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ELLA LONN: FEMALE SCHOLAR AND CIVIL WAR HISTORIAN

by Sarah McNair Vosmeier

For many years history was considered a man's profession; even after the 1960s when increasing numbers of women started entering the field of history, most women focused specifically on "women's history." Thus, very few women historians have studied the Civil War. In a 1963 bibliography of general books related to the Civil War (including novels and first person accounts) only 8% of the authors were women. Even in a more recent and much more selective bibliography of Civil War histories, only one of the 56 books listed was written by a woman.¹

Ella Lonn was one of the first professional women historians to focus on the Civil War and Reconstruction period, and with so few women in the field, she stands out clearly. Her first book was *Reconstruction in Louisiana After 1868* (1918), followed by *Desertion During the Civil War* (1928); *Salt as a Factor in the Confederacy* (1933); *Foreigners in the Confederacy* (1940); and *Foreigners in the Union Army and Navy* (1951). Why did Ella Lonn, as a turn-of-the-century woman, choose to pursue academics, and why did she choose to study the Civil War and Reconstruction period?

First, her family must have encouraged her to pursue academics. She was born in LaPorte, Indiana, in 1879, and lived there until she left for college in 1896. During the late nineteenth century, people sometimes argued that academics and intellectual exertion were a physical strain on women, but the Lonns evidently did not agree. Ella's mother, Nellie (Palmbia) Lonn, was described as "an omniverous reader" and she organized a "little reading circle" to study the works of various poets, including Sir Walter Scott and Nathaniel Hawthorne. Later, Ella's sister Alice also became a teacher.²

The Lonns were able to send Ella to kindergarten, which was unusual in the 1880's, and she recalled having "very good teachers" in high school. She also remembered the LaPorte Public Library with gratitude and respect, agreeing to write a history of the library for a town celebration in the 1930's. On



FIGURE 1. Ella Lonn.

From Goucher College Archives
(Towson, Maryland)

another occasion, she described the special speakers brought to LaPorte by the library. Among the speakers whom she presumably heard were Susan B. Anthony and Horace Greeley. In sum, Lonn remembered her childhood in LaPorte with "a special tenderness" and nostalgia: "when I think of this little city in northern Indiana, a picture floats across my mental vision of long avenues of beautiful maples, arching overhead and casting their grateful shade in broad splashes of light and shade."³

The Lonns were considered to be a "very prominent family," and other townspeople could see that prominence whenever they went down Washington Street past the "Lonn Block" (a building covering half a block and housing their harness manufacturing company). If the Lonns had not been successful, there would have been more pressure for Ella to devote her energies toward finding a husband or possibly a job, but because the family had no immediate economic pressures, Ella did not need to divert her attention from her studies.⁴

About the time Ella was leaving LaPorte for college, the Lonns established a bicycle factory, in addition to the harness factory. The growing interest in bicycles among young

people at the turn of the century has been cited as one of the factors leading to increased independence for women.⁵ Not only did bicycles allow young girls to escape the influence of older chaperones, but they also led to less restrictive fashions in women's clothing.

One might expect that Ella Lonn's early experiences in LaPorte would lead her to challenge traditional ideals of womanhood. Certainly, Susan B. Anthony must have spoken against them when she appeared in LaPorte, and there is no suggestion that the Lonn women adhered to the common theory that intellectual activity would physically weaken turn-of-the-century women. Furthermore, as bicycle manufacturers, it would have been good business for the Lonns to advocate the independent lifestyle that would lead women to buy

bicycles. Nevertheless, Ella Lonn did not argue against traditional conceptions of femininity. Her professional colleagues remembered her as "feminine but not feminist, with 'no cause to promote such as woman's rights.'" (In fact, she may have been more interested in women's issues than her colleagues suspected; she was very active in the AAUW, and spoke for the League of Women Voters.)⁶

Lonn may not have argued against traditional conceptions of femininity through her words or writings, but she certainly challenged those traditional ideals through her actions: first by going to college (graduating Phi Beta Kappa from the University of Chicago), and then by continuing with graduate work.

