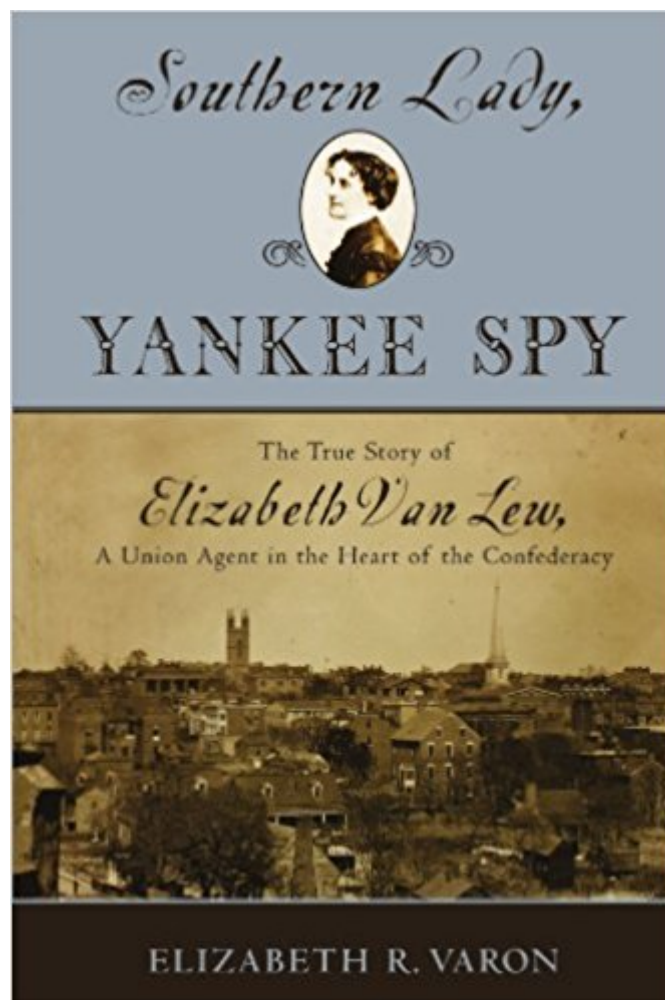




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# Southern Lady, Yankee Spy: The True Story Of Elizabeth Van Lew, A Union Agent In The Heart Of The Confederacy



## Synopsis

Northern sympathizer in the Confederate capital, daring spymaster, postwar politician: Elizabeth Van Lew was one of the most remarkable figures in American history, a woman who defied the conventions of the nineteenth-century South. In *Southern Lady, Yankee Spy*, historian Elizabeth Varon provides a gripping, richly researched account of the woman who led what one historian called "the most productive espionage operation of the Civil War." Under the nose of the Confederate government, Van Lew ran a spy ring that gathered intelligence, hampered the Southern war effort, and helped scores of Union soldiers to escape from Richmond prisons. Varon describes a woman who was very much a product of her time and place, yet continually took controversial stands--from her early efforts to free her family's slaves, to her daring wartime activities and beyond. Varon's powerful biography brings Van Lew to life, showing how she used the stereotypes of the day to confound Confederate authorities (who suspected her, but could not believe a proper Southern lady could be a spy), even as she brought together Union sympathizers at all levels of society, from slaves to slaveholders. After the war, a grateful President Ulysses S. Grant named her postmaster of Richmond--a remarkable break with custom for this politically influential post. But her Unionism, Republican politics, and outspoken support of racial justice earned her a lifetime of scorn in the former Confederate capital. Even today, Elizabeth Van Lew remains a controversial figure in her beloved Richmond, remembered as the "Crazy Bet" of Lost Cause propaganda. Elizabeth Varon's account rescues her from both derision and oblivion, depicting an intelligent, resourceful, highly principled woman who remained, as she saw it, true to her country to the end.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

