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Belle Boyd: Confederate Patriot or Pseudo-celebrity?

Christopher Cox

Belle Boyd remains one of the most colorful and enigmatic characters to have been active for the Confederacy during the Civil War. She was one of many Southern women to transcend the bounds of station normally assigned to her gender and lend valuable service to her country. In her case, it was not only as a nurse, but also as a courier and a spy. Boyd's actions in the latter capacity put her in a position to achieve fame; though it was her character and determination that achieved that goal. Known in some circles as the “Cleopatra of the Secesh,” her fiery spirit, headstrong determination, and unwillingness to let societal limitations hamper her likened her to the famous namesake.

Unfortunately, these qualities also provided ammunition for her detractors, largely the Northern media, who painted her as a camp follower or prostitute.¹ No evidence exists to support those charges and the fact that Boyd was a successful Confederate spy mitigates them in posterity, considering the source. Such disparagement, however, when combined with Boyd's own tendency to sensationalize and self-aggrandize in her memoirs has cast her reputation and accomplishments in doubt to



Figure 1 *Belle Boyd*. Created between 1855 and 1865. Negative, glass, wet collodion. Located at the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

many historians and other interested parties. Her legacy is torn between her love of the Confederacy and her fanciful accounts of her own adventures. The question remains, was Boyd an ardent Southern patriot, bravely doing everything she could for the cause? Or was she an attention seeker enamored with her own fame, a forerunner to the modern pseudo-celebrity who is famous mostly for being famous? The answer is that Belle Boyd was a complex blend of both.

In her early life, she grew up as a part of Southern society and grew to appreciate the values and culture of the Old Dominion. When secession occurred, forming the Confederacy, Boyd embraced her new country like many of her neighbors and resolved to do what she could to advance the cause. Her activities brought her not only notoriety but detention and incarceration as well, putting her in a position to test both her resolve and her love of the South. In her adult life, she used her talents and fell back on her own history as a way to support herself and her family, while still maintaining relevancy and her sense of pride. This first came in the form of her memoirs, *Belle Boyd in Camp and Prison*, and then later as an actress and purveyor of her own legacy. From a young age, the qualities that would make Boyd the woman she became were evident, and developed much of her character during her childhood.

Maria Isabella “Belle” Boyd was born in Martinsburg, Virginia on May 9, 1844.² Her upbringing was fairly well to do, as her father Benjamin and mother Mary, operated a general store first in the smaller town of Bunker Hill and then in Martinsburg in conjunction with a prosperous farm.³ Berkeley County, Virginia sat at the bottom of the Shenandoah Valley, and so picturesque beauty and a slightly far-flung version of Virginia gentility surrounded Belle’s early life. Being not quite part of the Tidewater or Piedmont elite, the Boyds were wealthy but not extravagantly so, and there were fewer expectations placed on Boyd as a child. She loved her home very much, comparing Martinsburg’s residences favorably to those she saw in England, and lamenting the idyllic nature of her surroundings before the coming of a ruthless enemy.⁴

As a child, Boyd first showed signs of the fiery spirit and fierce determination that would characterize her as an adult. At the age of eleven, after her parents denied her a place at a dinner they were holding for some distinguished guests because she was too young, Boyd rode her horse into the dining room and stated, “Well, my horse is old enough, isn’t he?”⁵ For being so independent and something of a tomboy, at the age of twelve, her parents sent her for formal schooling at the Mount Washington Academy, where she remained for the next

four years. This time removed the slightly rough nature Boyd had displayed as a child, but did nothing to quell her determination and independence. Boyd entered society at the age of sixteen in Washington and spent much of the winter of 1860-61 there, taking part in all manner of social events. This time honed not only her taste for company and attention, but her social skills as well.

Boyd had a very romantic view of this time in the nation's capital, and the pages of her memoir that discuss this part of her life are particularly poetic. She was also able to see the practical side of the political reality of the time, and likened Washington to Paris shortly before the French Revolution as a place innocent or willfully blind to the coming storm.⁶ The notion of disunion would have set a person like Belle Boyd on a path to involvement because of her love of her home and her direct nature. She, like many Americans that identified as Southern, felt the cultural pressure and resented the Northern intrusions into the traditions of her home and her very way of life. Boyd was also astute enough to observe that emancipation was the goal of only a select subset of the Northern populace, and that limiting the power of the South was the primary reason for sectional hostility. Once the Civil War erupted, Boyd's life would change forever and she would step forward to do everything in her power for the nascent Confederacy.

