

# ECHOES OF WAR AND STRAINS OF RESISTANCE: REPRESENTATIONS OF THE U. S.-MEXICO WAR IN *THE YOUTH'S COMPANION*

---

Lorinda B. Cohoon\*

---

## RESUMEN

En este texto se examina una revista para niños intitulada *The Youth's Companion* para localizar las representaciones de México en una publicación para niños en los Estados Unidos. Aquí se analizan los temas de la revista publicada durante el periodo de la Guerra entre México - Estados Unidos para saber si este evento se le presentó a los niños y cómo fueron tratadas la Guerra y la conquista. A pesar de que la revista era semanal, las referencias explícitas sobre la guerra casi nunca tuvieron lugar. Se estudia un registro sobre la Batalla de Veracruz y también se discute la poesía y los ensayos contra la Guerra escritos por mujeres.

## ABSTRACT

This essay examines a children's periodical titled *The Youth's Companion* to locate representations of Mexico in a United States publication for children. Specifically, this essay examines issues of the magazine published during the time period of the U. S.-Mexico war to find whether this war was presented to children and to examine how issues of war and conquest were addressed. Even though the magazine was published weekly, explicit references to the war occur rarely. This paper examines one account of the Battle of Vera Cruz and also discusses anti-war poetry and essays written by women writers

---

## PALABRAS CLAVE

Guerra, Guerra entre México-Estados Unidos, literatura antiguerra, revistas infantiles, sitio de Veracruz, Batalla de Chapultepec, *Youth's Companion*, Lydia Huntley Sigourney.

## KEY WORDS

war, U.S.-Mexico War, anti-war literature, children's periodicals, Siege of Vera Cruz, Battle of Chapultepec, *Youth's Companion*, Lydia Huntley Sigourney.

---

\* Profesora-asociada en el Departamento de Inglés, Universidad de Memphis, Tennessee.



War is not a topic that is automatically associated with literature for children, although many children's texts recount aspects of history that incorporate stories of war. In the United States, there are many children's novels and biographies that explore lives of national heroes such as Paul Revere, George Washington, and Abraham Lincoln. Stories of historical figures who participated in wars associated with American expansion of territory and American imperialism are not quite as common. One of the areas of U.S. history that is not frequently discussed is the U. S.-Mexico war of 1846-1848. In order to better understand how this war is addressed in children's literature and to make a call for more exploration of this time period, this study examined a long-running children's periodical, *The Youth's Companion*, for representations of Mexico and the war. The findings of this study indicate that through the duration of the war, there were very few explicit references made to the conflict, although mentions that were made in this publication tended to reference historic wars that had been interpreted as having less complicated motivations. Other pieces highlight the dangers and costs of war and encourage child readers to value peace and not be swayed by cultural glorifications of warfare.

*The Youth's Companion* first began publication in 1827 and ran until 1929. It was published in Boston by Nathaniel Willis, and in its early years, the articles and stories in the magazine were focused on religious themes, although the title page of the publication declared itself to be "a family paper, devoted to piety, brotherly love-no sectarianism, no controversy" (sub-heading on every issue's masthead). Despite this declaration, in the years between 1827 and 1870, the magazine's perspective is clearly protestant, and the politics of many of its contributors are abolitionist, either implicitly or explicitly. In *Children's Periodicals of the United States*, R. Gordon Kelly explains that the "career of Nathaniel Willis (1780-1870), the founder of *The Youth's Companion*, may best be understood as part of the orthodox reaction to religious liberalism in New England. During his early adulthood he became a political journalist and printer" (508). These unstated "sectarian" positions influence the material that is included in the magazine, and these perspectives are particularly significant for understanding the issues published during the U.S.- Mexico War.

When the invasion of Mexico began on 25 April 1846, many citizens of the United States, especially members of the Whig Party, were opposed to any aggression against Mexico. Some of the anti-war sentiment in the United States was related to anxieties about how laws surrounding the issue of slavery would be enacted in any annexed territory. Other objections had to do with the human cost of war. Many members of the Democratic party favored war, and especially saw it as a means to acquire valuable territory and to end disputes over the control of Texas. The war lasted from April 25, 1846-February 2, 1848 and resulted in thousands of casualties on both sides. The southern boundaries of the United States were redrawn, and citizens of Mexico living in Colorado, New Mexico, California, and Texas were offered citizenship in the United States as part of the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which was signed on February 2, 1848 to end the war.

