

and conscience, of a society losing its faith both in its gods and in itself.

The story is told with words, obviously, but the technique sometimes resembles a collage of commercial images from photographs, movies, TV shows. One of the main actors (kept deliberately offstage) is Martin Pressy, a spoiled effeminate rich kid who only discovered his *métier*—that of the highbrow pornographer—in 1968. The bizarre sequence of events ultimately turns on “Missy Prissy’s” strictly pure and two-dimensional interest in women and his projected volume of nude photographs.

Even the normal characters are stereotyped in celluloid imagery. Billy’s new girlfriend is Judy Davis in *Barton Fink*; the rich black attorney is a “lighter skinned version of Danny Glover”; Penrose has “Paul Newman eyes”; and the editor of the local newspaper is a “sawed-off version of Jason Robards.” The allusions are not random: individually they constitute a set of shorthand references that elucidate the character, somewhat as Hitchcock liked to cast well-known stars (Cary Grant, Jimmy Stewart) whose characters had been established even before appearing in the new film. Collectively, however, these pop-culture allusions hint at Garrett’s almost obsessive interest in the attrition of American character under the millstones of mass culture. “For the first time,” says Billy Tone, “we can see ourselves . . . in the eyes of distant strangers. . . . We have become small and ridiculous, like the Lilliputians. We are, from this point of view, here to be managed, manipulated, exploited. We’re nothing more than the pitiful consumers of whatever they wish us to consume.”

The principal cause of our shrinking is television, which has displaced reality. As the newspaper editor explains:

The sixties, are when it all happened. When public figures began to get the hang of it, how to use it. They could see that in TV, image was far more important than “reality.” That shadow had more value than substance. They could understand that it’s all smoke and mirrors. What you see is what you get, and what isn’t there doesn’t exist. They could see—I’m thinking of Johnson, of the Kennedys, hell, everybody in the public light—that you either control it or

it controls you. It can make anything happen. It can turn victory into defeat, vice into virtue, cowards into heroes, and most of all it has no memory at all. Now you see it and now you don’t. Yesterday’s heroes are today’s criminals [e.g., the leader of the Freemen] and vice versa.

The Kennedys did, however, achieve a kind of permanence through their martyrdom. What a blessing, in this age of images, is an early death. Contrast the posthumous reputation of JFK with that of more popular recent Presidents who had the misfortune to live to a ripe old age, of Elvis with Frank Sinatra, of John Lennon with Paul McCartney. Imagine how Bob Dylan would be worshiped, if he had been killed on his motorcycle back in 1966?

Abraham, Martin, and John were the pop political martyrs celebrated in Dion DiMucci’s 1968 one-hit comeback song (I wished at the time that Dion had stayed on drugs). There is, in fact, no pop idol more artificial—more “plastic,” as we used to say in the 60’s—than “Dr.” Martin Luther King, Jr., and Garrett has made King the pop cultural focal point of his photo-iconography. To figure out King’s character, the “Judy Davis” librarian looks through a series of photographs of King and observes that from his habit of never smiling, King turned his face into a mask (i.e., a cultural image, not reality). The really disturbing photograph is a shot of a warm and smiling King at the Nobel Prize ceremony, revealing—paradoxically—that he had spent his life holding his real self “in check.” In the end the camera would “eventually swallow him whole and leave only its multitude of fragmentary images behind.” Garrett, while drawing attention to King’s falseness—his adulteries and plagiarisms—does not see King either as evil or even essentially hypocritical. Instead, he prefers to take King’s call for a color-blind society at its face value as the last chance for the two races to understand each other.

In the book’s present tense (1994), relations between blacks and whites are summed up by the hypocrisy of Penrose Weatherby, getting rich from building low-cost homes for blacks. His father is more honest: an old-fashioned bigot who is open about his prejudices. But there is no place for candor in the 1990’s. Martin Pressy is coming out with a new book

of photographs of fat people, with a hilariously pretentious introduction by his old friend Professor Moses Katz. (“After the experience of these photographs the world will look different and, perhaps, more wonderful.”) Billy Tone, discovering the truth about himself, goes off to make movies in Hollywood, “a place where everybody wants to be like Fellini only without doing a lick of work or taking any chances.”

America in the 90’s is as real as a Hollywood set or a Disneyworld recreation of Medieval Paris, without either the rats or the stink and, one might add, without either the heroism or the faith. “It’s all too beautiful,” as the 60’s drugpop song went, but in pasting pretty images over the reality of racial differences and racial bigotry, we have also stifled whatever small aptitude we had for telling the truth. George Garrett is our Diogenes, and his latest book, while shedding light all over this kingdom of lies, can still not reveal an honest man.

*Thomas Fleming is the editor of Chronicles.*

## The Late Unpleasantness

by Katherine Dalton

**The War the Women Lived: Female Voices from the Confederate South**  
Edited by Walter Sullivan  
Nashville: J.S. Sanders & Company,  
319 pp., \$24.95



There is nothing so painfully ironic as a war between countrymen. So when nurse Kate Cumming speaks bitterly in her 1864 diary of “our *kind* northern friends, who love us so dearly that they will have us unite with them, whether we will or no” it is hard to blame her.