Boyd was in Martinsburg at the outbreak of conflict, and her father was among the first to enlist, becoming part of the 2nd Virginia infantry regiment that would go on to become a part of the Stonewall Brigade. She was very proud of not only her father but also of the rest of her countrymen and was clearly enamored by the romantic notion of fighting Yankee oppression. Of the Stonewall Brigade she wrote, "the very name now bears with it traditions of surpassing glory," and likened it favorably to Wellington's Light Division.⁷ By all accounts, Boyd had become an attractive, charming, headstrong, and impulsive woman by this point in her life. The first opportunity she found to aid the cause was in gathering equipment and supplies for the local men who were going to war, though this would be far from her last contribution.

The Civil War came early to Martinsburg, as a Federal Army under Maj. Gen. Robert Patterson took possession of the town on July 3, 1861, after overcoming a determined Confederate delaying action at Falling Waters nearby.⁸ Boyd writes of these early days of Union occupation as essentially an extended session of looting and destruction by drunk, rude, and offensive Federal soldiers. She showed her determination and spirit, however, by chastising Yankee officers

for their boorish behavior and taking care of wounded Confederates that the army had left behind as they abandoned the town. Boyd's most famous incident during this period, and the one that likely got her started in the espionage game, came on July 7, 1861. On this day, a party of supposedly drunk Union soldiers was going through town hunting Confederate flags and replacing them with that of the United States. At Boyd's house, her mother refused to allow them to fly the Union flag over the house and when a Yankee soldier insulted her, Boyd flew into a rage and shot the man.⁹ The man is believed to be Pvt. Frederick Martin of the 7th Pennsylvania who was buried in Martinsburg on that day, though some doubt remains.¹⁰

Hereafter, Boyd's home was under constant guard, and Union officers stopped by daily to check on the family's welfare. She was able to fraternize with these officers and use her charm to wheedle sensitive military information from them, passing it on to the hands of nearby Confederate commanders, usually through the aid of a slave.¹¹ Much of her words about this time are grandiose and full of self-flattery, but to risk death or imprisonment for espionage and killing a Union soldier speaks highly of Boyd's resolve and dedication to serve her country. Her love of attention is evident in the way that she writes, as her flair for the dramatic enlivens the tale of her deeds to a great degree, though it does not diminish the significance of what she was able to accomplish or why. Her most famous and successful endeavor would come at Front Royal, Virginia late in the evening of May 22, 1862.

Boyd had traveled to Front Royal to visit an aunt and uncle during a period when the town was under occupation by Union forces under Brigadier General James Shields. She gained much information from Shields and his staff, particularly a young captain. Boyd showed no remorse in using him for information, demonstrating her willingness to do what was necessary to aid the Confederacy.¹² On the evening of May 22, Shields called a meeting of his officers at the local hotel, and Boyd was able to listen in from the closet of a bedroom directly above the meeting room. Through a hole in the floor, Boyd was able to hear that Shields would be heading away from Front Royal in pursuit of Stonewall Jackson leaving the town lightly defended. She documented her information, and using forged papers, was able to run the Union lines and deliver the news to Jackson's cavalry commander, Colonel Turner Ashby.¹³ During the interim of this heroic endeavor and Jackson's attack on Front Royal, Boyd would

again display her ability utterly overcoming the will of young Union officers.

After Confederates approached her to deliver sensitive materials and correspondence to them, Boyd enlisted the aid of a young lieutenant to get her safely out of town in light of the constant scrutiny she was under due to her reputation. When Federals caught her with the documents, she was able to shift much of the blame to the young officer and avoided detection of the most sensitive material by offering it directly to the questioning Federal who was far too incensed by the actions of his subordinate to notice it.¹⁴ Once Shields had departed, Boyd heard news of the approaching Confederates under Jackson and braved musket and artillery fire to reach Jackson and confirm that Federals lightly held Front Royal. The town fell to the Southerners and this series of events became the center of Belle Boyd's legend and the foundation, which built her reputation as a spy. She writes that no desire for recognition or fame motivated her to do what she did, and certainly the evidence that she risked her life to deliver intelligence, supports that claim. Ultimately, Belle Boyd would pay the price for her activities not only in constant surveillance in every Union town she went, but with several detentions and imprisonments as well.