Despite the fact that the war lasted almost two years, references to the war in the weekly children's periodical *The Youth's Companion* are rare. There are references to historic wars, such as the Revolutionary War, in the early months after the war began in 1846. There are also some pieces of poetry that explore how women and children are affected by wars in general. No immediate mention is made of the Battle of Chapultepec, which occurred in Mexico City from September 12 to September 13 in 1847. In an event that is commemorated in history books, artwork, and monuments, six Mexican youths refused to surrender to U. S. troops and fought to their deaths.<sup>1</sup> One story of "Los Niños Héroes" explains that one young man wrapped the Mexican flag around his body before he leaped from the castle of Chapultepec. While this account of heroic patriotism would probably have been of interest to the readers of *The Youth's Companion*, no mention is made of it in the months following the end of the war. Instead, a battle that is recounted is the siege of Vera Cruz, and the article about this battle highlights the tragic aspects of war rather than the heroic or patriotic details.

<sup>1</sup> See John S. D. Eisenhower's account in *So Far From God: The U.S. War with Mexico, 1846-1848*.

The first issue of *The Youth's Companion* published after the beginning of the war does not contain explicit references to the U.S.-Mexico War, but it does open with an article titled "Chariots of War," which suggests that the topic of war was under consideration. This piece is about the biblical chariots of war, and it briefly describes their construction and uses: "[t]he annoyance which the Hebrews most dreaded, when they met an enemy in war, was that of chariots" (205). The rest of the piece describes their efficiency: "Chariots, owing to their efficiency as instruments of war, are used ... for protection and defence [sic] of the highest kind" (205). This brief article raises the topic of war, but deflects and displaces the current war of 1846 by instead discussing the uses of the chariot. This displacement technique occurs elsewhere, as can be seen in the 16 September 1847 issue of *The Youth's Companion*, which contains an article titled "Washington, A Story of the Revolution." This article begins with a discussion of the feelings many Americans have about Washington, the first president:

[t]here seems to be something in the very name of this illustrious individual, that every American seems instinctively, as it were, taught to venerate, inasmuch as every incident of his life is becoming more and more interesting as time gradually is gaining space from his life time to the present moment. (77)

Here, in an issue published after the siege of Vera Cruz, a general and president who led a revolution and founded a nation is described with a tone of respect and veneration. These deflections explore wars that stir less complicated and conflicted political views, and they address a topic of current concern in the context of history.

In addition to the oblique references to historical wars that contain echoes that reference the U. S.-Mexico War, there are also poems and articles that indicate a resistance to the embrace of war. One such poem, by Lydia H. Sigourney, is titled "Parting of the Widow's Son." This poem discusses a son departing from a peaceful life at home: "His balmy years of childhood o'er,/ He goes without a guide,/ Amid the stir and stride of men/ His devious course to run,/ The tempter and the snare to bide—/ God bless the widow's son" (89). The "stir and stride" mentioned in

this first stanza suggest the movements of war. The final stanza figures the mother's prayers as providing him with a better protection than armor: "a spell is round him thrown,/ More firm than diamond shield--/ A mournful mother's fervent prayer!/ So till his life is done,/ Till time and toil, and change are oe'er--/ God bless the widow's son." (89). While the poem does not mention the possibility that the widow mother might be doubly bereft if the son dies in battle, the implication of the potential for her sorrow to increase occurs in the line that emphasizes that this is a "mournful mother" (89). This poem certainly highlights the dangers of manhood during a period of war, and it demonstrates how these dangers also affect women at home.