Lonn's family seems to have encouraged her to pursue academics, but she probably became interested in the Civil War as a student at the University of Chicago. She majored in political science and history there, and one of her history professors was Hermann von Holst.

Von Holst had been one of the most respected historians in the United States during the 1870s and 1880s, especially since he had studied and taught in German seminars. During this period Germany was in the forefront of education and was introducing new teaching methods to the world: from kindergarten for children to seminars for college students. In the mid-1880s Lonn had taken advantage of new German educational reform as a kindergarten student. By the time she reached the University of Chicago in 1896 seminars were no longer unusual, and von Holst was nearing the end of his academic career. Still, von Holst's prestige and enthusiasm must have influenced Lonn's interest in the Civil War. He was an extraordinary speaker, with a "dramatic voice and blazing eyes."⁷

Furthermore, von Holst supported the Republicans (Lonn's father was also a Republican) and von Holst made his political opinions well known, arguing that historians had the right to interpret people and events according to their own political opinions. Lonn did not mix politics and historical interpretations to the extent that Holst did, but she *did* express her political opinions in her class lectures, especially later in life when she became extremely conservative.⁸

Lonn received her doctorate (in 1911) from the University of Pennsylvania and studied there with John Bach McMahers. McMahers had come into national prominence in 1883 with the publication of the first volume of his *History of the People of the United States, from the Revolution to the Civil War*. The last volume (on the Civil War) was published in 1913; thus he was probably working on the Civil War while Lonn was completing her doctorate.

McMahers represented a new kind of historian, different from historians like von Holst. Von Holst mixed politics and history unself-consciously, and saw American history as being controlled by two political themes: slavery, and the conflict between state's rights and national sovereignty. McMahers gave less attention to politics (although he also supported the Republicans), focusing instead on social history. He explained that his purpose was "to describe the dress, the occupations, the amusements, the literary canons of the time; to note the changes of manners and morals." In doing so, he made his books into compilations of details rather than sweeping arguments.⁹ Lonn's books followed McMahers' pattern closely.

While Lonn was at the University of Pennsylvania, she began writing to Goucher College, inquiring about openings in the history department. There were none in 1910-1912, and in 1913 and 1914 she went abroad for post-doctorate work at the University of Berlin and at the Sorbonne in Paris.

As World War I was beginning, Lonn left Paris to join the faculty of Grinnell College, in Iowa. In 1918 she was given an opportunity to apply to Goucher again, and she arranged for some of her colleagues to write letters of recommendation to the president of Goucher. One colleague described her as an energetic worker, adding that there was "no woman for whose scholarship and personality I have greater respect." Significantly, as the application was made during World War I, her colleague used almost a third of the letter asserting Lonn's loyalty to the United States. "Like many others with German names [actually Lonn is Swedish], the question of her loyalty to our Government may arise in the thoughts of those who do not know her ... [However] she does not mince words in

exposing and condemning these evils [of Germany]."

In the end, Lonn was offered a position, which she accepted with mixed feelings. At Grinnell she had been teaching a German language course rather than history, and so she was pleased to have an appointment in a history department. Also, she would probably have more chance for professional advancement at a women's college than she would at Grinnell. (The person who recommended her for Goucher explained that although Lonn was not actively seeking a new position, "I incline to think you could get her as there is not much chance for a woman at Grinnell.") Still, it rankled Lonn that Goucher offered her only an instructorship — when she had had eleven years teaching experience (some of which was in high schools). In fact, after she had accepted the position she was offered a better position elsewhere, but she finally agreed to stay at Goucher, and within two years she was appointed associate professor.¹⁰

