

The war within a war: Women nurses in the union army.

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## **The War within a War: Women Nurses in the Union Army**

Ann Douglas Wood

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### **In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

THE WAR WITHIN A WAR: Women Nurses in the Union Army Ann Douglas Wood Dr. A. Curtis, president of the Botánico-Medical College of Ohio and author of Lectures on Midwifery published in 1836, lamented the passing of women midwives, and the take-over of their occupation by men. "The destruction of scores of modern women and infants, and the miserable condition of multitudes that escape immediate death" testified all too clearly, he believed, that the change was "not made for the better."<sup>1</sup> For better or worse, the change was very real. In 1646, as Gerda Lerner tells us, a man had been prosecuted in Maine for practicing as a midwife. One hundred and thirty years later, Dr. William Shippen started to lecture on midwifery in Philadelphia. In the next half century, medical schools proliferated, and state after state legislated that a physician had to be licensed to practice. Professionalization served to drive women from medicine as it automatically excluded them from formal training, licenses, and hence practice.<sup>2</sup> As Victor

Robinson, the historian of nursing in America, sums it up, "in the change from colonial to national medicine, the casualty was woman: woman was not ignored, she was expelled."<sup>3</sup> This expulsion was hardly an unforeseen result of professionalization; rather, it was a desired and sought-after end. One Boston doctor boasted in 1820: It was one of the first and happiest fruits of improved medical education in America that females were excluded from practice, and this has only been effected by the united and persevering efforts of some of the most distinguished individuals of the profession.<sup>4</sup> Women continued to play a role in the healing process, but it was a totally unprofessional one. Any sister, daughter or mother was expected to be able to nurse the sick of her household: indeed, she was idealized and glorified as a bedside watcher. Catharine Beecher's comparison of woman's role as healer to that of Jesus Christ was a com1A. Curtis, *Lectures on Midwifery and the Forms of Disease Peculiar to Women and Children* (Columbus, 1841), p. 9. 2 Gerda Lerner, "The Lady and the Mill Girl: Changes in the Status of Women in the Age of Jackson," *Midcontinent American Studies Journal*, X (Spring, 1969), 7-8. 3 Victor Robinson, *White Caps: The Stonj of Nursing* (Philadelphia and New York, 1946), p. 139. \* Ibid. 197 198 CIVIL WAR HISTORY monplace. 5 Woman's silent, long-suffering ministry was the subject of countless poems and tales, but it was to hold sway principally in the home, usually her own, and never in any circumstance to come into competition with the professional doctor's role. William A. Alcott, a Boston physician and author of many books on women's health, proposed that all women should be trained to care for the sick at home. Women needed a little occupation to save them from "ennui," "disgust," and even "suicide," and they were by nature better qualified as nurses than men: self-sacrificing and self-forgetful, "they are formed for days and nights and months and years of watchfulness." Not only capable of such marathons of selflessness, women also "more readily anticipate our wants." Naturally, given such altruistic natures, the women nurses who are to be employed officially outside of their homes, "can be employed much cheaper" than men.<sup>6</sup> The essence of professionalism in nineteenth-century America was competition, and competition should clearly be anathema to the womanly watcher Alcott paints. A rough bargain was being struck here as in so many other occupational fields at the turn of the nineteenth century. Women were exchanging some kind of professional expertise and official recognition for a domesticated version of the occupation in question, a version fed by official veneration but sapped by its distance from technological, scientific advance and its closeness to the hearth.<sup>7</sup> In other words, women, told that they had been third-rate professional doctors, were promised that they could be first-rate amateur nurses. They could no longer be midwives, but they could be madonnas. One can even speculate that the sentimental adulation granted the mother watching at the sickbed was a kind of guilty, if unconscious...

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<sup>3</sup> Victor Robinson, *White Caps: The Story of Nursing* (Philadelphia and New York, 1846), p. 129.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*





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