

### The Myth of Belle Boyd

Known as “Joan of Arc of the South,” “Cleopatra of Secession,” and “Siren of the Shenandoah,” Belle Boyd came of age during the Civil War as a confederate spy. Growing up in Martinsburg, Virginia, Boyd was raised in a wealthy family as the daughter of a prominent shopkeeper and tobacco farmer, and after graduating from Mount Washington Female College of Baltimore, she returned to Martinsburg where she became a spy.<sup>1</sup> She received international recognition, and newspapers from the time indicate that many people followed her various endeavors. Though little talked about today, Belle Boyd’s life was well followed through the American media, from her looks, to her exploits, to her time in prison, to her various marriages and her legacy. Many took interest in stories of Boyd frequenting Union camps to obtain information, and the fact that she was arrested several times, imprisoned three times, and exiled twice.<sup>2</sup> In one instance, Boyd listened through a keyhole in her hotel room to learn Union plans. She delivered information to the Confederates, aiding in a victory in Jackson’s Valley Campaign.<sup>3</sup> Yet, scholars today never seem to look at Boyd’s contributions to the war, most likely because they were fairly minor. Coverage of Boyd likely slowed in the late twentieth century as those who lived in the same era as Boyd died out, and people turned to other mediums of media. Though her exploits were highly sensationalized, the most significant way to view Boyd is through her relationship to the historical memory of the Civil War. Those who continued to study

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<sup>1</sup> "Boyd, Belle (1844–1900)." Women in World History: A Biographical Encyclopedia. . *Encyclopedia.com*. (December 2, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Michals, Debra. "Isabelle 'Belle' Boyd." National Women's History Museum. Last modified 2015. Accessed December 2, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Abbott, Karen. "The ‘Siren of the Shenandoah’." The New York Times. Last modified May 23, 2012. Accessed December 8, 17.

the Civil War began to focus on more significant aspects on it, and Boyd became increasingly insignificant. Yet Boyd's legacy continued for some time after her death. But perceptions of her can be used as a touchstone through which one can examine the feelings of the public at the time.

Throughout various parts of the United States, there was a general consensus that Belle Boyd used her charms to gain Union information. However, descriptions of Boyd varied, and there are regional differences in what the North and South chose to print about her, which contributed to the overall perception of her. In fact, when a Washington D.C. newspaper, *The Evening Star*, printed a correspondence from the *Philadelphia Inquirer* in 1862, the author pointedly accused her of being an "accomplished prostitute," while another Northern newspaper, *The New York Herald*, harshly wrote: "romancers have given this female undue repute by describing her as beautiful and educated...she is by no means possessed of brilliant qualities, either of mind or body."<sup>4</sup> <sup>5</sup> It's logical that these statements would come from Northern papers, which weren't likely to idealize or romanticize a Southern spy. In contrast, according to Civil War historian Mary Lou Groh, Boyd's contemporaries praised her as "very attractive...quite tall...a superb figure...and dressed with much taste."<sup>6</sup> Additionally, upon her death, a West Virginian Newspaper, the *Wheeling Daily Intelligencer*, praised her appearance, saying she "dedicated to the Confederate army the only weapons that she possessed-- a woman's beauty and a woman's wiles." The newspaper goes on to highlight that she "flirt[ed] her way to liberty," further promoting this hyper-feminine image.<sup>7</sup> Thus, perceptions of Boyd varied regionally, and were linked to the overall view of the war, resulting in a contested perception of her physical

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<sup>4</sup> *Evening Star* (Washington, DC, District of Columbia). "A Rebel 'Joan D'Arc' at Front Royal." May 31, 1862.

<sup>5</sup> *New York Herald* (New York City, United States). "Arrest of Belle Boyd, the Female Rebel Spy." August 14, 1862

<sup>6</sup> Groh, Mary Lou. "Maria 'Belle' Boyd." Civil War Trust. Accessed December 11, 2017

<sup>7</sup> *The Wheeling Daily Intelligencer* (Wheeling, WV). "Belle Boyd Dead." June 16, 1900

appearance. As author Karen Abbott writes, “part of what made people uncomfortable was Belle’s physical presentation. While not conventionally beautiful...she was at ease in her own body, and willing to use it as a subversive tool.”<sup>8</sup> These varying interpretations of her appearance contribute to notions of mysterious hyper-femininity that seemed to surround Boyd, further romanticizing her and the perception of the Civil War. After the war, more newspapers tended to describe her as beautiful, and while some of her contemporaries and current historians disagree, the willingness to consider her as such indicates a kind of sentimentalism or idealization of Boyd and the war.<sup>9</sup>

Another aspect of the perception of Boyd comes from the descriptions of her actions themselves. Some Southern newspapers portrayed her espionage in a dramatic and idealized light. For instance, a South Carolinian newspaper, *The Daily Phoenix*, described her contribution to the Battle of Front Royal in a harrowing light:

She crossed the ground then swept by fire, the bullets whistling around her: her dress was pierced by several of them, and she was even obliged to fall on the ground in order to escape death from a shell which exploded within twenty yards of her feet.<sup>10</sup>

This description combines the excitement of the battlefield, with a feminine description of Boyd, presenting a compelling story to readers. It’s unknown whether or not this presentation is exactly the way the occasion happened, but the dramatization of it in a Southern newspaper supports the notion that the South regarded her as a kind of action hero. Northern newspapers didn’t tend to write about the same instance in a heroic light. For instance, a Michigan Newspaper, *The Telegram Herald*, wrote about Boyd’s delivering of information in a more

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<sup>8</sup> Abbott, Karen. "The ‘Siren of the Shenandoah’." *The New York Times*. Last modified May 23, 2012. Accessed December 8, 17.

