

Tina Stewart Brakebill . *"Circumstances are Destiny": An Antebellum Woman's Struggle to Define Sphere.* (Civil War in the North.) Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press. 2006. Pp. xx, 255. \$34.95.

"My destiny," lamented Ohio native Celestia Rice Colby, "is to act, to do life's humblest duties, in a narrow, unknown sphere, to crush back the upspringing aspirations that rise in my soul, and to strive for the mastery over my own spirit." (xii) With this, the reader of Tina Stewart Brakebill's *"Circumstances are destiny": An Antebellum Woman's Struggle to Define Sphere*, a volume in Kent State University Press's Civil War in the North Series, is led into one antebellum woman's thoughts concerning her decades long struggle against gender based limitations in American society. Increasingly, Colby came to believe (with obvious deep-seated despondency) that she and her circumstances in life had been severely curtailed simply because she had been born a woman; increasingly, also, she felt defeated by being unable to alter the path of her socially-proscribed destiny.

Brakebill's penetrating, contextual analysis of Celestia Rice Colby's writings—private and published—and mid-nineteenth-century American society are nicely woven together in this fine study about how some women perceived and contributed to the growing movement for women's rights and an equality of circumstances. The book is divided into three parts relative to Colby's life: "An Expected Life" which encompasses her formative years through her first decade of marriage; "The Battle to Change Expectations" which focuses on her efforts to alter the path of her life from what was expected of women; and, "Expectations Stagnate" in which Colby assess the battle's outcome. Colby had much to say even if she doubted the power to influence even her own life, writing some 680 pages of diary entries and 275 published newspaper and other periodical items upon which this is based.

Colby was born Celestia Rice in 1827 in the town of Andover (Ashtabula County) in northeast Ohio, a time and place where rural and agricultural life dominated much of American society. Also becoming prevalent was the trend of families migrating westward as her parents had done, relocating to Ohio from Massachusetts, and as she would do in moving with her family to Illinois after the Civil War. Colby, however, lived the majority of her life in Ashtabula County, particularly Cherry Valley, which was known for its dairying and butter and cheese production. As a daughter then as a mother, her roles and responsibilities would lie within this rural socio-economic context and include often arduous and monotonous farm and household routines.

While growing up, the relative prosperity of Colby's family enabled her to attend Grand River Institute, a private seminary school, in the early 1840s. Here the rigorous curriculum and reformist influences including abolitionism found a fertile mind in Colby and awakened a life-long passionate interest in gender and racial disparities. These ideas would dominate her writings, especially her growing disaffection with the separate spheres ideology. In 1848 she married Lewis Colby, a Cherry Valley dairy-farming neighbor, and in so doing Colby returned to assume the life expected of rural Midwestern women, ultimately raising five children.

Initially, Colby's personal writings reveal a basic, even happy acceptance of her new role as farm wife. "It is my first desire," she maintained, "to be a blessing to my husband." (19) During the 1850s, some of her published essays began appearing in the *Ohio Cultivator* and, at least early on, echoed traditional values. Sounding very much like Catherine Beecher, Colby contended that "If the great mass of our sex fully understood their duty, and were prepared to fulfill it, how soon, how very soon would the moral aspects of the world be changed for the better." (47) Interestingly, she, like Harriet Beecher Stowe, found that the issue of the preservation of the family could be used as a non-threatening vehicle for women writing in support of the antislavery movement, to name just one cause.

By the late 1850s, ten years into marriage, motherhood, and dairying woman, Colby was not only articulating more radical reformism, but also an obvious bout with depression. Whether the two were related or not, the reader begins to question this long before Brakebill concedes the likelihood of a "clinical depression" on page 185. For example, Colby frequently despaired of a life she perceived as full of meaninglessness, especially her "natural" dairying and housekeeping labors. She also disparaged women "content to live a life of idle dependence" who would "sink into mere drudges, and plod through the rest of their hopeless existence with no thought or hope beyond the bounds of their kitchen or parlors." (119) At this point, Colby appeared to believe that she could not alter her gender-driven destiny after all. Perhaps this brought on her depression, or vice versa; nevertheless, one becomes hard pressed at being able to analyze her reformism separate from her depression.

During the Civil War era, Colby's public writings focused on children's stories while her private writings were increasingly despondent with allusions to marital unhappiness. After the war, the family re-located to Freeport, Illinois, where they abandoned farming as a way of life. Eventually Colby rejoiced that her children, including her daughters, pursued a college education, right at the time that women were first being accepted at places like the University of Michigan. At some point in the 1880s, Colby's husband was no longer in the picture, and Colby herself died in 1900 at the age of seventy-two.

Tina Stewart Brakebill has produced a remarkably nuanced analysis of Celestia Rice Colby and her mid-nineteenth-century world. Certainly gender suggested destiny, but a miserable life was not guaranteed. To understand how other women coped with these circumstances, Brakebill might have consulted more primary source accounts for connections to other women and perhaps fewer of the numerous secondary sources she referenced. A regional grounding with other rural, agrarian women would also have kept Brakebill from misconstruing Ohio as being "a microcosm of New England culture" at this late stage (the 1850s). If anything, this is a Midwestern story, and the main connection to New England at this point is genealogical. "Circumstances are destiny" is a must read for those interested in Women's, Ohio, and Midwestern histories.

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