

4-1-2015

Book Review - A Tour of Reconstruction: Travel Letters of 1875

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Recommended Citation

Stanley, Deborah (2015) "Book Review - A Tour of Reconstruction: Travel Letters of 1875," *Georgia Library Quarterly*: Vol. 52: Iss. 2, Article 17.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/glq/vol52/iss2/17>

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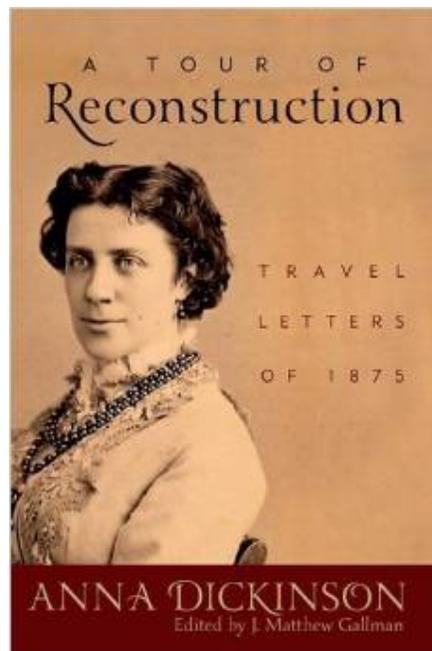
Off the SHELF

A Tour of Reconstruction: Travel Letters of 1875, by Anna Dickinson, edited by J. Matthew Gallman (University Press of Kentucky, 2011: ISBN 978-0-8131-3424-6, \$35.00)

In 1875, Anna Dickinson, a popular speaker in the North on Abolition and women's rights, made her first speaking tour of the South. With the speaking circuit dwindling in the North, this tour afforded her a new audience and source of income, along with material for possible future speeches and writings.

During her travels, Dickinson visited penitentiaries, former prison camps, state capitols, and schools, observed the simple homes of many of the people, and occasionally visited the homes of well-to-do white people. She recorded her impressions in four letters home to her mother, published here for the first time.

These letters offer fascinating insights into how the South was rebuilding after the war, and how it was navigating a new world where blacks and whites were, in theory, to be treated equally in public life. Dickinson describes uproar when federal law is obeyed and black people are offered theatre tickets or hotel rooms. She is very impressed by Savannah, with its "exhaustless beauty of trees in double rows," but on her way to the cemetery, notes that "the negroes have got themselves little truck patches and put up for themselves cabins and bits of houses" because it is harder for them to have their own land in Georgia than in South Carolina or Virginia, due to the effort to keep large properties intact.



Blacks were still living in terrible poverty, and many whites were also struggling. Dickinson generally regards the white southerners she encounters on her travels with disdain, even disgust. She presents them as generally ignorant, lacking ambition, and unwilling to take any responsibility for the war. Of rural North Carolina, Dickinson writes that the people "were the most utterly helpless, ignorant, "lousy" degraded, nerveless, limp, slimsy....yet in many cases vicious" people she had ever seen. However, she is also condescending about black southerners. Indeed, the book reveals a great deal about racial attitudes in 1875. Though a lifelong abolitionist, even Dickinson has a patronizing view of the freed slaves, calling them "darkies" and, in trying to convey their speech patterns, she sometimes drifts into what now seems like insulting parody.

Of course, as an ardent supporter of the Union, Dickinson brought her own feelings about the Civil War to her writing. Some of her most poignant descriptions are of the Civil War sites she toured, such as the horrific prisoner of war camp at Salisbury, NC: "...for all my life to come...I shall see those awful long lines of [burial] trenches that epitomize so much of the satanic cruelty...on the one side, so much of super human faithfulness... on the other."

The lengthy introduction to the book is invaluable. It provides a biography of Dickinson, background information, and historical context, so the reader encounters the letters with a clear

understanding of their place in history. The editor, Matthew J. Gallman, also offers insight into the work of a historian, and discusses how the letters can be used.

Recommended for high school students and older, and general readers, this engrossing and educational book would be a good entry point

into discussions of the Civil War and Reconstruction.

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