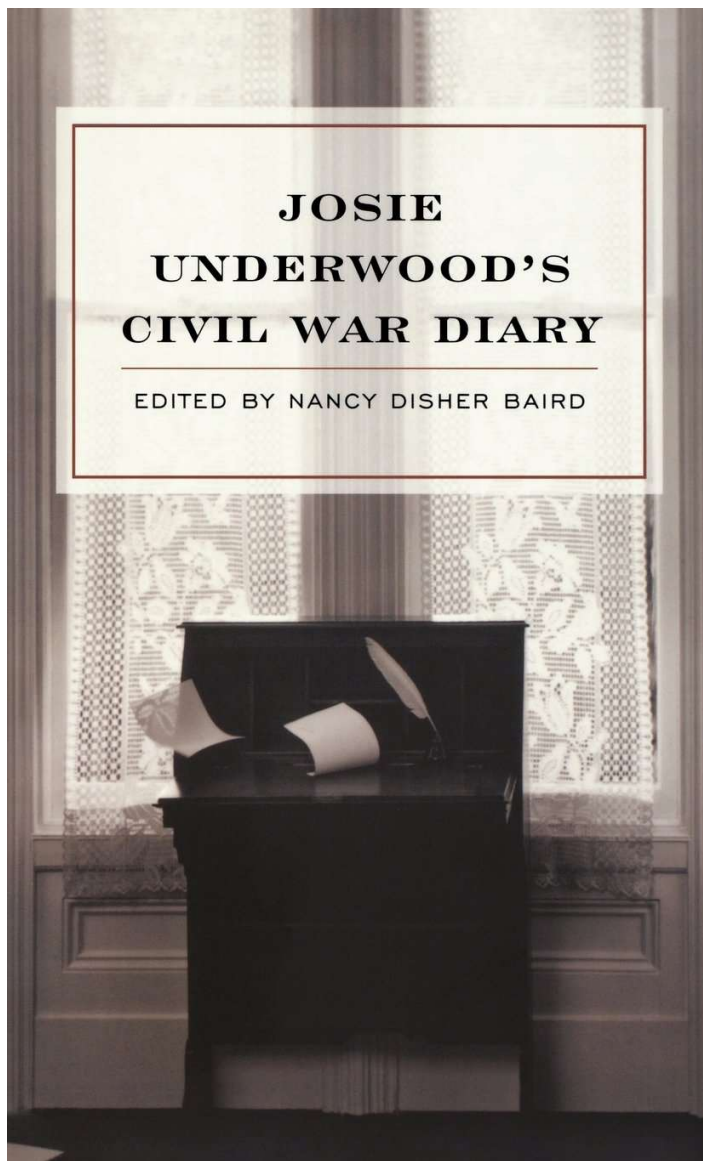


‘Civil War Diary’ offers enlightening account

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“Josie Underwood’s Civil War Diary” edited by Nancy Disher Baird. Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2021, 288 pages, \$26.00 (paperback).



“Mystery surrounds the Civil War diary kept by Josie Underwood,” Nancy Disher Baird explains in the preface to “Josie Underwood’s Civil War Diary,” her recently re-released edited paperback containing a very personal and enlightening chronological account of the impact of the bloodiest episode in our nation’s still-evolving history on one person’s life and family. “On her death in 1923, the diarist left the two-volume journal to her eighteen-year-old granddaughter, Joanna, then living in Texas.”

“In the late 1940s, descendants of the Underwood family in Bowling Green gave a large collection of family papers to the Kentucky Library (Special Collections) at Western Kentucky University,” Baird continues. “In 1976, the Rev. Howard Surface, rector of Christ Episcopal Church in Bowling Green, received from the dead letter office in Atlanta a 167-page photocopy of a typescript of Josie’s journals, sent to him because a copy of her marriage certificate was attached. Assuming that a member of the library faculty had mailed it, he brought the package to the Kentucky Library. Its receipt reminded one of the librarians of a rumor that when the large Underwood Collection came to the library nearly three

decades earlier, someone decided not to include the Civil War diary.”

“Passions and hatreds generated by the war and its aftermath still lingered and in some cases were quite strong in the community,” she adds. “Concern apparently existed that descendants of those criticized by Josie’s sharp pen as ‘contemptible,’ or ‘a traitor,’ or other unflattering labels might be offended.”

After making my way through the brutally honest chronicle of Josie’s perspective on how the conflict affected her on many levels, I can see where they might have had some cause for concern. Here we are, 156 years later, and the Civil War’s repercussions are still very much alive in the

hearts and minds of many of my contemporaries. In many ways, the struggles she describes so vividly are still being played out for many Americans.

Josie obviously had a front-row seat to horrendous events that were unfolding on a daily basis right here in South Central Kentucky. And if you are from Bowling Green or the surrounding community, you'll definitely recognize most of the locations she references. For example, witness the following from Josie's entry dated October 14th, 1861:

"Today we had a trial almost too great for dear Ma to endure. Shortly after breakfast a hundred men with gleaming axes marched up the front walk and instead of going around the house, marched straight through the hall and out the back door to the barn where they commenced cutting down the grove of walnut and oak trees – which all now lie low on the ground. Pa had gone to his office in town and could not have stopped it anyway. Dear ma and I went out and asked why they were doing it and begged they would desist – but they had to obey orders and so the cutting down the trees went on all day. Ma went to her room and locked her door, she could not shut out the sound of the blows, and the falling of the big trees as they crashed down to the ground was as though her heart were crushed."

"We learned they are going to build a Fort back of the barn back of the barn and these trees would obstruct the range – the site commanding the Railroad and the Louisville Pike, and also the Scottsville road... What will come next I wonder and dread. Ma's health is in such a precarious condition, we fear she can't bear up against so many trials and all the nervous strain it costs."

Honestly, the more I read, the more I felt the people Josie was describing could have been members of my own family; albeit slightly more affluent. The portrait she paints is vivid and visceral – and appropriately disconcerting. There's definitely some truth to that 'not pulling any punches' reference noted above.

"Josie Underwood's Civil War Diary" is extensively researched, with 14 pages of source notes at the conclusion of the introduction and five chapters that form the main narrative. The manuscript also features eight pages of black-and-white illustrations that serve to bring the story Josie (and Nancy) are telling to life in a way that would not have been possible otherwise. I was especially impressed with the inclusion of a 22-page "Who's Who in Josie's Journal," an appendix which really helps to keep the various characters in the journal straight – especially if you are not from the area. In fact, reading through these brief biographies is a history lesson in itself.

A professor and special collections librarian at Western Kentucky University from 1975 to 2010, Baird's previous books include "Healing Kentucky: Medicine in the Bluegrass State," and "Western Kentucky University: The First Hundred Years," which she co-authored with Sue Lynn Stone McDaniel and Carol Crowe Carraco.

If you are a student of history – and especially of the era covered by this journal - you'll definitely want to pick up a copy of "Josie Underwood's Civil War Diary." As Catherine Coke Shick, the owner of the copyright of the diary, notes in the forward, "... I believed it was important for the diary to be published for two reasons. One, I hoped that others would have a similar experience in reading the work. And two, I thought that as an historical document, this diary about life in south central Kentucky during the Civil War was unique." I could not agree more. Highly recommended.

Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, University Distinguished Professor, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.