Lonn remained at Goucher until her retirement in 1945. The bulk of her books and articles were published while she was at Goucher, and she gave numerous public lectures in Baltimore (about 35 a year). Lonn was a "stickler" demanding meticulous attention to details and single-minded dedication — from herself as well as her students. Still, her classes were apparently popular, especially a course she gave on current events. In the classroom, Lonn's meticulousness was reflected in the way she filled the blackboard with notes for her students. In her research, her single-mindedness was reflected in a popular story about her working so diligently at the Library of Congress that she was overlooked and locked in for the night. Unperturbed, she spent the night sleeping on one of the long tables.¹¹

In 1945, after retiring from Goucher, Lonn was elected president of the Southern Historical Association — despite the fact that no woman had ever been elected president before and despite the fact that she was a Northerner (by birth). Her election was a recognition of her qualities as a "studious, objective, no nonsense scholar," and her gender had not entered into the question, according to the male leaders of the organization.¹² After her term as president was over, she continued to do research, and published her last book in 1951. She died in 1962 in Florida.

Ella Lonn was clearly a successful historian. Her success was certainly due in part to her skills and personality, but many women must have had those same skills and similar personalities yet they did not become successful historians. Thus, other factors contributed to Lonn's success. First, her family supported her in her academic pursuits, both personally and financially to some extent. Even after her parents died, Lonn's sister Emma (who lived with her in Baltimore) was protective and supportive. With the support of her family, Lonn was able to take advantage of excellent educational opportunities. For example, she studied with Hermann von Holst and John Bach McMahers, two prominent historians. Von Holst probably inspired her interest in the Civil War, and McMahers influenced the way she wrote and thought about history.

ELLA LONN'S BOOKS ON THE CIVIL WAR

Lonn published seven books and many articles, as well as thirty-four entries for the *Dictionary of American Biography*.¹³ Her achievements were recognized by her colleagues, both in their reviews of her books and in their electing her president of the Southern Historical Association.

Lonn, Ella. *Reconstruction in Louisiana after 1868*. Putnam, 1918.

Ignoring, in large part, national politics and issues, this book focuses on Reconstruction in Louisiana between 1868 and 1876 — what Lonn refers to as "a long and weary drama." One reviewer described the book as "a remarkable piece of work in regard to the general accuracy of her statements," but objected that Lonn is "too timid about expressing opinions; it is not enough to present the facts, to quote freely the conflicting partisan opinions of the time ... the function of the historian should be to digest and interpret where it is needful." Significantly, Lonn's book was also criticized for "lacking in that sort of orderly continuity which makes for clearness and for interest,"¹⁴ just as her professor, John Bach McMahers, was criticized for lack of organization in his books.

Desertion During the Civil War. American Historical Society, 1928.

Influenced by the issues of World War I, Lonn examines what she refers to as the "disease" or "evil" of desertion, arguing that to understand desertion "is to see more of the truth about war and should be another step in the direction of peace." [p. v] Having justified her study of a topic she expects to be unpopular, she carefully elaborates on the causes, magnitude, manner, and results of desertion, both from the Northern and Southern armies. Lonn admits that deserters were the minority

in both armies and that desertion did not carry a stigma for most Civil War soldiers. Still, in conclusion, she describes desertion in the Confederacy as "bad, appallingly so," and desertion in the Union to be even worse, being more deplorable because it prolonged the war. [p. 229] Lonn's book is readable, and J. G. Randall "recommends it as better calculated to convey a sense of the sickening realities of the Civil War than many volumes of military history."¹⁵



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FIGURE 2. Bounty-jumpers enlisted only for the bounty paid to new recruits and then quickly deserted (*Leslie's*, April 1, 1865).

Salt As a Factor in the Confederacy. New York: Walter Neale, 1933 (reprint University of Alabama Press, 1965).

