

CHILD JOURNALISTS, THE CIVIL WAR, AND THE INTERSECTIONAL WORK OF REPORTING GRIEF

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IN 1861, AT the age of twelve, Nellie Williams began producing the only local newspaper for her hometown of Penfield, NY, a sleepy farming community ten miles outside of Rochester. Appearing weekly during the height of the American Civil War (1861–66), Williams’s *Penfield Extra* foregrounded the editor’s youth in the masthead’s subtitle—“Little Nellie’s Little Paper”—while the same banner announced her paper’s fresh vantage point as “Devoted to News and Literature and Neutral in Politics” (Figure 1).

Despite the masthead’s assertion of neutrality, the specter of war remained a constant presence in Williams’s weekly. Strewn across the pages of “Little Nellie’s Paper,” poems expressed the loss of loved ones and war-related announcements flanked the advertising pages, while Nellie’s editorials mused on the absurdity, hypocrisy, and finality of war.

On 8 December 1864, the personal and public dramatically collided when Nellie Williams reported that her only brother and Union soldier, Leroy K. Williams, had been captured at the Battle of Shenandoah. In “JUST AS WE EXPECTED,” she announced:

ONE reason why we opposed this cruel war was because our only brother has been enduring the hardship of a soldier’s life for the past two and a half years ... Although we are deeply grieved, yet we are glad that he is out of his tormentor’s hands ..., [He was] together with about 60 others of the N. Y. Cavalry [*sic*], overpowered by the rebel cavalry, and we have had no tidings since from any of them.

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In this instance, Williams's language straddles despair and restraint, as private grief verges into public memorializing, tensions that her popular paper (with nearly 3,000 subscribers from coast to coast) would continue to probe during the months and years following her brother's capture. Furthermore, in the same year in which she reported her brother missing, Nellie, along with her sisters (Mary, aged seventeen; Allie, aged twelve), began a second publishing venture, the *Literary Companion*, a monthly literary journal.¹ While this journal has only recently come to light, it proves that Nellie and her sisters worked side by side, in a single print shop producing their papers. In addition, the remarkable cross-pollination between their periodicals illustrate how they employed the miscellaneous forms of nineteenth-century journalism to report on their brother's tragic capture and disappearance.

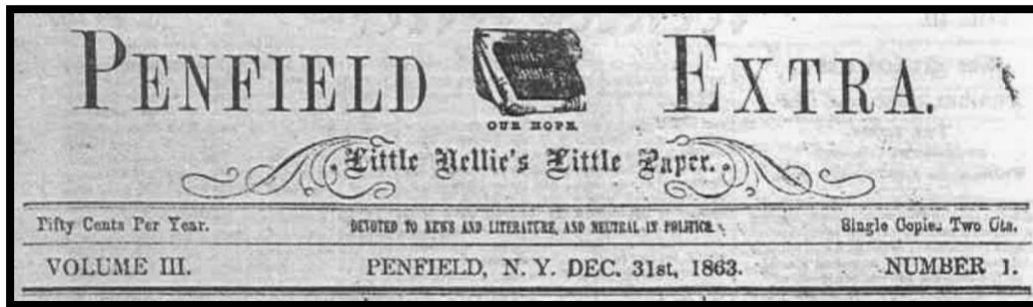


Figure 1. Masthead, *Penfield Extra*, 31 December 1863, p. 1. Central Library of Rochester and Monroe County, Historic Newspaper Collection.

Editorials by the Williams siblings support James Marten's contention that children, including Northern white girls, were dramatically affected by as well as direct participants in the politics defining the American Civil War.² In their explicit engagements with trauma and loss, moreover, these young writers upended innocent and "protectionist" discourses which, as Susan Honeyman asserts, have been problematically associated with children's writing about war (75). In their editorials, as the sisters give public voice to private despair, their words illuminate the complexly layered socio-political contexts informing their identities as white Northerners, working-class children, loyal sisters, and professional journalists. The historically situated intersectional identities, reflected in and contested by the Williams sisters' periodicals, expose a kaleidoscope of fissures and collisions between private and public, silence and enunciation, gender and class, trauma and resilience.³ As such, their accounts provide vital documentation of how genres shaped, and were shaped by, children's articulations of suffering for a national audience during wartime.⁴

Returning to Nellie Williams's editorial "JUST AS WE EXPECTED," its title reveals the complexity she navigated writing about personal trauma in the form of a newspaper editorial for a public audience. By giving a sensational title to a family tragedy, Nellie eschews immediate associations with the sentimental, personal, or literal. Instead, her eye-catching title draws readers in, making them wonder *what* was

so obviously predicted. For readers to discover that this “expected” event was the disappearance of Nellie’s “only brother,” who had suffered the “hardship of a soldier’s life,” must have been stunning. Adding to the dissonance, the article’s adoption of the editorial “we” (“we have had no tidings since from any of them”), filters news of personal loss through Nellie’s voice as editor. Yet thinly veiled behind the vantage point of the child journalist, the grieving sister lashes out at local abolitionists for not fighting as her brother has, as evidenced by the editorial’s abrupt conclusion: “We shall glory in the next draft, not that we would wish to see our war abolitionists shot down like dogs, but we would like to see the cowards shake in their boots a little.” Prefaced by patriotic language, Nellie’s admission that she would “glory in the next draft” merges with hyperbolic metaphor of abolitionists, whom she regards as hypocritical “cowards,” potentially “shot down like dogs.”

