

Southern Women and the American Filibustering Movement

By Nathan Chaplin

Abstract:

This project will focus on the response of Southern women to the American filibustering movement. During the mid-19th century, a wave of filibustering swept through America. Filibusters were American citizens who engaged in unauthorized expeditions into foreign countries, normally to support a revolution or to attempt to annex the territory. The two most prominent figures of this movement were Narciso Lopez and William Walker. Lopez was a former high-ranking Spanish official, and had fled Cuba after joining the anti-Spanish independence movement. He led several unsuccessful expeditions to Cuba, and was eventually publicly executed on the island. William Walker led expeditions to Mexico and Nicaragua, and enjoyed more success than Lopez. After serving a brief period as the foreign President of Nicaragua, several Central American countries rose up against him and he was exiled.

My proposed project will add to the historiography of the filibustering movement by focusing on the actions and reactions of women. While most discussion of filibustering centers around the military exploits and the connection to American imperialism, I instead want to focus on the role of women and gender in the movement. Doing so will highlight a subaltern group that is not normally addressed in this discussion. I will attempt to amplify women's voices by examining letters to and from women and focusing on influential Southern writers, such as Lucy Holcombe Pickens. In examining these voices, it will become clear that filibustering served as a predecessor to the Confederate 'Lost Cause' mythology, and also reveals a great deal about gender in the 19th century South.

Proposal Narrative:

During the mid-19th century, a wave of filibustering swept through America. Filibusters were American citizens who engaged in unauthorized expeditions into foreign countries, normally to support a revolution or to attempt to annex the territory. The two most prominent figures of this movement were Narciso Lopez and William Walker. Lopez was a former high-ranking Spanish official, and had fled Cuba after joining the anti-Spanish independence movement. He eventually arrived in New York and recruited Southerners to his cause. These Americans saw Cuba as the next slave state, and believed that it had immense economic potential. In 1851, Lopez and his army landed in Cuba and were quickly defeated. William Walker was the successor to Lopez, and enjoyed a bit more success. While he also led a filibustering expedition to Mexico, Walker was most known for his actions in Nicaragua. In 1855, Walker targeted Nicaragua for several reasons. First, civil war had recently broken out in the country. Second, Nicaragua was part of an important trade route between San Francisco and New York City. Like Lopez, Walker was supported by Southern slaveowners, and promised that he would reinstate black slavery in Nicaragua if he was successful. Walker was victorious, and named himself president once more. He was even officially recognized by US President Franklin Pierce. After a year, the neighboring states of Costa Rica, Honduras, and El Salvador banded together and defeated the foreign invader. On Walker's third filibustering attempt, he was finally arrested by the United States government. While most discussion of filibustering centers around the military exploits and the connection to American imperialism, I instead want to focus on the role of women in the movement. Doing so will highlight a subaltern group that is not normally addressed in this discussion. I will attempt to amplify women's voices by examining letters to and from women and focusing on influential Southern writers, such as Lucy Holcombe Pickens. In examining these voices, it will become clear

that filibustering served as a predecessor to the Confederate ‘Lost Cause’ mythology, and reveals a great deal about gender in the 19th century South.

Before discussing the role of women in filibustering, it is necessary to examine the historiography of the expeditions. One particular noteworthy book is *Agent of Empire: William Walker and the Imperial Self in American Literature* by Brady Harrison. Harrison focused primarily on the way that “the freebooter’s adventures serve as a means to explore the expansionist desires and actions of the era of Manifest Destiny.”¹ Harrison examined numerous literary retellings of Walker’s expeditions, and placed the filibuster into the wider context of imperialism. But while Harrison’s main focus was on American literature, he did discuss gender. At one point, while recounting the life of author Richard Harding Davis, Harrison mentioned how Davis travelled to Nicaragua and saw a statue of William Walker. The statue depicted a Nicaraguan woman with her foot on the throat of Walker, which Harrison called “a visceral representation of American masculine defeat.”² In another section, Harrison mentioned how Walker was accused of being a woman disguised as a man.³ This is found in the account of the writer Darwin Teilhet, one of Walker’s many chroniclers. But while Harrison interacted with gender only in passing, my project would focus solely on the subject.

A more traditional account of filibustering is provided by Robert Granville Caldwell in his essay *The Lopez Expeditions to Cuba, 1848-1851*. Caldwell had several focuses in his work. First, he articulated the political and economic conditions in Cuba, and explained why these motivated men like Narciso Lopez to desire the island. Then, he discussed the opinion of both Americans

¹ Brady Harrison, *Agent of Empire: William Walker and the Imperial Self in American Literature* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004), 12.

² Harrison, 2.

³ Ibid., 3.

and Cubans towards acquisition. He argued that “the Lopez expeditions were essentially part of a much larger movement both in Cuba and in the United States.”⁴ Finally, he gave an account of Lopez’s two most important expeditions, the Round Island Expedition and the Cardenas Expedition. Caldwell’s work was written in response to another source, *Lopez’s Expeditions to Cuba, 1850 and 1851*. Caldwell found that the author, A. C. Quisenberry, was more concerned with “charm of style” than with discussing the broader historical implications of filibustering, so Caldwell wrote his essay to address this inefficiency.⁵ Likewise, my project aims to address the main flaw with Caldwell’s work, in that he fails entirely to mention any women.

