

Foreword

Celia Garth by Gwen Bristow

First published 1959

Chicago Review Press; Reprint 2008

Rosina Lippi

At age thirteen I discovered historical fiction by means of Gwen Bristow's Jubilee Trail, and with that began a life long preoccupation with stories set in the past.

By the time I was seventeen I had read hundreds of novels about civil wars (British and American), the Revolution, the Anglo-Saxons and the Norman Invasion, ancient Rome and Greece.

I considered myself something of a connoisseur, someone who could tell Mary Renault from James Michener. The stories I liked best were the ones that focused on the lives of women, who were so often banished to the periphery in the historical fiction best sellers. Even at a young age I was skeptical of James Fenimore Cooper's portrayal of women struggling to survive on the New-York frontier.

My impression was that male authors didn't really know how to write female characters, and they didn't particularly regret that lack. Women were wonderful for filling in detail and establishing background; a man had to have a family to fight for, after all. The most a reader could hope for was a female with grit, that stock character who knows how to shoot a gun and speaks her mind now and then, but isn't really fulfilled until she embraces her feminine nature.

Even female authors fell into this trap. Scarlett O'Hara was a strong-willed, spoiled, manipulative, vain wretch who wrestled her fate to the ground and held it there determined to get what she believed she deserved. Except, of course, she fails, because Scarlett doesn't know what she wants. She rejects the love of a good man, and is doomed to unhappiness.

Gwen Bristow took a different approach. Her female characters may be introduced to us as young and inexperienced; they may even be naïve. But they are otherwise serious-minded individuals with strong feelings about matters other than engaging the interest of men.

This is certainly true of Celia Garth. A young woman with few family ties, she is proud of her skills as a seamstress and ambitious. She depends in the first line on her own intelligence and sense of self. Unlike many primary characters in early historical novels, she does not fling herself into harm's way. Harm comes, certainly, in the form of another war and a British army bent on not only subduing, but mastering and humiliating a rebel colony.

Celia has a strong sense of herself and her abilities, and what it means to be a Southerner (first) and an American (second) in occupied Charleston. She does fall in love, but her choice is a good man with a family who loves and respects her. The conflict is not an internal one for Celia; she does not doubt her choices. The force that moves her story along is external: when the marauding British army takes everything she holds dear, the Revolution is no longer

academic for Celia. Step by step she becomes more involved, of her own free will.

Her love story, as touching as it is, is secondary to the role she has taken for herself as a spy.

Celia Garth is a novel that straddles a line. She takes great pains to recreate Charleston as a war zone; Celia and those close to her are shaken, again and again, by the constant barrage of artillery fired from British ships in the harbor. The Revolution is not a sanitized affair; there is death and injury and loss of property; there is despair and grievous insult and loss of hope. There is division within the community; Celia's cousin takes the King's side and shows no empathy for Celia even in her worst days. The stories of the many secondary characters, good, indifferent and bad, come together to bring 18th century war-time Charleston into three full dimensions.

Bristow was a proud native of the South. Her love for South Carolina and Charleston are palpable. Thus it isn't surprising that in trying both to tell a true story and to honor her home she does in fact sidestep the issue of slavery. There is no contemplation of that institution; it just is. The many slaves in the story hate the British as much as their owners do. This may be seen as a simplification or even as denial or revisionism on Barstow's part, or simply as a realistic representation of how Celia saw and understood her world.

For Celia, as is the case with many of Barstow's female characters, personal happiness – family, marriage, children – is a byproduct of a life lived on a wider plain where challenges must be overcome. Celia Garth earns her happy ending. With Celia, Barstow gives us a complex, ambitious character who can strive for personal fulfillment in a whole range of ways.

There may well have been young women like Celia who spied for the colonial forces during the Revolution, women whose stories have been forgotten. If there are such records, the details will be spotty and open to interpretation; the historical record is what it is, and doesn't strive to convince anybody of the facts or even to make them palatable or believable.

But a novelist does bear that burden, and Barstow is equal to the challenge. With Celia Barstow she gives us an extraordinary young woman living in Charleston during the Revolution – a setting as extraordinary as Celia herself.

June 24 2008