Through this mixture of sensational title, impartial tone, and metaphorical violence, Nellie directs anger toward those who pay lip service to (rather than enlisted in) the war cause, the cause for which her brother volunteered and paid the ultimate price. One speculates on whether, in expressing her political opinions so openly, Nellie’s identification as a white Northerner, combined with her role as newspaper editor, bolstered her authority. And yet, when alluding to her possible desire—“to see our war abolitionists shot down like dogs”—Nellie’s phrasing is carefully shrouded in the subjunctive and negative tenses (“not that we would”). In this manner, she protectively cloaks her anger and violence in linguistic codes, which would have served at the time of writing to preserve her normative cultural positioning. As Linda Grasso argues, nineteenth-century girls were not expected to demonstrate overt anger or violence (5), a cultural assumption most likely augmented by Nellie’s working-class background. Even as Williams reports that “we have had no tidings of [our brother’s] existence or whereabouts,” raw emotions break through the objective, editorial “we,” expressive of a sister “deeply grieved.” Her almost vengeful conclusion, stirred by private grief, is fueled also by strident political attitudes inflamed by violent national fratricide. The resulting interplay between Nellie’s fraught language practices and her complex social positioning, moreover, must have been compounded by the notoriously difficult human problem of putting words to raw suffering. The strained mix of violence, anger, and patriotism of her essay’s conclusion suggests the limits of what could be expressed. When viewed through the lens of current trauma theory, Nellie’s aggressive metaphors could also be read as a transference of anger, which current trauma theorists describe as one of the psycho-emotional effects of newly-felt trauma for a child between the ages of twelve and seventeen.⁵

Following on the heels of “JUST AS WE EXPECTED,” the editors of the *Literary Companion* also published an announcement of their brother’s presumed capture in the issue for December 1864. In an essay entitled “GOBBLED UP,” the Williams sisters announced:

Our only brother [was] ... [e]ither killed or taken prisoner on the 12th of November last. ... He did not get the large bounty that is given now. He has undergone many hardships for his country; cheerfully and uncomplainingly; and in all human probability he is now at rest; if not, he must suffer in a rebel prison and await the end.

Commending their brother's heroic volunteerism, the *Companion* echoed the *Extra's* matter-of-fact tone and sober predictions of their brother's fate: "in all human probability he is now at rest," or a rebel prisoner who is soon to die ("must ... await the end"). The *Companion's* attention-grabbing title was similarly sensational and may have led readers to associate it with a Thanksgiving joke or bit of gossip. Any humorous associations, however, would have been abruptly overturned by the article contents that follow: "Our only brother [was] ... [e]ither killed or taken prisoner on the 12th of November last." Punctuating the stunning pronouncement of personal loss, the editors reassure readers of their brother's selfless heroism; as an Army volunteer, "He did not get the large bounty that is given now." Framed by a catchy title ("GOBBLED UP") and narrated by a formal editorial persona, the sisters' tragic personal circumstances are recast as national news, even as the essay's title also alludes to the ways that private suffering and grief may threaten to swallow up those who mourn.

In the 20 July 1865 issue of the *Penfield Extra*, the Williams sisters, with Nellie at the helm, provided a final update on their brother's fate. Starkly titled "STARVED TO DEATH," the front page of the *Extra* reports that "it has been ascertained beyond a possibility of a doubt that our brother L. K. Williams ... starved to death in a rebel prison." Verifying the article's source of information, the editors recount that "a Corporal of Comp. C. Eight N. 1. ... was in the prison at the same time and saw [their brother and another young soldier] die with despondency and starvation." The sisters' somber editorial, moreover, was reprinted and ran for a second time in the August 1865 issue of the *Literary Companion*. Reporting the news of the deaths of their brother and another young soldier with cool detachment, both editorials conclude: "in the last few months we have given up the idea of ever seeing them again, and are not the least surprised to hear of their cruel death."

This matter-of-fact objectivity, however, does not have the final word in the Williams sisters' accounts of trauma and grief. As editors of periodicals, the sisters assembled various genres within and across weekly or monthly installments, which offered a range of expressions resonant with their circumstantial suffering as well as broad-ranging domestic and national unrest. In the same volume in which Nellie announces her brother's status as missing in action, a poem entitled "Dear Brother, He is There" appeared in *The Penfield Extra*. Unlike Nellie's sardonic report of her brother's suspected fate, the poem eulogizes a brother, feared dead, while also celebrating the Christian hope in resurrection. Dedicated to "The Penfield Extra" and authored by a regular child contributor, N. D. Howe, the poem concludes:

Upon that bright eternal shore,
Where cruel wars are known no more,
No pain, no grief, no care,
But joys which here, we cannot know,
Like a calm river overflow;
Dear brother, he is there.