In this manner, my project will aid to the historical discussion surrounding the filibuster movement. While other scholars have focused on the political and literary impacts of filibustering, I instead want to emphasize the subaltern group of women. This project is highly feasible for several reasons, but there also is one distinct challenge. First, since the main filibustering expeditions occurred in the 1850’s, all primary sources written about them are in the public domain. There is also a decent amount of news coverage of the events. The main difficulty that must be addressed in this research is the lack of care towards preserving sources written by women. It is difficult to find documents that are written by women, especially if they are not addressed to men. But, I have been able to find several, as will be outlined in my sources.

One of the first sources for my project is a letter from Dickie Galt to his daughter, Eliza Fisk Skinner. Galt was a merchant, and had taken his steamer down to Cuba in 1851. After staying for several days and interacting with a wide variety of people, Galt wrote a letter back to his daughter. In the letter, he identified that he was in Cardenas by stating that he was “in the place

⁴ Robert Grandville Caldwell, *The Lopez Expeditions to Cuba, 1848-1851* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1915), 3.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.

attacked some time since by the famous Lopez.”⁶ This shows that some women were aware of Narciso Lopez’s filibustering expeditions. Eliza Fisk Skinner was at least knowledgeable enough to be able to know the location of Cardenas solely by Galt’s association of the city with filibusters. Later in the letter, Galt mentioned that the Cubans “still seem[ed] to dread Lopez as more troops are daily expected here.”⁷ This again establishes the importance of filibustering to the discussion of Cuba.

Another important set of letters that shed light on the relation of women to filibustering are provided in A. C. Quisenberry’s *Lopez’s Expeditions to Cuba, 1850 and 1851*. William Logan Crittenden was a prominent Southerner and one of the military leaders of Lopez’s expedition. When Crittenden and Lopez were forced to split up during the Bahia Honda expedition, Crittenden and his men were captured and executed by the Spanish government. Before their executions, Crittenden and his men were given a brief moment to write letters home telling of their fate. Several of these letters were addressed to the filibuster’s wives, mothers, and sisters. One particular noteworthy example are the letters of Captain Victor Ker. Ker wrote to his wife, Felicia, and simply told her “never marry again; it is my desire.”⁸ But this was not all he wrote to his wife. He also assured her that he would “die like a soldier.”⁹ This reflects the Victorian ideal, prevalent in the southern aristocratic women, that men were expected to preserve southern honor and values at all costs. If this meant that a man must die and become a martyred hero, so be it. This is shown in numerous of these letters. Thomas C. James wrote to his sisters that with his execution, he

⁶ Dicke Galt to Eliza Fisk Skinner, January 6, 1851, accessed January 31, 2018, <http://skinnerfamilypapers.com/?p=776>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ A. C. Quisenberry, *Lopez’s Expeditions to Cuba, 1850 and 1851* (Louisville: John P. Morton and Company, 1906), 132, accessed Jan. 31, 2018, <https://books.google.com/books?id=VmkUAAAAYAAJ>.

⁹ Ibid.

would be “launched into eternity.”¹⁰ To his mother, James Brandt wrote that he “deeply regret[ted] the grief it will cause you to hear of my death,” but he also instructed her to “remember only [his] virtues.”¹¹

This idea of protecting southern values was even more evident in the life of Lucy Holcombe Pickens. Lucy was perhaps the most influential and important woman involved in the filibustering movement. Later in her life, she was proclaimed the ‘Queen of the Confederacy,’ and is the only woman depicted on Confederate currency. But in 1851, she was a 19-year-old girl, engaged to a filibuster. When he was killed in the expedition to Cuba, Lucy proclaimed “what life is more sublime than one given to a nation struggling for the principles of moral and political freedom?”¹² Lucy epitomized this idea of protecting southern values, and did this through her own writing. Lucy Holcombe Pickens is such a valuable resource since she was actually able to write about filibustering, and did so with the intention of garnering US support for the Cuban independence. Lucy intended to have influence on this national discussion, and did so by writing the book, *The Free Flag of Cuba*. This work, written under the pseudonym “H. M. Hardimann,” was lost for years but has recently been found. In the romantic novel, Lucy wrote about gender issues and also predicted the ‘Lost Cause’ mythology of the Civil War. She envisioned Narciso Lopez and his fellow filibusters as American martyrs fighting for liberty. The two key sources I will utilize to examine the life of Lucy Holcombe Pickens are her own work, as well as a secondary source, *Queen of the Confederacy: The Innocent Deceits of Lucy Holcombe Pickens* by Elizabeth

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 133.

¹² Elizabeth Wittenmyer Lewis, *Queen of the Confederacy: The Innocent Deceits of Lucy Holcombe Pickens* (Denton, Texas: University of North Texas Press, 2002), 1.

Wittenmeyer Lewis. My research project will differ from Lewis's though, for while she strived to place Lucy in the Confederate context, I will instead focus on filibustering.

In summation, this project is not only feasible, it also adds to the historical discussion of filibustering. The normal historiography focuses on the actions of Narciso Lopez and William Walker, and placing them in the imperial context. I instead will examine the effect of filibustering on women, as well as the impact made by significant figures such as Lucy Holcombe Pickens. I will consult letters written to women, letters written by women, and the primary source book *The Free Flag of Cuba* in order to make this analysis. By researching this project, I will be able to help emphasize the subaltern voices that are often dismissed when discussing imperial and colonial history.

Budget:

Access to books and other primary sources materials not available at Creighton: up to \$500

Bibliography:

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