

[Author Interview--Stephanie McCurry \(Women's War\)](#)

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Hello H-CivWar readers,

today we feature Stephanie McCurry to talk about her new book [Women's War: Fighting and Surviving the American Civil War](#).

Stephanie McCurry is the R. Gordon Hoxie Professor of American History in Honor of Dwight D. Eisenhower at Columbia University. She is the author of *Masters of Small Worlds* and *Confederate Reckoning*.

Stephanie, could you give our readers a brief idea of how this book came about and what your argument is?

Hi Niels, Hi Everyone. Thanks for talking about my new book Women's War.

About three years ago I realized I had this book in my head. I had just finished a deep dive into international law and the idea of gender and innocence in the laws of war which took a serious hit in Lieber's Code written, as so many know, in the middle of the American Civil War. At the time, I was writing my way into a new book project on the post-Civil War United States - one I very self-consciously think of as a project about a "Postwar" moment and not narrowly a history of Reconstruction. I was grappling with the big questions of the historiography. I really feel that we are at a new juncture in the history of Reconstruction, that the frameworks that structured debates in the field since the 1950s are collapsing under the weight of a new urgent accounting of racism and the legacy of slavery in American life (coming out of the Black Lives Matter movement for example). I wanted to engage all of that but I had a very strong sense that what I wanted to understand most was the human experience of living through that profound passage in history. It was at that point that my work on Gertrude Thomas became more than a source and turned into a topic in its own right. I went to Duke, got the manuscript diary, and started to work out from there to the Freedmen's Bureau papers etc. It has been an amazing experience.

*This is the first book I have ever written that is truly women's and not gender history. As the preface makes clear (this is the first time I have ever written about this), the interest in women and war grows out of my own experience as a teenager living under military occupation in Belfast during the Troubles. The book is about three central questions of Civil War history that turn crucially (I think) on the history of women: the nature of the military conflict; black women fugitives' role in emancipation and the limits of the military narrative; and what was involved in destroying slavery and reconstructing lives -- including ideas of belonging -- in the aftermath of war. But in a more important sense the book is about the problem of women and war itself -- what I see as the trans-historical and highly problematic assumption that women are outside of war. This is something I tackled in *Confederate Reckoning* through the idea of Antigone; the idea that women might be witnesses to war, or innocent parties who should be protected in it, but not just human beings (like men) who share political convictions about the causes of war or legitimacy of invasions, who are willing to fight, or who shape the terms of war in their desperation to survive it. In every war that I*

know of (at least in the modern period) armies are forced to acknowledge women's role as enemies who matter during the conflict, but when it is over the whole society moves forcefully to deny it and bury that history. So the book is also about that. As I wrote it I had to admit how much it mattered to me to write it - to tackle fictions about women and war, to challenge the writing out of women (including by historians), and to insist on the value of women's perspective on wars and their aftermaths. This is what I am most invested in.

You are certainly illustrating some powerful connections between the role of women and military conflict. However, you also illustrate some racial distinctions, how was the war experience different for African-American women? How did you select the individuals you studied in the book?

Well for one thing African American women - and especially enslaved ones - found no protection under the laws of war or Lieber's new code as white women did. And black soldiers' wives had a very difficult time getting access to the government benefits and support which they were entitled to for their husband's military service and sacrifice.

But the bigger issue, I think, is that African American women were really fighting a different war - to destroy slavery and find a way to liberate themselves and their families while, somehow, also surviving the military conflict. In this they faced a different and far more forbidding landscape than the men in their families and communities, in no small part because the Union government and army saw them (the women and children) as a burden and encumbrance. There was NO military upside to the flood of black women into Union lines and territory. Indeed, what is most disturbing about this part of the story is how few allies they had (including among Union forces or policy makers) and how much they were up against in every respect during the war. This is a huge story. But part of what I try to do in the book is show the challenges black women fugitives posed to a Union emancipation policy aimed only at enslaved men. Telling the story from African American women's perspective shows the limits of a conventional emancipation narrative focused on black soldiers and military service. Enslaved women and children seeking refuge constituted a military and humanitarian crisis of massive proportions. They also posed a problem of governance that confounded and shaped Union policy for the entirety of the war. By pursuing their own personal and collective objectives in the war and challenging the government's plans to exclude, control and contain them they expanded the terms (and terrain) of emancipation.