Cumming is one of 23 Southern women whose memoirs and diaries Walter Sullivan, an English professor at Vanderbilt University, has collected in this anthology. The authors range from Mary Boykin Miller Chestnut, wife of U.S. Senator James Chestnut of South

Carolina, to the spy Belle Boyd of Virginia, arrested first at 19, to Céline Frémaux of Louisiana, who was only ten when the war began. There are many wonderful stories here, some very moving. Several of these women were, like Mary Chestnut, from wealthy families; all were ruined by the war. By 1864, Céline Frémaux was so poor that her family made their own shoes—using cartridge boxes and belts for the soles, and velvet from an old hunting suit for the uppers. Sewn together with copper wire, these shoes would last for seven or eight wearings—enough for a month or two of church.

In that same year in Georgia, in the wake of Sherman's Army, Mary Ann Harris Gay traveled unescorted from Decatur to Social Circle—a dangerous trip at the time. In her first two days traveling she saw no living animal, not even a bird, other than a dog guarding the ruins of a house burnt to the ground. When she returned to Decatur, she was met by women and children who ran after her and begged for something to eat.

Other women besides Mrs. Gay showed great courage. After Richmond fell in 1865, Phoebe Yates Pember continued to nurse her soldiers under occupation. Frustrated one day to find her stores of food had been commandeered by the Union soldiers, she went to the commissary and, to the guards' astonishment, simply pushed aside their bayonets and unlocked the door. She then filled her basket, "with an explanation to them that I could be arrested whenever wanted at my quarters." (She was allowed to nurse and feed her patients until there were none left.)

Some of these women write very well, and most of the rest write simply and clearly—only the lady spies are guilty of penny-dreadful prose, and their stories are still entertaining, if not always credible. Sullivan has helped his authors (and readers) by silently editing out political commentary and family details he found less interesting. He has also quoted selections that are generally longer than those found in similar anthologies, and quoted several women two or three times, so that you get a real feeling for their characters and circumstances. This is the case with Phoebe Pember, and with Mary Jones and her daughter, Mary Mallard, whose twin diaries tell one of the most powerful stories in the book.

In late 1864, Mrs. Jones and Mrs. Mallard were living with a friend, Kate King,

and five children on one of the Jones' estates near Savannah. The diaries cover the month Sherman's Army came through, December 1864 to January 1865. During this time the women were robbed of their food and possessions (as were their slaves), had their house frequently invaded, were cursed and insulted, and sometimes threatened with death or fire. One soldier took their well chain, telling the women they had no right even to water. Mrs. Mallard writes that her male slaves had to stay home with their wives to keep them safe from assault, and there was one night when the white women, too, were told by a servant that they were in danger. They prayed and then sat sleepless in the dark, finding in the morning that a Union soldier had taken it upon himself to guard them. Mary Mallard, who was pregnant, finally had her daughter on January 4, while a hundred Union soldiers yelled and cursed in the yard.

In an entry dated January 7, when the worst was over, Mary Jones examined her conscience and then wrote, "I never failed to let them know that before High Heaven I believed our cause was just and right. The isolated and utterly defense-

less condition of my poor family compelled me often to use entreaties; but after the day was over I frequently inquired of Kate and Daughter: "Tell me, girls, did I act like a coward?"

Mrs. Jones' emotion makes the war feel very real, and very recent. This is the virtue of a well-chosen anthology: in it we have a chance to hear the people who lived through a great event tell their own tales, in their own way, with an immediacy that even the best third-party history cannot have.

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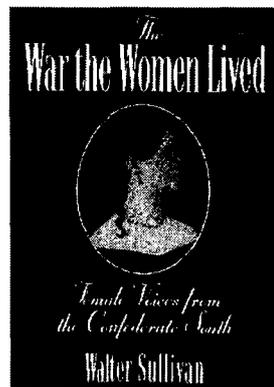
## Brief Mentions

**The Great Betrayal: The Elite's War on Middle America.** By Louis T. March and Brent Nelson (Raleigh: Representative Government Press), 138 pp., \$5.95

A devotion to free trade seems to be common among "conservatives." But free trade, according to Louis T. March and Brent Nelson, is a bad idea. "We should defend our markets," they write, "as we should defend our borders." The term is really a euphemism for letting the Fortune 500 decide what the rules of trade will be—at the expense of American workers. In the authors' view, NAFTA and other schemes so beloved of Beltway ideologues have two main results for blue-collar Americans, as companies relocate in Mexico or are flooded with cheap labor: belt-tightening and layoffs. According to Ravi Batra's book *The Myth of Free Trade*, "Ford Motors today produces roughly the same number of cars and trucks as in 1975 with only about half the number of employees." Citing an article by *Chronicles* contributor Alfred Eckes in *Foreign Affairs* (Fall 1992), March and Nelson point out one result of abandoning traditional tariff policies. Due to tariff cuts, says Eckes, "average American wages in 1991 were 20 percent below 1972 levels," a drop accompanied by huge layoffs. Sadly, it was only after this fiasco that Republicans threw in the towel on "free trade," renouncing the protectionism of their forebears. Today, generosity to our rivals is the dogma of many "conservatives," even as America rots from within.

—Michael Washburn

## The War the Women Lived



*Female Voices from the Confederate South*

**Edited by Walter Sullivan**

Selections from the journals of Confederate women, 1861-1865

"It was a splendid notion of Walter Sullivan's to assemble a chorus of Confederate women diarists, who, as this book shows, did a great deal more than merely stand and wait. They also served, and are eloquent in their memories of those days." -SHELBY FOOTE

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