<sup>9</sup> See Appendix A

<sup>10</sup> *The Daily Phoenix* (Columbia, SC). "Belle Boyd in Print." August 11, 1865.

matter of fact way, simply stating that she “rode across the battlefield of port Royal and carried Jackson dispatches...” minimizing the suspense of the event.<sup>11</sup> Though the general information is the same, the way it is presented conveys the differing opinions of Boyd in the North and the South. Karen Abbott posits that Jackson might have already known the information Boyd sought to deliver, but the excitement of the story surrounding her allowed her to become a symbol for the war. She writes: “Although Jackson might have already possessed the intelligence Boyd risked her life to deliver... she became one of the most controversial and enigmatic figures of the war... whose efforts on behalf of the Confederacy evoked admiration and derision, in equal parts.”<sup>12</sup> Thus, although Boyd’s contribution to the war was fairly minimal, due to the dangerous and fantastical image of her as a heroine, she became a symbol for the South, creating drama and romance that the Southern public could enjoy and support.

Belle Boyd as a symbol of mystery, deception, excitement and femininity wasn’t only popular in regions directly involved in the war. For instance, a North Dakotan newspaper printed an article titled, *The Romance of Belle Boyd* in 1881, sixteen years after the war had ended, indicating that the excitement surrounding Boyd didn’t decrease even after the war. The article filled more than a full column of text, and highlighted in great detail the exploits of her life.<sup>13</sup> The fact that people still held an interest in her life (even in a region that had no direct interest in the war) long after the war ended, shows how Boyd became a figurehead for an event seared into the memories of the populace. But even further outside of the fighting territory of the war, reports of Boyd extended internationally, and even British newspapers were writing about Boyd.

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<sup>11</sup> *Telegram Herald* (Grand Rapids, MI). "Belle Boyd's Career." April 6, 1890.

<sup>12</sup> Abbott, Karen. "The 'Siren of the Shenandoah'." *The New York Times*. Last modified May 23, 2012. Accessed December 8, 17.

<sup>13</sup> *Bismarck Tribune* (Bismarck, ND). "The Romance of Belle Boyd." July 22, 1881.

One Irish newspaper went as far as to credit Boyd with the success of Jackson's entire valley campaign, rather than just the battle at Front Royal,] as other sources report today.<sup>14</sup> In addition to writing about her, British newspapers published reviews of Boyd's book, *Belle Boyd in Camp and Prison*, containing comments heralding her work, printing comments such as "Belle Boyd's adventures far surpass the best contrived fictions of our most popular writers," and "will no doubt make a great sensation."<sup>15</sup> It's clear from these articles that even British citizens would have seen Boyd's exploits as full of excitement, to a point where her life was seen as fictional, allowing people to read about her as a source of exaggerated entertainment rather than assessing her actions as legitimate contributions to the Civil War. One newspaper, *The Dundee Evening Telegraph*, went as far as to declare Boyd "as famous as Buffalo Bill," showing that the common perception of Boyd was more centered in excitement and drama rather than the real impact of her actions on the Civil War.<sup>16</sup>

As historian David Blight posits, memory of the Civil War is often romanticized and guarded by people today, blurred by a kind of sentimentalism. He writes, "Deeply embedded in an American mythology of mission, and serving as a motherlode of nostalgia for antimodernists and military history buffs, the Civil War remains very difficult to shuck from its shell of sentimentalism." The enduring perceptions of Belle Boyd seems to fit perfectly into this idea, with a lasting impression of her as an adventurous and wiley southern Belle masking the fact that her contributions were minimal.<sup>17</sup> The myth of the Lost Cause, as has become more widely accepted in recent years, challenges the notion that the South never had a chance from the start of

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<sup>14</sup> *Belfast Morning News* (Belfast, Ireland). "An American Story of Belle Boyd." April 29, 1863

<sup>15</sup> *Globe* (London, England). "Belle Boyd." July 14, 1865.

<sup>16</sup> *Dundee Evening Telegraph* (Dundee, Scotland). "Belle Boyd Still Alive." February 25, 1889.

<sup>17</sup> Blight, David. *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard, 2001.

the war. Boyd seems to fit perfectly into this myth, as she is portrayed mostly in the south as a brilliant and clever spy who didn't succeed because the South didn't.<sup>18</sup> The romanticism and drama associated with her points to the exact same ideas presented in the myth of the lost cause and David Blight's theory, indicating how the hearts and minds of the people consuming her story changed in the years after the war.

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<sup>18</sup> Foner, Eric. *Give Me Liberty! An American History*. 5th ed. New York City, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2017.

**Appendix A**



*Portrait of Belle Boyd.* Photograph. National Archives.

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