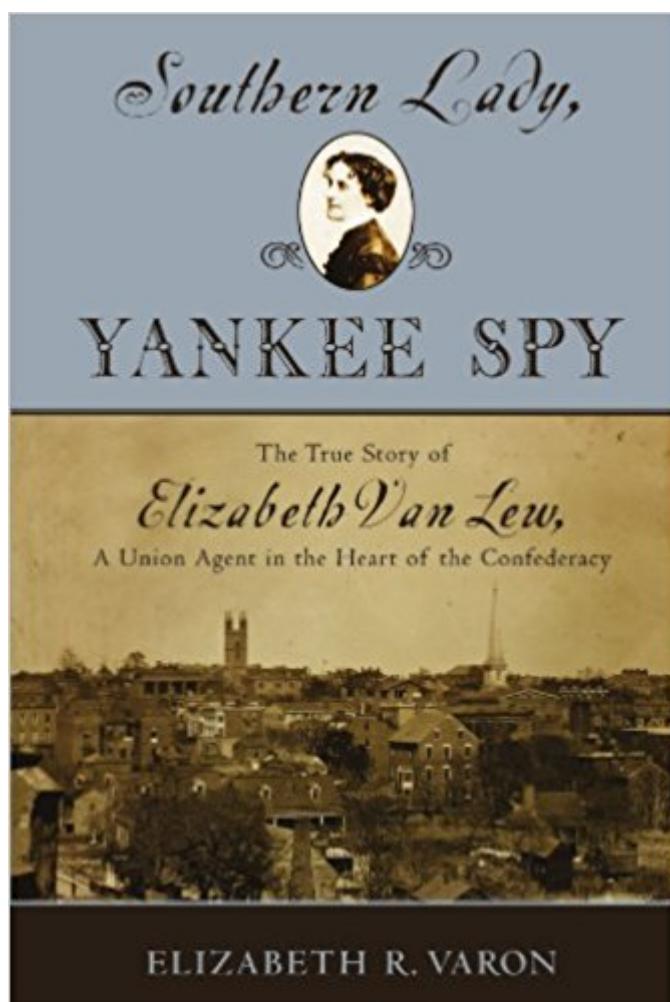


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Southern Lady, Yankee Spy: The True Story Of Elizabeth Van Lew, A Union Agent In The Heart Of The Confederacy



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

I am the great-great grandson of Elizabeth's brother, discussed extensively in the book. Ms. Varon has admirably fleshed out with documented sources many of the accounts passed down through our family. She has (thankfully) quite thoroughly debunked the 'Crazy Bet' nonsense that always bothered those of us who knew something of the real story. In that respect it is a valuable and enjoyable work. Most satisfying was the evident skill with which the author develops the paradox of northerners, starting with Elizabeth's father who came to Richmond in 1807 from New Jersey at age 17, becoming so thoroughly southern that her brother could marry into some of the bluest blood Virginia ever produced. The book, however, would have been even better had Ms. Varon taken the time to develop a chapter on Elizabeth's sister-in-law, Mary Carter West. They did /not/ get along, and the Secession Crisis blew the Van Lew marriage apart along some already weak seams. Mary was directly descended from four of the most important families in Virginia -- the Carters, Harrisons, Randolphs, and Wests. Robert E Lee's mother was a Carter cousin. President Harrison was a great-uncle. Mary's brother Thomas enlisted with the 27th Virginia Infantry less than a month after Fort Sumter was shelled, and was one of a handful of original enlistees still alive to surrender at Appomattox. The battle of Malvern Hill (1862) was literally in the West family's front yard. In fairness to Ms. Varon I should note that she did mention Mary's departure from the family (family lore says that Elizabeth drove her out of the house) and subsequent (1864) testimony intended to finger the Van Lews as traitors.

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