> McMichael, *How Confederate Women Created New Self-Identities*, 1.

<sup>4</sup> Mary Elizabeth Massey, *Women in the Civil War*, (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), 190.

her husband requested a record of events in their hometown of Winchester, Virginia, while he served the Confederacy in Richmond. She often wrote her diary between the printed lines in books. She lost the segment of her diary from March through November 1862 when her family fled Winchester, resulting in her recreation of the lost sections of the diary after the war. In 1875, she also added wartime recollections from before and after the period her diary encompassed. Her son Hunter McDonald edited, annotated, and published the diary and recollections in 1935. The 1992 edition contains passages deleted in the 1935 publication.<sup>5</sup> The extensive editing poses some limitations on the interpretation of Cornelia McDonald's narrative. While the 1992 edition contains the passages expunged by a man influenced by 1935 social standards, it has still been subjected to changes by the editor Minrose Gwin and McDonald herself in her postbellum rewrite. Because of the diary's significance to women's history and women's writing, Gwin tried to edit with sensitivity.<sup>6</sup> The most extensive editing of the diary may have occurred under Cornelia McDonald's own hand as she created copies of her diary for her children. In addition to tailoring her diary for her children as her audience, she also wrote her recollections through the lens of Reconstruction. Since all of the publications of McDonald's diary contain the changes she made after the war, her diary is not a pure account of the war.

McDonald's diary reflects autobiographical trends among American women during the mid-nineteenth century. Autobiography became a relatively widespread medium for American women prior to the Civil War. Scholar Margo Culley notes that men produced significantly more diaries than women through the mid-nineteenth century. Increasing numbers of middle-class women began to keep diaries because such writing was associated with refinement and

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<sup>5</sup> Cornelia Peake McDonald, *A Woman's War: A Diary, with Reminiscences of the War, from March 1862*, ed. Minrose C. Gwin (New York: Gramercy Books, 1992), 4.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

accomplishment.<sup>7</sup> Because diary-keeping transformed from being a predominately male pastime to a female activity, women followed social conventions about gender norms in their writing. According to scholar Domna C. Stanton, writing was a phallogentric activity because men had greater access to education.<sup>8</sup> Female writers contradicted gender norms established by the Cult of True Womanhood which dictated that a woman should be pure, pious, submissive, and domestic.<sup>9</sup> Scholar Harriet Blodgett claims that female writers made their diaries into records of family history, local events, and business transactions instead of personal reflections to avoid socially unacceptable egotism and the usurpation of male power. However, the dairies still became a way for women to write about themselves while simultaneously creating a useful record.<sup>10</sup> Writing allowed women to create order out of the chaos and trauma of war by providing them with a space to write events within their own terms, an act that empowered and sustained the women.<sup>11</sup> McDonald's diary followed the social standards for American women in the mid-nineteenth century. As a respectable middle-class woman, she did not begin keeping a diary until her husband requested a record of the events in Winchester. After her husband's death, she wrote her recollections for the benefit of her children. Although her motivations for keeping a diary remained in accordance with social standards, McDonald's diary provided her with a medium to create an empowering representation of herself as an audacious woman within her narrative.

McDonald skillfully altered her gendered performances with Northern soldiers to protect her family of nine children from starvation and homelessness. Her verbal acuity was key to the family's survival because of the sheer number of times Winchester changed hands during the

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<sup>7</sup> McMichael, *How Confederate Women Created New Self-Identities*, 13-14.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 14-16.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

war. Three major battles also occurred in Winchester, as well as a number of smaller engagements and nonviolent evacuations by both sides. The social instability in Winchester caused the local women, including McDonald, to be especially rebellious during Federal occupations.<sup>12</sup> The female gender offered protection for the women of Winchester and gave them enough security to be antagonistic towards Union soldiers.<sup>13</sup> Because Winchester changed hands so many times, the residents could not cultivate rapport with a relatively consistent body of troops and officers. McDonald frequently behaved assertively towards the Northern soldiers because she had to gain support from each new set of Federal officers. The number of major battles in the Shenandoah Valley and western Virginia, as well as Antietam, created the need for a number of hospitals to be organized in Winchester. Since losing her house was one of a woman's greatest fears during the war, McDonald repeatedly confronted Northern officers and soldiers in an effort to keep her home from becoming a hospital or an officer's headquarters.<sup>14</sup>

McDonald tailored her performances of gender to her situation and audience. In one instance when her house was going to be confiscated as a hospital, she went to Union General Robert Milroy, "painting to him my helpless condition, telling him that I came to him for protection, as he had the power, and I was sure he could not want the will to protect a woman and children as defenseless as we were."<sup>15</sup> McDonald structured her plea around the commonly held middle-class values of the Cult of True Womanhood in the hopes that Milroy's obligations under the social system would stir him to protect her, despite her status as an enemy woman.

Operating under the same class and gender system, Milroy rejoined by asking "where our natural

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<sup>12</sup> Kym S. Rice and Edward D.C. Campbell Jr., "Voices from the Tempest: Southern Women's Wartime Experiences," in *A Woman's War: Southern Women, Civil War, and the Confederate Legacy*, ed. Edward D.C. Campbell Jr. and Kym S. Rice (Richmond, VA: Carter Printing Company, 1996), 82.