Federals detained Boyd in her home or lodgings on several occasions, and the frequency of this practice increased as her legend grew. Confining the charming Confederate spy was a matter of security and expedience for several Union commanders. When she was under guard at her residence, she was at least pinned down to one location and easier to watch, though this was not always entirely successful, depending on the officers assigned to watch her. This was often done purely on her reputation alone, and not as a response to anything she may have done at that particular location, which only served to increase her notoriety as a dangerous Rebel operative. In many ways, this confinement was counterproductive, as Boyd still found ways to gather information wherever she was due to her tremendous determination and skill at manipulating the opposite sex. Simple home confinements would not be the end of Federal infringement on Boyd's liberty, however, as she would spend multiple stints in actual prisons before being banished entirely.

While still in Front Royal, Boyd continued her spying, but she finally made a serious mistake after so many exploits that led to her incarceration. By foolishly trusting a Federal operative posing as a paroled Confederate soldier, Belle allowed a letter full of captured information to make its way to Major General

Franz Sigel instead of its intended recipient Stonewall Jackson.¹⁵ Sigel forwarded the information to the War Department where Edwin Stanton ordered Belle's immediate arrest and transport to the Old Capital Prison in Washington. An escort of 450 cavalry troopers delivered Boyd to prevent an expected attempt by the Confederates to rescue one of their most effective and well-loved spies.¹⁶ While there, Boyd did her best to continue gathering information, which considering the seriousness of her situation, demonstrates a true dedication to the Southern cause. Most remarkably, she steadfastly refused to take the Oath of Allegiance in exchange for her release, which made her an instant and tremendous source of inspiration for her fellow inmates.¹⁷

Federals arrested Boyd again in 1863, this time more for her reputation than for any overt act. This time they sent her to Carroll Prison, which adjoined the Old Capital Prison, and this imprisonment proved more difficult for her due to illness and worry for her family.¹⁸ While at Carroll, she was responsible for facilitating an escape by the inmates in the adjoining cell providing a valuable service to the Confederacy even in the worst of times.¹⁹ In late 1863, they sent Boyd to Fortress Monroe to be exchanged, which was a sign of her status not only to the Union, but to the Confederacy as well. While making a second visit to Richmond, and after learning of her father's death, Jefferson Davis suggested that she visit England for her health while surreptitiously carrying Confederate diplomatic dispatches to London.²⁰ Boyd was more than happy to comply with the request, considering that it came from the Confederate President, and set out for London on the *Greyhound*.

The U. S. S. *Connecticut* stopped the *Greyhound*, and Federals found Boyd carrying incriminating documents and arrested her again on May 9, 1864. Her captor was Navy Lieutenant Samuel Hardinge, who instantly became smitten with Boyd to the point of neglecting his duty to a sufficient degree to allow the captain of the *Greyhound*, George H. Bier, to escape captivity. This incident cost Hardinge his commission and caused the exile of Boyd to Canada because there was no other way to ensure that she would not continue to damage the Federal war effort with her espionage. From Montreal, Boyd would make her way to her original destination of London, albeit without the dispatches she had when she originally left Richmond. Her visit to London would culminate with two events that would mark the end of her time as a Confederate spy and the beginning of her life as an author and actress.

Though she felt guilty for the capture of Lieutenant Hardinge, Boyd

would be surprised to find that her beau was already in Europe; after a brief confinement, the Navy released and dishonorably discharged him.²¹ Boyd had developed feelings for Hardinge during their trip together aboard the *Greyhound*, and when they met again in London, they set their wedding date, as they had agreed during a stop in New York before her exile to Canada. Their wedding, while flashy and showy, was to be short-lived, as Hardinge left shortly thereafter to return to the United States, and Boyd never saw him again. Some speculate that he carried Confederate dispatches back to the United States, but rather than making directly for the South, he spent time in the North to visit his family and then in Martinsburg to visit hers, before heading to Baltimore, where the Federals arrested him.²² His disappearance left Belle in a tight financial situation, but she would not accept the continued charity of her English friends, so she arranged to write and sell her memoirs, *Belle Boyd in Camp in Prison*.²³

