



Civil War Nurse Narratives, 1863-1870

Daneen Wardrop

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Civil War Nurse Narratives, 1863–1870, examines the first wave of autobiographical narratives written by northern female nurses and published during the war and shortly thereafter, ranging from the well-known Louisa May Alcott to lesser-known figures such as Elvira Powers and Julia Wheelock. From the hospitals of Washington, DC, and Philadelphia, to the field at Gettysburg in the aftermath of the battle, to the camps bordering front lines during active combat, these nurse narrators reported on what they saw and experienced for an American audience hungry for tales of individual experience in the war.

As a subgenre of war literature, the Civil War nurse narrative offered realistic reportage of medical experiences and declined to engage with military strategies or Congressional politics. Instead, nurse narrators chronicled the details of attending wounded soldiers in the hospital, where a kind of microcosm of US democracy-in-progress emerged. As the war reshaped the social and political ideologies of the republic, nurses labored in a workplace that reflected cultural changes in ideas about gender, race, and class. Through interactions with surgeons and other officials they tested women's rights convictions, and through interactions with formerly enslaved workers they wrestled with the need to live up to their own often abolitionist convictions and support social equality.

By putting these accounts in conversation with each other, *Civil War Nurse Narratives* productively explores a developing genre of war literature that has rarely been given its due and that offers refreshing insights into women's contributions to the war effort. Taken together, these stories offer an impressive and important addition to the literary history of the Civil War.

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