Although the modern reader may not immediately think of salt as an important factor in the Civil War, Lonn claims that "by diverting men . . . [from] winning battles, the lack of salt was a contributing factor to the outcome of the War Between the States." [p. 230] In fact, salt was an important part of all American culture throughout the nineteenth century. The average American consumed between 30 and 50 pounds of salt every year — mostly to preserve meat and for horse and cattle feed. Because almost all the salt in the South was imported,

salt shortages were severe during the war. Lonn's goal in this book was to "make an exhaustive study of the role which salt played in the drama of the War Between the States so that this particular task would not need to be done again." By explaining how Southern states and individuals manufactured or smuggled salt during the war, how salt fit into the Southern budgets, how the Northern army and navy attacked the salt works, Lonn seems to have succeeded in her goal.



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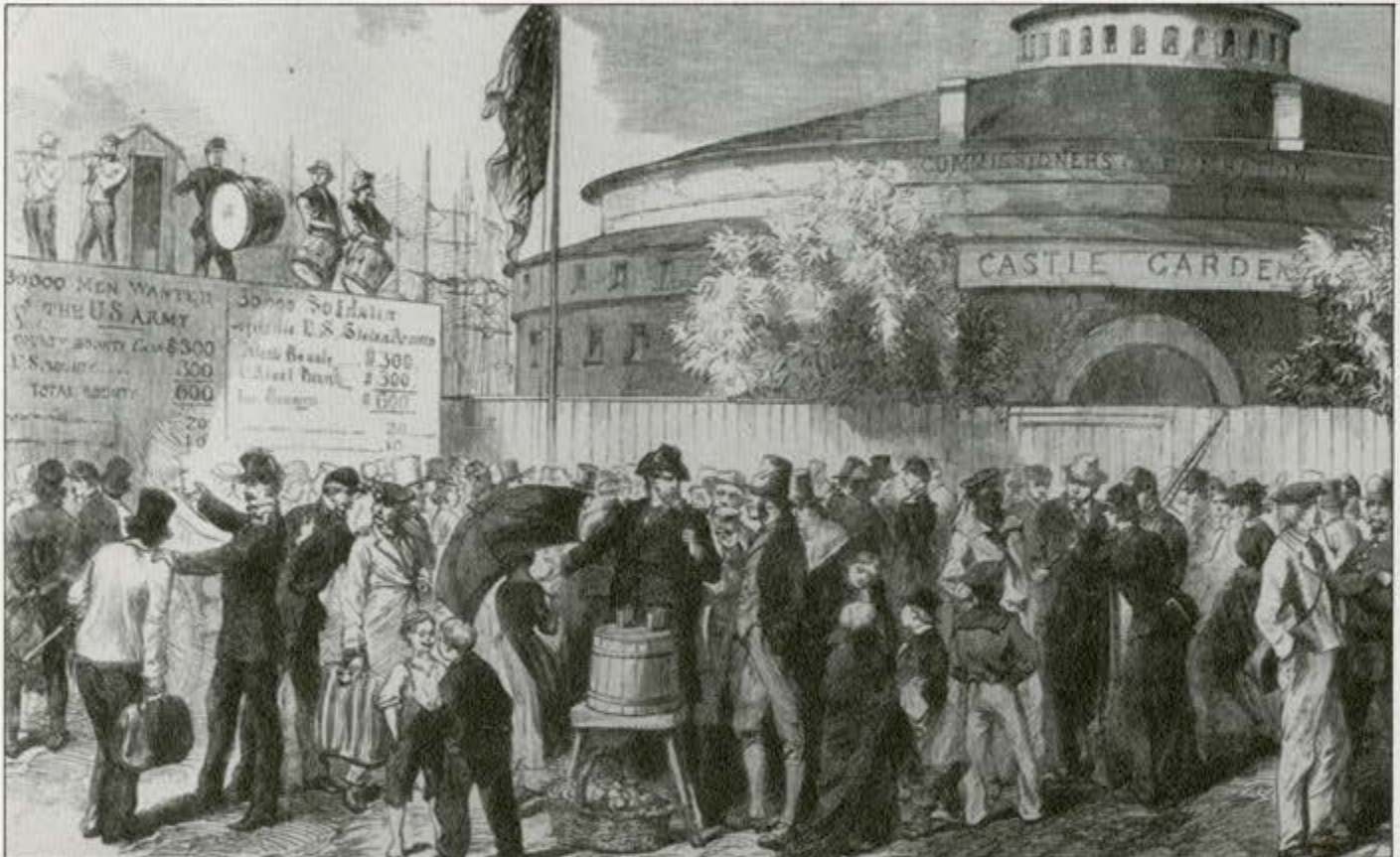
FIGURE 3. A salt factory in the South (*Harper's Weekly*, January 14, 1865).

