



Revolutionary Heart: The Life of Clarina Nichols and the Pioneering Crusade for Women's Rights

Diane Eickhoff

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Near the end of her life, early reformer Clarina Nichols (1810—1885) wrote, “what a book I might have given to my dear children, relatives, and personal friends.” With this thorough biography detailing Nichols’s life, the author has given tribute to this wish. Nichols’s popularity as an activist and a speaker, in Kansas and elsewhere, came largely from her anecdotal stories and tales of injustice, such as a mother whose children were stolen, or a woman battling a drunken husband, or a widow put up to auction. These stories opened her audience’s “minds to the injustice she was trying to expose” and worked to bring them closer to the issues. Eickhoff’s details and descriptions work in a similar manner to bring readers close to the “restless, adventurous spirit” of this pioneering feminist.

Eickhoff worked as a freelance writer and editor before discovering Clarina Nichol’s story. Inspired by the Quindaro ruins in Kansas and the 150th anniversary of the Kansas Territory, Eickhoff created this well-researched and enjoyable biography. She also performed as Clarina Nichols in the Kansas anniversary celebration, and produced a young-adult audiobook on the subject.

Nichols’s life story is rich with details; she worked as a journalist, owner of a lending library, editor of a newspaper, and a public speaker, but it is her strength and unique duality that draw the reader into her tale. Though many were unaware of her past, she endured her own encounter with the law in a marriage of cruelty; it was this that united her with the hardships of many women. She comprehended the plight of these women, and she was also able to reach those who could change the state of women’s rights. Her education, knowledge of law, and respectable upbringing gave her the language and the opportunity to address lawmakers and clergy. Her ability to deliver convincing arguments while maintaining a “lady-like” persona would become an identifying feature of this figure of women’s rights. She is described as “wearing a Sunday dress” with “writing paper and knitting in hand” at the Kansas legislature.

Working in a number of states (New York, Vermont, Wisconsin, Kansas), Nichols challenged laws inhibiting women’s property rights, voting rights, custody rights, control of wages, inheritance and education rights; additionally, she worked for temperance and antislavery movements. Through her popularity as a speaker, she deeply touched public opinion and social conventions in Kansas and the United States as a whole. As her story collides with many prominent historical events and figures, this biography provides both the individual tale and a broader overview of the times. The reader is carried through many reform movements of the nineteenth century, while also discovering this courageous and influential woman.

CAROLINE SINKINSON (August 18, 2009)

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