The title of this groundbreaking and altogether remarkable biography effectively summarizes it. Varon, professor of history at Wellesley, gives the first full account of a figure recorded until now in legends and anecdotes. The formidable Miss Van Lew (1818-1900) was born to a wealthy slave-owning Richmond family of Northern background. From her early 20s she led the family in efforts to achieve peaceful emancipation, starting with the family's own slaves. With the outbreak of war and the secession of Virginia, which she saw as a crime and a disaster, her Unionist sentiments and efforts became more systematic. Beginning with providing comforts for Union prisoners, she went on to help them escape and ended by running a very modern-style intelligence network, through which intelligence flowed to the Union Army from couriers black and white, free and slave, but all Unionist and all risking their lives. Frequently under suspicion, she escaped, Varon shows, not by feigning insanity (as the legend of "Crazy Bet" would have it) but because gender and regional prejudices told the authorities that a Southern lady could not do such a thing. While she was publicly rewarded for her work after the war by an appointment as Richmond's postmaster, gender and political prejudice eventually led to her dismissal after Reconstruction, and she died poverty-stricken and unsung-until this book. This is not only a classic "forgotten woman" study, it is free of jargon, anachronism, prejudice and condescension, and as accessible to the lay reader as a novel. A wide variety of students of the Civil War will find it invaluable, and readers who just savor biographies of remarkable human beings can enjoy it, too. Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

"An accomplished and engaging biography of a remarkably resourceful and determined woman, whose story shed considerable light on the role of southern Unionism in undermining the Confederate war effort, military and otherwise, and on the women who embodied and actively sustained that cause."--Civil War History"A thrilling detective story filled with clandestine meetings, cloak-and-dagger intrigue, disguises, surveillance and undercover work. While such well-known Civil War women spies as Belle Boyd and Rose O'Neal Greenhow remain shrouded in partisan mythology, Varon has unearthed hard evidence that establishes Van Lew as a genuine heroine of the Civil War era."--Raleigh News & Observer"A rich account of a complex and important figure in wartime Richmond...Highly readable."--Civil War Book Review"Groundbreaking and altogether

remarkable...A classic 'forgotten woman' study...as accessible to the lay reader as a novel."--Publishers Weekly (starred review)"This is a wonderfully readable and engaging book. Varon brings Van Lew out of the realm of myth and into the much more interesting domain of history, offering us a woman who as spy, abolitionist and woman's rights advocate was at once larger than life and at the center of her time."--Drew Gilpin Faust, Director of the Radcliffe Institute, author of *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War*"Detailed, astute and convincing."--Jonathan Yardley, *The Washington Post*"A solid job of ferreting out facts and discarding fiction...What is presented here is the fullest scholarly treatment we are likely to have, and if Varon finds her subject to be one who loved and served her country to the end, the fascinating record speaks for itself."--Roanoke Times"A thoughtful, meticulously researched biography."--Washington Times"Popular Civil War literature is filled with romantic and sensational stories of female spies, many of them made up out of whole cloth. But the story told in *Southern Lady, Yankee Spy*, is eminently true. A member of the social elite in Richmond, Elizabeth Van Lew nevertheless loved the Union and disliked slavery. She built a Unionist underground in the Confederate capital that helped escaping prisoners of war and provided General Grant with valuable intelligence. Based on thorough research and written with grace and style, this account of Van Lew's contribution to Northern victory is a valuable addition to Civil War scholarship."--James M. McPherson, author of *Battle Cry of Freedom* and *Crossroads of Freedom: Antietam*"This is a wonderfully readable and engaging book. Varon brings Van Lew out of the realm of myth and into the much more interesting domain of history, offering us a woman who as spy, abolitionist and woman's rights advocate was at once larger than life and at the center of her time."--Drew Gilpin Faust, Director of the Radcliffe Institute, author of *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War*"Elizabeth Varon's *Southern Lady, Yankee Spy* is a well-researched, well-written tale that illuminates a fascinating southern dissenter and forges a sensible path toward bringing women into the military narrative of the Civil War."--William W. Freehling, author of *The Road to Disunion* and *The South vs. The South*"Few women risked as much to assist the Union effort during the Civil War as Elizabeth Van Lew. A member of Richmond's elite, Van Lew orchestrated an effort in the Confederate capital that conveyed useful information to United States military forces, embraced emancipation, and supported Radical Republican policies during Reconstruction. Elizabeth Varon's biography draws on substantial research to offer a long-overdue, and compelling, portrait of a complex and important figure."--Gary W. Gallagher, University of Virginia, author of *The Confederate War*