Foreigners in the Confederacy. University of North Carolina Press, 1940.

Lonn argues that foreigners were an important part of the Confederacy, and her book covers nearly every aspect of their lives there, including statistics about their proportion of the population; a description of their various political views and motives; their experiences as officers, enlisted men, and civilians; and Southern opinion of them as foreigners. Lonn assigns general characteristics to each ethnic group; for the most part the characteristics are complimentary (the English were honest, the Scots intelligent, etc.); however, the Mexicans were described as "wholly unreliable." Lonn's book is almost encyclopedic in detail, and while it is readable, it is not engrossing. Lonn's research and writing are very careful, and the text is riddled with qualifying phrases like, "first such whom the writer has been able to find."

Foreigners in the Union Army and Navy. New York, Greenwood Press, 1951.

This companion volume to *Foreigners in the Confederacy* is quite similar to it. This book focuses more specifically on the foreigners in the *military* in the North (recruitment and the draft; enlisted men and officers; and specific battles) giving proportionally less attention to women and other civilians. This book is even more encyclopedic in detail than *Foreigners in the Confederacy*, and its writing style is similar. Lonn's treatment of various ethnic groups is slightly different: she is more evenhanded in her description of ethnic characteristics and contributions in the North, and she is less enthusiastic in general about immigrant contributions, pointing out that native soldiers were equally skilled and more significant numerically.



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FIGURE 4. Immigrants being recruited for the Union upon arrival in the United States.

FOOT NOTES:

1. John Mebane, *Books Relating to the Civil War*. (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1963); John M. Blum, et al, *The National Experience* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), 385-387.
2. LaWanda Cox, "Ella Lonn," in Carol K. Bleser's "Three Women Presidents of the Southern Historical Association: Ella Lonn, Kathryn Abby Hanna, and Mary Elizabeth Massey," *Southern Studies* 20 (Summer, 1981): 103; Dorothy Rowley (Associate Curator, LaPorte County Historical Society) to author, 8 April 1988.
3. Lonn, "Reminiscences of LaPorte," and "History of an Unusual Library," in *LaPorte, Indiana: History of First Hundred Years 1832-1932*. (n.p.).
4. Rowley; *LaPorte County Directory 1897-8*.
5. See for example, Harvey Green, *The Light of the Home* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983).
6. Cox, 103, 105.
7. *The Dictionary of American Biography*; Thomas J. Pressly,

8. Michael Kraus and Davis D. Joyce, *The Writing of American History* (Norman, Okl.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1985), 166; Cox, 103; Interviews with Jean H. Baker (Goucher College professor), Rhoda Dorsey (President of Goucher College), and Kenneth Walker (retired Goucher professor).
9. Kraus and Joyce, 166, 190, 194.
10. R. H. Perring to President Guth, Goucher College, 5 August 1918; Faculty Records, Office of the President, Goucher College.
11. Goucher Faculty Records; Walker and Dorsey interviews; Cox, 102.
12. Cox, 105.
13. Cox, 104.
14. Pierce Butler, *American Historical Review* 24 (October, 1918): 109.
15. *American Historical Review* 34 (July, 1929): 860.