

"These Artful Jezebels": On American Spies

During the American Revolutionary War, women up and down the East Coast spied for the rebels. They also spied for the British. They carried messages across enemy territory and through enemy lines. They reported on gun emplacements and recounted conversations overheard among officers about military strategy. Philadelphia women brought key military intelligence on the British Forces to General George Washington at Valley Forge. Allison Pataki's recent novel, *The Traitor's Wife*, claims Peggy Shippen Arnold, Benedict's wife, was the real mastermind behind the treasonous plan to surrender West Point to the British.

The most extraordinary Revolutionary spy was surely the American waxwork artist Patience Wright, richly portrayed in Charles Coleman Sellers's 1976 biography *Patience Wright: American Artist and Spy in George III's London*. In 1769, Wright, a widowed mother of five, began sculpting wax effigies of eminent Philadelphians to support herself. Her witty, intelligent, and forthright chatter combined with her method of keeping the wax warm and pliable between her thighs as she worked, made a sitting with Mrs. Wright *de rigueur* among the American elite. The superbly detailed likeness of her subject, with "that light of expression in which character is revealed," made her famous and wealthy.

In 1772, she expanded her operation to London. Preceding Madame Tussaud by thirty years, Wright was soon sculpting life-size images of prominent British cultural and political figures. While sculpting various MPs, Wright, a devoted patriot, obtained intelligence useful to the American independence effort and hid the compromising information in wax busts she sent to Philadelphia. She even tried to incite a rebellion against the monarchy in Britain itself.

By the time of the Civil War, female spies were ubiquitous. Many were white women, both abolitionists and secessionists, who conveyed weapons, secret documents, and contraband under their hoop skirts or tied up in their hair. Many were slaves desperate for the North to win. In her engaging new book *Liar, Temptress, Soldier, Spy: Four Women Undercover in the Civil War*, Karen Abbott interweaves the audacious stories of Confederate loyalists Belle Boyd and Rose O'Neal Greenhow with those of Union devotees Sarah Emma Edmondson, Elizabeth Van Lew, and the former slave Mary Elizabeth Bowser. Abbott's lively narrative provides a uniquely female perspective on a defining event in American history.

Belle Boyd, a.k.a., *La Belle Rebelle*, became the most renowned spy of the South. Born into a well-to-do family in the Shenandoah Valley, Belle was a precocious child convinced she was destined for greatness. Just seventeen when the war began, she famously shot and killed a Yankee soldier when he barged into her home and threatened her mother. As dedicated to the secessionist cause as to becoming famous, Belle hung around Union soldiers plying them for

information that she promptly took to the Confederacy. Soon she became a courier riding through country overrun with Yankee scouts and guerrillas to carry commands among Generals Jackson, Beauregard, and J.E.B. Stuart. She took ever greater risks to procure invaluable information until she was finally working directly for General Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson and Confederacy president Jefferson.

During the Civil War, in both the North and the South, at least 400 women were posing and fighting as men. Frank Thomas, a private for Company F, Second Michigan Infantry was, in fact, Emma Edmondson of New Brunswick, Canada. She fled a tyrannical father and the inevitability of a repugnant arranged marriage, emigrating to the U.S. believing the "only way to escape male treachery was to become one of them," she reinvented herself as a man. She earned a living as a Bible and book salesman until President Lincoln called for Union Army volunteers. Opposed to slavery, Emma enlisted. She worked first as a field nurse under General McClellan, then as an aide-de-camp delivering messages to and from Union commanders, and finally as a spy, ironically often disguised as a woman in order to penetrate enemy lines. After the war, when her truth was revealed, her fellow soldiers praised her exemplary military service; many supported her effort to receive a military pension. In 1897, she was the first woman admitted to the veterans' organization, the Grand Army of the Republic. Her autobiography, originally titled *Unsexed; or, The Female Soldier*, published in 1864, sold 175,000 copies.

In Washington, DC, the widow Rose O'Neal Greenhow, known as "Wild Rose," was renowned for her "late-night gentlemen callers -- abolitionists, secessionists, senators, representatives, diplomats, and even their lowly aides... No woman in Washington knew more men of power and influence, of both Northern and Southern persuasion." Once a doyenne of Washington society, she was devastated when thirty years of Democratic rule ended and her supremacy declined. President Davis, a crony, asked her to create an espionage ring in the Federal capital; she immediately agreed in honor of her mentor, the late former vice president John C. Calhoun, who had insisted slavery was "indispensable to the peace and happiness" of the nation. One of Greenhow's recent conquests, Henry D. Wilson, an abolitionist Republican Senator and Lincoln's chairman of the Committee on Military Affairs, proved particularly useful.

She devised a system of communicating by needlework based on the Morse code: using stitches and colors in tapestry patterns, she passed information to the Confederacy. She was eventually arrested and imprisoned in the Old Capitol Prison, from where she still managed to continue her spying activities. After her release, President Davis told her, "But for you, there would have been no Battle of Bull Run." In 1863, Davis sent her on a diplomatic mission to England and France to plead the Confederacy's cause: no American president had ever before sent a woman abroad to represent her government.

Elizabeth Van Lew of Richmond, the daughter of wealthy Northern-born parents, ran one of the most important Union spy rings. Eccentric and dauntless, she regularly visited the Libby Prison, bringing Union soldiers food, clothing, and escape plans. She hid many Union soldiers in a secret room in her house until they could safely join the Underground Train. One of Van Lew's invaluable spies was Mary Elizabeth Bowser, whom she regarded as a sister. A former

slave the Van Lew family had bought and freed, then sent to Philadelphia to be educated, Bowser came back to Richmond -- at considerable risk since it was illegal for a Negro who left Virginia to be educated in the free states to return -- and helped Van Lew build her spy network. They conspired to position Bowser as a house maid in the residence of President Davis where she was able, with her eidetic memory, to listen in on conversations or glance at a classified document on Davis's desk and later recall and transcribe them verbatim. She would sew the information into the Confederate First Lady's dresses and take them to be mended by a local seamstress sympathetic to the Union, who then relayed the papers to Van Lew.

General Ulysses S. Grant told Van Lew, "You are the one person who has sent me the most useful information I have received from Richmond during the war." After he became president, he nominated her postmaster of Richmond, one of the highest federal offices a woman could then hold.

The phenomenon of female spies was so widespread a popular novel came out in 1862 entitled *Pauline of the Potomac* about a spy for General McClellan, and the *Albany Evening Journal* declared, "The 'heavy business' in the war of spying is carried on by women! Is it not about time that an example was set which will prove a terror to these artful Jezebels?" Wartime exigency bends and breaks constricting social mores, freeing women to be at their best -- and worst. As Abbott observes, "Women, it seemed, were capable not only of significant acts of treason, but of executing them more deftly than men." After lifetimes of living under male tyranny, it is easy to comprehend how women from the North and South, white and black, would be overfamiliar with a divided self and expert in subterfuge.

Jenny McPhee's books include A Man of No Moon, No Ordinary Matter, The Center of Things, and Girls: Ordinary Girls and their Extraordinary Pursuits. She teaches creative writing at the Central Foundation Boys' School and is a founding board member of the Bronx Academy of Letters. She lives in London but mostly she resides at www.jennymcphee.com.