In addition to poetry, strains of resistance to war can be found in articles that examine war's alternatives. One such piece, titled "The Two Swords," makes the argument that the "sword" of the Bible or religious instruction is much less damaging than the sword associated with physical battle. It discusses how the sword of Captain Miles Standish can be seen at Pilgrim Hall in Plymouth, Massachusetts: "Old Capt. Standish never expected to make people any better for the wounds he gave them with his sword" (12). The other sword, the Bible, can wound, the article explains, but the wounds can heal: "[t]errible blows have been given by it, and keen the sufferings of the wounds, but they were given on purpose to save and not destroy" (12). This article implies that the swords used in battle are for destruction, while other kinds of swords can have better purposes: "My young friends may now see the difference between the two swords. They may never see the renowned one of Capt. Standish, but they can put their eyes upon the nobler and better one every day they please. And I hope that the latter is the only one they will ever use" (12). In this statement, there is a clear anti-war stance, since the author does not want children to use both kinds of swords but only the "nobler and better one" (12). In issues that are published later in the war, there are even more explicit discussions of the purposelessness of war and condemnations of its destructiveness.

A narrative included in *The Youth's Companion* published a month after the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo titled "A Tragic Incident of the Bombardment of Vera Cruz" tells of an officer's agreement with a midshipman to attempt to protect a house

inhabited by a woman to whom he is engaged. The midshipman, named "G." makes his request:

you asked my reason for wishing you to spare that house. Hear it. My betrothed, Anita do [sic] Corulla, is there-to what danger is she exposed! Lieutenant, do not deny my request; spare that house; think of the agony I must feel in knowing that she, my love, my very life is there, protected only by walls which crumble at every shot. (174)

The officer agrees to "aim elsewhere," and the midshipman explains his plan: "when we storm that place, I can be first over the walls, and reach the doors before the others, I may yet save her from the fearful perils which now environ her" (174). Although this plan seems hopeful, the officer acknowledges to himself that the chaos of war does not always allow for such careful planning.

The narrative spends a good amount of space explaining war's duties and war's horrors. The officer describes G.: "a young midshipman, whose activity and officer-like conduct I had noticed at the time of our landing, when he had charge of a cutter which aided in putting us ashore" (174). The siege of Vera Cruz involved the first amphibian landing made by the United States, so the role G. is described here as playing is an important one. He is also described as "young," and his youthfulness is part of the tragedy that is highlighted in the narrative. After G. makes his request, the officer reflects on the inevitable horrors of war: "I thought of the fearful excesses which must inevitably occur if we stormed the town; the excesses, which the madness of victory, and the desire to revenge fallen comrades, ever leads even well disciplined soldiers to commit" (174). This statement, made in a article for children to read emphasizes "fearful excesses," "madness," and "revenge" rather than bravery or victory, and foreshadows the tragedy that is hinted at in the title.

Later passages elaborate on the gruesomeness of war in some detail, indicating that the author of the piece and the editor of the periodical mean to convey to child readers a picture of how horrible war is, despite the fact that this battle was considered a victory for the United States. One passage makes several detailed observations of casualties and damage: "it was sickening to see here and there a ghastly mass of flesh

and crushed bones, which, by some huge shot, had been thus transformed from life and beauty" (174). The end of the narrative demonstrates how war's destruction of "life and beauty" affect those on both sides of the battle. When the U. S. soldiers enter the city to take possession, the narrator sees G. at the castle holding his betrothed: "[h]e held her still and motionless in his arms, her long black hair fell in disheveled masses down upon the cold marble, and over a partly bare and lovely shoulder" (174). Upon closer observation, the narrator sees the destruction the battle has caused: "a ghastly wound of black and horrible roughness showed how she had died. A piece of iron shell had cloven a rent in her bosom through which her soul had sped to a kinder world than this" (174). This scene in the narrative demonstrates that the conquest of the war does not just claim beautiful, uninhabited resources, but that it has caused horrific deaths that destroy families and lives.

At the end of the narrative, G. is described as ill and probably dying. It was during the siege of Vera Cruz that United States soldiers began to suffer from the yellow fever, and the narrative suggests he has contracted such an infection. The close of the narrative insists that readers recognize the costs of war:

And this! this [sic] is *war!* These are the scenes which the pen of history must record of men who live in the nineteenth century of the existence of that religion which has peace, love, and charity for its mottoes and emblems. I know, reader, that this is a poor train of thought, and an inconsistent one for a soldier, but were you to see such scenes as these, you would not wonder that I should almost be willing to exchange the sword and uniform for the gown and prayer book. (174)

This conclusion acknowledges the hypocrisy of war in the face of religious beliefs, and it suggests that histories should work to record war's horrors and losses so that children do not learn that war is glorious. The piece ends with the narrator stating that he is "almost" willing to exchange his sword for the more peaceful pursuits of scholarship and prayer, but stops short of making this exchange. Thus, the readers of the periodical are positioned to better understand war's costs and to admit the complexities of the victory of the United States in the siege of Vera Cruz.