This is a terrific book on a figure in American history who deserves more attention. As far as I know, at this point it's the leading, authoritative bio on Elizabeth Van Lew at this point, particularly because it effectively and convincingly dispels myths that have surrounded her for so long--most notably the inaccuracy about Bet being "crazy" or feigning mental illness in order to spy. The book also provides a great picture of Civil War and post-Civil War Richmond as well as rapidly evolving times after the war, with all the factions, political dynamics, and cultural change bubbling at the time. Given Van Lew's life arc, the story is a classically tragic one--a hero who struggles and is met with disappointment after disappointment in the years following her moment of greatness, the moment of her great contribution to a nation. One question I would have for author Veron is why she didn't tackle the question of whether Van Lew was abused by her caregiver/relative during her later years. Even if the author disputes that supposition, it would seem to be something to be addressed, given that Van Lew's journal seems to suggest it. That does not detract from the book's overall effect and importance. It's a must-read for those interested in Richmond history, unsung Civil War heroes (such as women and African Americans), and the complexities of a city and state that--to the surprise of many, I'm sure--were home to a strong pro-Union faction (loyalists). Thanks to Veron for a big contribution.

What a brave and commendable lady! She did so much for the Union side in helping prisoners, gathering information, and in so many other ways at great risk to herself. I loved the story of the recovery of Ulric Dahlgren's body, the placing of spies, and the help her servants provided. Luckily, Grant appreciated her and did for her what he could at the close of the war, giving her money, and making her postmaster of Richmond during his two presidential terms. Otherwise, despite the fact that she was hated in Richmond and had beggared herself, the Federal Government treated her shabbily.

Varon gives us a great history of a woman who gave all for her country. I was impressed by the scholarship she showed in writing the book although I, at times, found myself questioning the purpose. This purpose is revealed near the end and I won't spoil it for you here. As a historian Varon does great justice not only to the story of Van Lew but also to others within the Richmond Underground within context of the overall war. Great pains were taken to give context of the battles, campaigns, and politics which puts everything in perspective. I would definitely consider this a VERY pro-Union text as the South is bashed repeatedly, but given Van Lew's views it is understandable. We are essentially seeing the War through HER eyes. As a gendered approach

this text ranks high on my Civil War reading list and is a must have for anyone who is interested in the subject of women during the war and after. I would very much like to see more texts that put the "Crazy Bet" rumors to rest along with other misconceptions about the War.

An interesting account of a lady from the nearby city of Richmond who risked her life and reputation to aid and preserve the Union and change the future of the South and the institution of slavery in America. It's always intriguing to read about locales familiar to me and to consider what it would have been like had I lived where I do back in the days of the Civil War. Would I have had the courage to take action as Elizabeth Van Lew did?

Well-written and excellently researched. "Southern Lady, Yankee Spy" is a true story. The author captures the intensity of the South under siege. I couldn't put the book down!

Excellent. Lots of research and very well written.

Interesting. She was a very brave and dedicated woman. She did not get enough recognition and thanks. I have never even heard of her or woman like her before from history books. She risked her life and gave up so much.

Elizabeth Varon has written true story that has been hidden heroism for more than a century! The terrible struggle of the Civil War from the eyes of both patriot and enslaved and freed persons of color. A MUST read... for anyone who understands the deep struggle of liberation and the long range futility of war.

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