Boyd brought her memoirs to London writer and journalist George Sala, and as she sought his aid to get her work published, she uttered the famous phrase, "Will you take my life?"²⁴ Boyd needed a way to support herself, and she felt telling the story of her exploits in written form was the best means available to her. This was the first step that she took to capitalize on her own fame, but it was an important one, and brought her to a career as an actress and a celebrity in Europe and the United States. Boyd married two more times, to John Swainston Hammond and Nathaniel Rue High, and she would also have three more children by her second husband.²⁵ High himself was an actor and inspired Boyd to resume touring and speaking about her life which brought her legend to new generations and allowed her to remember and relive the glories of her past. She passed away in Wisconsin in 1900. This second part of Boyd's life, her time as an actress and author, is what raises the question of her true motivation.

Boyd's dual legacy is that of ardent Southerner and lying attention-seeker and the events of her life make both of these aspects understandable to a certain degree. Two aspects really indicate that both are true and that they are not mutually exclusive, as the historians that have studied her seem to have settled upon. The first is the personal risks that she took in the line of duty and the high price she paid for her espionage, all in the name of the Confederacy. From running through a hail of fire at Front Royal to spending significant time behind bars to facing potential capital sentences for spying for the South, the cost to Boyd for her dedication to the South was high. Secondly, too much supporting evidence from outside sources

exists that corroborates her stories for them to be lies, despite the sensational and self-centered nature of many of them. Walter Clark recounts the care he received at Boyd's hands, and Harry Gilmor writes about her willingness to accept dangerous tasks when she requested to ride on a scouting mission with him.²⁶ While her Northern husbands have cast doubt on her dedication to the Confederacy in some circles, the rest of her accomplishments and her recognition for them say otherwise.

Her love of attention, however, is difficult to deny based on her behavior, the writing in her memoirs, and her dedication to capitalizing on her own legend later in life. While this, on occasion, obscures her accomplishments as a Confederate spy, it should instead compliment them and be an integral part of this complex and fascinating historical figure. Boyd was a flawed figure, vain, headstrong, and self-centered, but her character defects were not of sufficient magnitude to detract from the rest of her life. She spent her youth developing the social skills that she would need later in life, and used them and her natural charm to become a spy who was successful in ways that a male could not have been. She never compromised her principles for gaining recognition, and that fact should preserve her historical legacy as much as anything. Later in life, she capitalized on her own fame and became, in many ways, the forerunner of the modern celebrity that plies fame as a career to itself. This was as much out of necessity as it was out of choice, so there should be some mitigation when examining this aspect of her life. Ultimately, Belle Boyd is a diverse character, and while she loved attention, she also loved the South, and so was not only an attention-seeking celebrity, but also a devoted agent for the Southern cause.

Notes

¹ John Bakeless, *Spies of the Confederacy* (Mineola: Dover Publications, Inc., 1997), 142.

² Ruth Scarborough, *Belle Boyd: Siren of the South* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1997), 2; Boyd's name is often given as Isabelle Marie, but Scarborough references the Boyd family Bible, which clearly states Maria as her given name.

³ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴ Belle Boyd, *Belle Boyd in Camp and Prison*, Volumes I & II (London: Saunders, Otley, & Co., 1865), 22-23.

⁵ Louis A. Sigaud, *Belle Boyd: Confederate Spy* (Richmond: Dietz Press, Inc., 1944), 1.

⁶ Boyd, 24.

⁷ Ibid., 28-29.

⁸ Scarborough, 15.

⁹ Boyd, 36.

¹⁰ Bakeless, 145.

¹¹ Boyd, 38.

¹² Ibid., 52-53.

¹³ Ibid., 55.

¹⁴ Ibid., 57-59; Boyd claims to have gained the idea of innocently offering the evidence from a Cooper novel called, "The Spy."

¹⁵ Sigaud, 62-63.

¹⁶ Boyd, 83.

¹⁷ Scarborough, 74.

¹⁸ Ibid., 112.

¹⁹ Boyd, 134-135.

²⁰ Sigaud, 147.

²¹ Scarborough, 157.

²² Sigaud, 179.

²³ Ibid., 185.

²⁴ Scarborough, 178.

²⁵ Ibid., 180-181.

²⁶ Sharon Kennedy-Nolle, Introduction to *Belle Boyd in Camp and Prison* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998), 12-13.

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