Another piece published in this same issue as the narrative about Vera Cruz indicates that cautionary narratives and poems about the dangers of a warlike spirit were part of the stance on war presented to children in this periodical. An editorial titled "Soldiers! Soldiers!" describes how young boys sometimes follow soldiers when they march through towns: "[t]his is the beginning of the *war-spirit*—this is the temptation which leads many to ruin" (176). The "delusive promises" of the recruiting officer are described in this piece: "good pay, fine clothes, plenty of food, promotion, and military glory" (176). These promises are then contrasted with the experiences of the youths who are conscripted: "he has lost his liberty –he is a slave– he must obey, without murmuring or questioning, in whatever his officer commands him to do" (176). The position of the *Youth's Companion* here is that young readers must be careful of being deluded by superficial "glories" and must instead value personal liberty over the false excitement and false promises of the "war-spirit."

The piece goes on to explicitly discuss some of the losses experienced during the war against Mexico. The editorial explains that General Pierce of New Hampshire has returned with far fewer men: "[o]f the 948 men which composed his regiment, only 120, able of service, remained at the time Gen. Pierce left Mexico" (176). This discussion of numbers is followed by an exploration of the loss of human life: "[i]n view of the destruction of human life in this war, a question of great magnitude arises, viz *who will be answerable for these lives in the day of judgement.*" This question is not answered, but the article suggests that all participants and also all observers play a part in the destruction of human life caused by war. Child readers are then encouraged to be cautious about recruitment and are urged to resist the "war-spirit" that tends to glorify war and ignore its costs.

As is demonstrated in critical explorations and recovery projects such as Shelley Streeby's *American Sensations: Class, Empire, and the Production of Popular Culture* and Christopher Conway's, more work is being done on representations of the U. S.-Mexico War in literature for adults, but there has been very little examination of how this war was presented to children in the children's literature of the nineteenth century. This is certainly an area where more recovery work can be done. This war redrew geographical and political boundaries that still have

profound effects on contemporary children, and a better understanding of this history may result in better-informed decisions about citizenship, immigration, and political policies between neighboring nations. Uncovering such accounts will add to understandings of the rich history of the connections between these two nations and illuminate how child readers have been positioned to understand the connections through the literature they have been given.

## WORKS CITED

- Conway, Christopher, (ed.) *The U. S.-Mexican War: A Binational Reader*. Trans. Gustavo Pellon. Indianapolis, Hackett, 2010.
- Eisenhower, John S. D. *So Far From God: The U. S. War with Mexico, 1846-1848*. New York, Random House, 1989.
- Kelly, R. Gordon. *Children's Periodicals of the United States*. Westport, Connecticut, Greenwood Press, 1984.
- Streeby, Shelley. *American Sensations: Class, Empire, and the Productions of Popular Culture*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 2002.

## MAGAZINES\*

- "Chariots of War." *The Youth's Companion* 30 April 1846 (19. 52), p. 205.
- Sigourney, Lydia H. "Parting of the Widow's Son." 21 Sept. 1847 (21. 20), p. 89.
- "Soldiers! Soldiers!." *The Youth's Companion* 2 March 1848 (21. 44), p. 176.
- "A Tragic Incident: Of the Bombardment of Vera Cruz." *Youth's Companion* 2 March 1848 (21. 44), pp. 174-175.
- "The Two Swords." *The Youth's Companion* 21 May 1846 (20 3), p. 12.
- "Washington, A Story of the Revolution." *The Youth's Companion* 16 Sept. 1847 (21. 20), pp. 77-78.

\* Se ha respetado el modo de citar de la estudiosa que dentro del paréntesis indica "Volume/Issue" es decir, "volúmen y edición". Se trata de los artículos del periódico "Youth's Companion", publicados en Boston, Massachusetts durante el siglo XIX por el editor Nathaniel Willis.