<sup>13</sup> Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 199.

<sup>14</sup> Francis Butler Simkins and James Welch Patton, *The Women of the Confederacy* (Richmond and New York: Garrett and Massie, Incorporated, 1936), 52.

<sup>15</sup> McDonald, *A Woman's Civil War*, 112.

protectors were. [...] He said, ‘they leave you unprotected and expect us to take care of you.’ ‘We would not need your care if we were allowed to take care of ourselves,’ said I. ‘It is only from the army you command that we want protection.’”<sup>16</sup> Milroy implied that southern men failed at protecting their families under the social system. McDonald retorted by hinting that women and children needed protection because the Federal officers and their soldiers could not operate under the social system either. Milroy relented and allowed her to keep her house.

McDonald repeatedly performed just within the confines of middle-class gender standards in her interactions with Milroy. When she needed a permit to buy goods for her family, she went to Milroy. He responded by stating that “his orders were to withhold permission from every one who would not declare himself or herself loyal to the United States government. I told him it was impossible for me to do it, as it would be entirely false; and added that it could not be a matter of importance what women thought or wished on the subject.”<sup>17</sup> McDonald relied on the widespread belief that women were pious and morally superior to men to convince Milroy that taking the oath of allegiance would cause her to lie and to lose her spiritual and moral authority. To fully persuade Milroy, she also referenced a popular belief that women were incapable of holding their own political beliefs and could only mirror their husbands’; therefore she could not be responsible for her husband’s actions in the Confederate army.

McDonald also crossed gender norms multiple times when she prevented her family’s food from being stolen from her house by a Union soldier. In one incident on Christmas Eve, “a man had opened the stove and taken out a pan of nice light brown rusks, and was running out with them. A fit of heroism seized me and I darted after him [...] I caught him by the collar of

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 126.

his great coat, and held him tight till the hot pan burnt his hands and he was forced to drop it.”<sup>18</sup>

McDonald crossed gender boundaries by grabbing and holding onto a man she did not know, physically asserting her power over him. While her behavior was justified under her responsibilities to feed her children in a time of need, her actions fell in stark contrast of submissive and domestic woman under middle-class gender standards.

While McDonald was audacious in her interactions with the Federals, she minimized these encounters in her diary through self-deprecation in her reconstructed diary. In her conversation with Federal officers over William Seward, Lincoln’s Secretary of State, visiting the Kernstown battlefield after the Union victory, she wrote “‘Ah!’ said I, forgetting prudence, ‘we can well excuse him for rejoicing as it is the first time he has had occasion to do so, but I must tell you what crossed my mind as you told of his visit to the battle-field. It was a short poem of Lord Byron’s wherein he relates how Mr. Seward’s great prototype once visited a battle-field.”<sup>19</sup> After angering the colonel through her recitation of the poem she stated “I began to repent what I had done, as I felt that I might have to pay a severe penalty for my rashness. [...] My confidence had all oozed out by that time, so I silently withdrew to the hall.”<sup>20</sup>

Despite her professed lack of confidence, McDonald still took a parting verbal shot at the officers as they left to pursue Jackson’s army by saying, “‘I shall be very glad to see you Col. Candée on your way back if you have time to stop.’ That last piece of impudence was cowardly, as he could not, as I thought, reply, but he did, saying, ‘Madam, Jackson is now pushed to extremities –three columns are now converging to crush him.’ My heart sunk, and as usual my courage melted away into a fit of weeping.”<sup>21</sup> While McDonald’s recollections reflect her

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 41-42.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 42.

tenacity through her repeated verbal sparring with the officers, her descriptions of her emotions highlight her gender-perceived weakness as a woman. Because she recreated the lost portion of her diary for her children, most of whom reached maturity after the war, she subscribed to the postbellum gender standards for an agitated woman. Her presentation of herself as imprudent, rash, impudent, and cowardly gave her credibility in the eyes of her children while covertly expressing her nerve.

Cornelia McDonald's diary reflects both her performance of gender to negotiate wartime power struggles and to create a credible narrative for her children. She tailored her gendered behaviors to suit the situation. In her interactions with General Milroy, she repeatedly performed just within the limits of the middle-class gender system because she found it a successful way to persuade him. While she relied on social conventions as the support for her pleas to keep her house and to buy food, her success ultimately came through her audacity to confront him. McDonald skillfully controlled her confrontational tone during her meetings with Milroy, but implied that the Union army's actions and orders towards civilians did not follow the middle-class standards Milroy invested himself in, jolting him into making exceptions for her family. In other situations, McDonald circumvented gender standards, like when she realized she needed to use brute force to prevent a northern soldier from stealing her food. McDonald also performed within gendered standards when she wrote her memoirs and recreated the lost portion of her diary. Because she edited her diary near the end of Reconstruction, she had to perform gender within social standards that had reverted to the antebellum status quo. She depicted herself responding rashly to Federals due to her womanly loss of self-control to make herself appear credible and respectable to her children. McDonald's successful performance of gender led not only to her family's survival under enemy occupation, but also the acceptance of her

autobiographical narrative. Her son found her work so compelling that he published it, allowing the diary to join the body of women's published autobiographical war narratives to become a window through which historians can study McDonald and life in Winchester during the Civil War.

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