Another elegy, entitled “The Dying Soldier,” dedicated to Nellie and penned by a (presumed) child author (C. B. L.), expresses the emotional lament of an imprisoned soldier, a subject resonant with the Williams sisters’ private grief:

In a dreary, lonely prison,
Where the sunlight never came,
With none to watch, nor cheer, nor tend him
No one there to love his name—
Lay a soldier, sick and dying,
.....
Who can tell what thoughts passed o’er
Whether of grief, of joy, or pain?

Told from the point of view of one imagining the soldier’s experience, the poem recounts his bleak isolation in prison; he is alone, with “no one there to love his name” nor “tend him.” The poem also muses on what the soldier’s loved ones and the reader cannot know: “who can tell what thoughts ... whether of grief, of joy, or pain?” exist within the mind of the one imprisoned. These lines, when read together, thus conjure a dual perspective on the experiences of war. The vivid emotions which haunted those who fought were as inexpressible as those haunting the homebound, who could only imagine what their beloved soldiers might be experiencing in war. Accordingly, we witness how the elegy functions dynamically, as Peter Sacks contends, both as an expression of and outlet for private feelings of grief as well as a public memorial to the cultural “work of mourning” (6). Paying tribute to the profound emotions surrounding love and loss, these poems speak of personal and national trauma and thus may have evoked experiences and feelings familiar to many Americans, like the Williams sisters, who lost loved ones in the wake of the American Civil War. While poetry on mourning and loss clearly alludes to the Williams sisters’ private grief and may have provided solace, their direct reporting on their brother’s capture remains more firmly enclosed within their professional roles and discourses as newspaper editors. And yet, the close proximity between their sardonic, public accounts and the lyric poems, authored by others, unsettles and enriches the manifold expressions contained within and between each genre.

Through their richly textured reporting, the *Literary Companion* and the *Penfield Extra* reveal how young journalists exploited popular genres and discourses, while

also disrupting their codes. As the Williams sisters' public witnessing to war and trauma demonstrate, by 1860 children's acts of authorship could dismantle cultural attitudes regarding children's innocence and separateness from adult culture—and the fact that they wrote amidst the culture-exploding Civil War makes our interpretation of their entangled accounts even more challenging. Between the adoption of journalistic conventions and their own free play as literary agents, Nellie Williams and her sisters employed established discourses for new ends. As a result, readers witness the profundity of young people's political engagements with war, suffering, and storytelling. Even as these young journalists were dependent upon and limited by language, their charged rhetoric expanded its possibilities.

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NOTES

¹ The *Literary Companion*, a monthly journal produced between October 1864 and September 1865, was conducted by Nellie's older sister, Mary Williams. Mid-volume, Allie Williams, aged 12, took over as editor after Mary married and left home. The periodical was more focused on literature and household tips and was less news-based than the *Penfield Extra*. A digital copy may be viewed at libraryweb.org/~digitized/serials/reynolds/literary/Literary_Companion.pdf.

² For more evidence on these points, see Catherine Jones and Andrea McKenzie.

³ In this essay, I build on Kimberlè Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality, a term she coined to "denote the various ways in which race and gender interact" and thus are not isolated categories. Crenshaw developed this concept of intersectionality initially to emphasize how the "intersection of racism and sexism factors into Black women's lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately" (1244). I draw out the implications of this concept to include other identity categories, including race, gender, class, professionalism, and age, in order to consider how these categories were variously practiced and/or channeled in

children's expressions of grief and trauma. In this sense, I follow the lead taken by Crenshaw herself in a special issue of *Signs*, in which she, Sumi Cho, and Lesley McCall sanction the various ways that scholars have interpreted "the scope of intersectionality, representing the wide variety of projects that make up the field" (788).

⁴ By genres, I refer to formal literary categories as well as the dynamic interplay between the discursive and social functions of genres. As Anis Bawarshi argues, genres are more than "analogical to social institutions" (31); they are "actual social institutions, constituting not just literary activity but social activity, not just literary textual relations but all textual relations, so that genres do not just constitute the literary scene in which literary actors (writers, readers, characters) and their texts function, but also constitute the social conditions in which the activities of all social participants are enacted" (31–32). For more on children's awareness and deployments of genre conventions see George Kamberelis.

⁵ For recent studies on the range of physical, emotional, and cognitive effects of traumatic experiences on children's lives and the various ways that children manifest and articulate these effects, see Joy D. Osofsky, Michaela M. Mozley et al., Michelle Liu, and Lisa A. Kirschenbaum. For more on how physical and emotional suffering shape access to language and narration, see Elaine Scarry. While intense emotional or physical pain may prompt creative expression as a means of relieving or substituting trauma, pain may also "absorb all of one's energy so that one might not have any resources left over for speech," as Scarry asserts in an interview on this groundbreaking work (Smith 224).

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