

11-15-2021

**[Review of] *Till Death Do Us Part: The Letters of Emory and Emily Upton, 1868-1870* Ed. Salvatore G. Cilella Jr.**

Libra Hilde  
San Jose State University, libra.hilde@sjsu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/faculty\\_rsca](https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/faculty_rsca)



Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

---

**Recommended Citation**

Libra Hilde. "[Review of] *Till Death Do Us Part: The Letters of Emory and Emily Upton, 1868-1870* Ed. Salvatore G. Cilella Jr." *Michigan War Studies Review* (2021).

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by SJSU ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Research, Scholarly, and Creative Activity by an authorized administrator of SJSU ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@sjsu.edu](mailto:scholarworks@sjsu.edu).



*Till Death Do Us Part: The Letters of Emory and Emily Upton, 1868-1870* ed. Salvatore G. Cilella Jr.

Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 2021. Pp. ix, 331. ISBN 978-0-8061-6489-2.

Review by Libra Hilde, San Jose State University (lhilde@stanford.edu).

In *Till Death Do Us Part*, editor Salvatore Cilella Jr. gathers letters exchanged during the two-year marriage of Emory and Emily Upton, which ended when Emily succumbed to tuberculosis in March 1870.<sup>1</sup> The coverage is inevitably lopsided because Emily's letters to Emory have not survived, but Cilella does include her correspondence with her parents and siblings to flesh out her perspective on her marriage. The result is a picture of a couple deeply in love, but ultimately unable to embark on a life together.

This well organized and thoroughly annotated collection will appeal to researchers concerned with post-Civil War American marriage, gender roles, health, and army life. The introduction sketches the background of the Uptons' lives and marriage and surveys the contents of the letters. Discrete chronological sections follow the young couple's short marriage, starting with their letters home to family members during their honeymoon and ending with accounts of Emily's last days.

The Uptons already faced the limitations of Emily's illness during their honeymoon in Europe. She often stayed in and observed life from her window as Emory visited tourist destinations, including sites of military interest. Emory's letters show his disdain for Roman Catholicism and what he saw as backward European social and political practices. Emily praised her new husband as a solicitous nurse.

Most of the collection consists of Emory's letters to Emily and hers to her parents, while she sought an elusive recovery in Key West and Nassau. The Uptons briefly lived together in Atlanta, where Emory was posted in March 1869, before Emily returned to Nassau that November after a stay at Willowbrook, her family home in New York. She died in Nassau a few months later in March 1870 at age twenty-three. Both Emory and Emily lamented the challenges of communicating during the long separations caused by her illness and attempts to recuperate.

*Till Death Do Us Part* is a welcome source of information on the health, diseases, medical treatments, and effects of illness and death on loved ones in the second half of the nineteenth century. As the editor notes, Emily followed the medical advice available at the time and thus misguidedly sought recovery in humid climates, which only exacerbated her respiratory problems.

The collection is a boon for anyone interested in nineteenth-century marriage and interpersonal relationships. Emory Upton's letters offer rich commentary on gender roles and expectations. He adored his wife, but she was not entirely multi-dimensional to him, owing to her physical weakness. The couple's letters reveal their thorough acceptance of the tenets of domesticity. Emory saw women as a civilizing force and wrote of "the softening, refining influence of a

---

1. Cilella has previously edited two volumes of Major General Emory Upton's letters and published a Civil War history of the 121st New York Infantry, known as "Upton's Regulars." The earlier volumes do not include Upton's numerous and demonstrative letters to his wife.

dear good woman like my wife; ever precious, fond, loving and true" (90). He credited her with reigniting his own religious observance and making him a better person. "How beautiful is our relation, each the complement of the other, one worldly the other spiritual" (104). He often expressed his desire to protect his wife, while she articulated a yearning to see to his "comfort" (115).

Emory believed marriage offered women their only chance at "true life" (147). In one letter to Emily, he asserted that "all husbands worth having prefer a wife to be dependent upon them, rather than independent of them." He also worried about how much Emily's parents helped the couple financially, adding "I am sure you would study my happiness by ultimately looking to me for everything" (139). Despite the intensity of their mutual feelings and hopes for a future together, Emily's untimely death robbed them of the chance to know each other deeply or see their relationship evolve.

As a hero of the Civil War who had a lasting influence on military reforms, Emory Upton is a figure of interest to scholars of the Civil War and American military history.<sup>2</sup> His personal letters hint at his feelings about needed military reforms and the problems created by irregular pay. The collection allows Emily Upton to shine and, even in the periods of her absence, sheds light on the lives and expectations of military wives. Though Emily was never able to meet these expectations and fully serve in the role of an army wife, she did briefly execute some of her duties in Atlanta where she joined Emory in April 1869; she found some fulfillment, for instance, in distributing personalized Bibles to the soldiers.

The letters also document postwar army life. There were rumors that Emory would be posted to Arizona or California, and rapidly changing orders show how military downsizing and reorganization after the Civil War caused anxiety and left families unsettled. Various letters concern mundane details of daily life, including setting up a household and the finances of a young couple amid this instability. Other challenges were posed by frequent moves and efforts to establish a routine at each new post.

Finally, the letters contain tantalizing hints at Reconstruction politics in the postwar South. Emory hoped Reconstruction would succeed and voiced his contempt for Rebels (147). While living in Atlanta, Emily noted that Union military men maintained a separate church due to the animosity of the local population and commented that "The hard feeling here in Atlanta does not in any way diminish I am sorry to say" (203). She believed that actions taken by the occupying army to "keep peace and protect Northerners" (205) only inflamed tensions. She never mentioned the needs and disputed status of freedpeople.

The volume's final section includes letters copied and kept by Emily's mother; these describe her daughter's last days and Christian resignation in the face of approaching death, and ends with the last letter Emily received from Emory right before she passed away. The editor also includes a letter from Emory to a colleague discussing his profound grief and the difficulty of living without his love, but also his determination to pursue a "new field of usefulness" (230).

An epilogue traces Emory's life and work following his wife's death, including his declining health due to a sinus tumor and his suicide at the Presidio in 1881. Cilella covers the conspiracy theories surrounding Upton's death, drawing reasoned conclusions about the effect of his deteriorating health on his mental state. The collection, combined with Cilella's prior two volumes of Maj. Gen. Upton's letters, will benefit students of the various impacts of combat trauma on veter-

---

2. See, e.g., David Fitzpatrick, *Emory Upton: Misunderstood Reformer* (Norman: U Okla Pr, 2017), with review at *MiWSR* 2018-006.

ans. Emory showed remarkable resilience after the war, as seen in his thoughtful remembrance of the sixth anniversary of the Battle of Fredericksburg (96), and again after losing Emily, the latter bolstering Cilella's attribution of the causes of his suicide.

*Till Death Do Us Part* offers a captivating and instructive narrative of an ardent relationship cut tragically short. It is an especially valuable primary-source research tool, both on its own and as an entry point into the extensive archival collections from which its contents derive.