FOREWORD REVIEWS THE INDIE WE LOVE.

The Confederate Belle
Giselle Roberts
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The Civil War blew away almost all the sources of social status and pride for aristocratic Southern belles. Few young women were as resourceful as Scarlett O'Hara in using grit and charm to build a new life for themselves. Instead, they struggled to keep a sense of worth, as their situation—and the Confederacy's—steadily worsened. This book offers, in their own words, some glimpses of how the "Confederate belles" coped.

The author is on the faculty of the history department at Latrobe University in Melbourne, Australia. This volume, based on her doctoral dissertation, examines the experiences of Louisiana and Mississippi women who were between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five during the conflict, all daughters of the elite class, either of plantation owners or of urban professionals. Diary writing was a popular and genteel art of the time, and Roberts uses these women's diaries as well as some selections from letters and later memoirs.

Before the war's start, such young, unmarried women had no responsibilities for managing a household or doing other work. Belles did go to school, but otherwise could spend their time on personal adornment and social events ranging from picnics to grand balls. In 1859, Lemuella Brickell longed for her debut, after which she would have "nothing to do but read, talk, and go along in a 'harum scarum' sort of way." Roberts includes many such quotes showing the outlook and activities of these young women.

When secession occurred, they were suddenly bereft of this charmed life. As their brothers and potential suitors were called to war, belles redefined themselves in terms of "patriotic womanhood." Knitting socks and sewing uniforms for soldiers replaced the parties. At special church services, belles wished "Godspeed" to the soldiers marching off to the battlefields.

After Union troops reached the river country, even pride from these roles was denied the young women. With their slaves fled and their own families facing shortages from blockade and Yankee raiders, the women's present and future now promised only, as Lula Thompson put it, "work from morning till night."

In the author's view, belles coped with misfortune by continually redefining their honor as Southern women as circumstances changed. She makes the case well for the war years, but the one chapter on Reconstruction shows many belles floundering. This in-depth look at a little-studied aspect of the Civil War will provide new insights to both specialists and amateur historians.

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