The human cost to them was staggeringly high. It is hard to grasp it, but in writing about African American women and the struggle for emancipation I try to show how exposed and vulnerable each and every one of them was to deadly violence at the hands of white southerners and of both Confederate and Union armies and troops. It is shocking to realize that in all the accounting for the Civil War dead, and the constantly revised and escalating numbers of men who died in the conflict, as of 2019 we still have no true body count -- no idea how many enslaved people and African American men and women were murdered or died in the Confederacy and Union border states during the Civil War. The historical record is littered with the evidence. Obviously that is part of the postwar story too.

You mention that some of these gendered and racial struggles remain an issue in the post-war period and your last chapter deals with Reconstruction. How did you decide on the chronological boundaries of the book? Similarly, how did Reconstruction alter the conversation? I am in part here thinking

about the Fourteenth Amendment and the introduction of gender into the Constitution.

The book doesn't really have an end point, meaning that I kind of deferred the question of when 'Reconstruction' ends. I mentioned that the last chapter leads directly into the work I am doing now on the postwar United States. That book will probably go to World War I and end with the "lessons" Woodrow Wilson took away from his experience of Reconstruction. But in this book I was focused especially on the years immediately after the war, and on the enormity of the transformation that defeat and emancipation entailed. The chapter goes to the 1890s but the energy is all really about the period 1865-1873 or so.

Here I am focusing on the period as seen through one white women's life, Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas, because her daily account of reconstructing a life amid the ruins of the old slave South, shows how it involved a revolution at the level of every household and every family. Clearly it would be a bad idea to leave one's self captive to one white woman's account of events, so I also try to capture something of the struggle as local freed people waged it against former owners like Thomas by research in freedmen's bureau records and other sources for the Augusta area (where Thomas was from). For all its limitations, Thomas's perspective allows us to see how the huge structural changes in land, capital, and racial ideology that form the usual subjects of Reconstruction history were inextricably wound up with highly intimate matters of marriage and family, sexuality and love. With slavery - and its possessive claim - destroyed even subjectivity itself had to be remade. I am currently writing an article that expands on this idea called "Reconstructing Belonging: The Thirteenth Amendment at work in the World."

Crazy as it sounds to say it, I think we still haven't really taken the proper measure of what emancipation actually involved. The best way to get at it is not (to my mind) at the global level but the human scale. It is the human experience of the huge meta events that interests me at this moment. People like Gertrude Thomas didn't simply accept the loss of their racial privilege or surrender their possessive claim on the people they had owned. As everything was wrenched away, her response mixed grief, loss and rage in dangerous measure. In late 1864 when her father's will was read, she learned that (as she feared) he had other children, enslaved children whose mother he also owned. It is impossible to separate Gertrude Thomas's thinking about race and white supremacy from her feelings of sexual betrayal and humiliation. One thing her story shows is that the damage from the sexual violence of slavery set a deep explosive charge beneath every negotiation over the terms of freedom in the postwar South.

I think we stand at a new juncture in the history of Reconstruction. For me that involves reframing the subject as a study of a post-war society and moment and not simply as a history of "Reconstruction" as the period and topic are conventionally framed. It is why I try to talk of reconstructing (and not Reconstruction). If we think of the cost of emancipation as a sort of indemnity imposed on the former Confederacy as the price of defeat, it starts to put the U.S. experience in a broad context and allows us to think about the perseverant problems faced by postwar societies and the challenges of reconstruction which arise everywhere in the aftermath of war. I have a lot of work left to do to bring this vision fully to life in the book I am working on now. But it's a great project and I am really excited about it.

Stephanie, thank you for this conversation and for taking the time to share some aspects of your book

with us here on H-CivWar.