

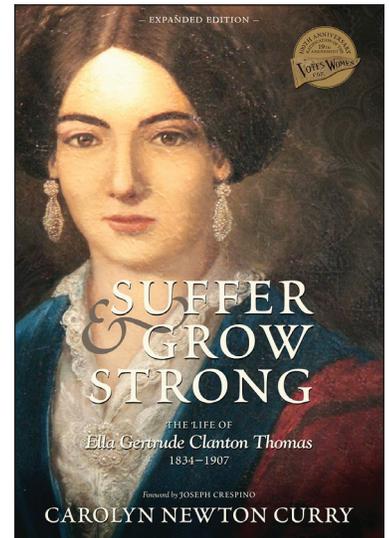
SUFFER AND GROW STRONG

The Life of Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas, 1834–1907

by Carolyn Newton Curry

March 2020 - Biography/Women's Studies

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Bibliography • Index • Illustrations • *foreword* by Joseph Crespino



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MACON, GEORGIA—"Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas was a real life Scarlett O'Hara," says Joseph Crespino, Jimmy Carter Professor of History at Emory University. "The daughter of a privileged slaveholding family in antebellum Georgia, her comfortable life was upended by the Civil War and the abolition of slavery. Carolyn Newton Curry brings a sharp, empathetic eye to Thomas's life. She fills in holes in historical accounts and provides context and nuanced interpretation thanks to extensive interviews with Thomas's descendants. As a scholar of women's history, Curry also brings to the fore aspects of Thomas's life that other scholars might overlook."

Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas was an intelligent, spirited woman born in 1834 to one of the wealthiest families in Georgia. At the age of fourteen she began and kept a diary for forty-one years. These diaries of her life before, during, and after the Civil War filled thirteen hand-written volumes with 450,000 words. In the early years she described her life of leisure and recorded the books she read. Her father recognized her love of learning and sent her to the first college for women in America, Wesleyan Female College in Macon, Georgia. After college graduation in 1851, she was a "gay young girl of fashion" who met and married her Princeton-educated husband in 1852.

However, with the coming of the Civil War and its aftermath, her life changed forever. Thomas experienced loss of wealth, bankruptcy, the death of loved ones, serious illness, and devastating family strife. She gave birth to ten children and saw four of them die. But, through it all, she kept pouring thoughts into her diary. Thomas examined what was happening, asked questions, and strived to find ways to improve her family's dire economic straits. She started a school in her home and later ran a boarding house out of the old family mansion.

In 1893, Thomas left Augusta and moved to Atlanta where she became active in many women's organizations. She found comfort in her work with the Women's Christian Temperance Union and the Suffrage Movement. She began producing articles for newspapers, keeping them in scrapbooks that tell the story of her life after she quit keeping a diary. In 1899 she was elected president of the Georgia Woman Suffrage Association. Because of her own losses, Thomas was sensitive to the well-being of other women. As she said, she had "suffered and grown strong." Her life is an amazing story of survival and transformation that speaks to women in our own time.

Carolyn Newton Curry holds a BA in English from Agnes Scott College and MA and PhD degrees in History from Georgia State University. She has taught at the Westminster Schools in Atlanta and The University of Kentucky. In 2015, Curry was named Georgia Author of the Year in Biography by the Georgia Writers Association and *Suffer and Grow Strong* was selected as one of the "Books All Georgians Should Read" by the Georgia Center for the Book. Curry is the founder and chair of Women Alone Together®, a non-profit foundation created to meet the needs of women who are alone in our culture. The well-being of women past and present has been her lifelong passion. Curry resides in Atlanta, Georgia. Learn more at carolyncurry.net.

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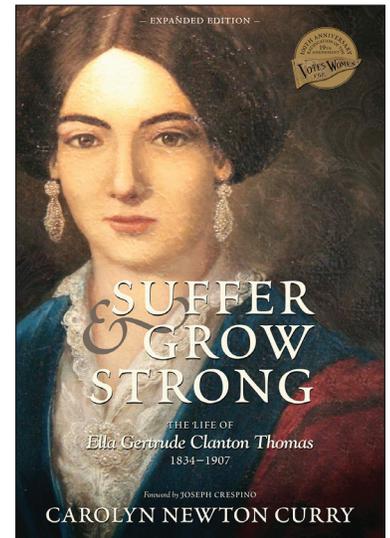
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Advance Praise

Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas's journals have long been an indispensable source for anyone seeking to understand the nineteenth-century South and Southern white women's experiences. Yet surprisingly, Thomas has never been the subject of a full-length biography. Carolyn Curry's welcome new book carefully documents Thomas's life story and puts her journals into an intriguingly fresh context.

—**Michele Gillespie**, Presidential Professor of History, Wake Forest University

Suffer and Grow Strong is a remarkable biography by Carolyn Curry that is destined to become a classic in women's studies. It tells the story of the redoubtable Ella Gertrude Thomas, who kept a vivid record of her life for forty-one years. Her courage and resilience during and after the Civil War are reminiscent of Scarlett O'Hara. History has been a great silencer of women, but *Suffer & Grow Strong* tells the tale of a white Southern woman who endures the whirlwind of the war and the deprivations of Reconstruction, then fought hard enough for women's rights that my grandmother was eligible to cast her first vote in 1920. This book is a great achievement for Carolyn Curry.

—**Pat Conroy**, *The Death of Santini*

Suffer and Grow Strong is a fascinating story of a remarkable Southern woman. Carolyn Curry ably brings Gertrude Thomas to life through extensive research and explores Thomas's steel-willed determination to triumph over wartime dislocations and postwar deprivation, her spirited intellect and devotion to her family, and her passionate support of women's rights—important and elegantly written contribution to Southern women's history.

—**Kathryn Fuller-Seeley**, professor, University of Texas, Austin

As enjoyable as it is educational, Carolyn Curry's *Suffer and Grow Strong* utilizes journals and contemporary newspapers to vividly recreate the life of one of Georgia's earliest "feminists." In doing so, she teaches us about a more domestic Civil War, viewed through the experiences of the women left behind.

—**Morna Gerrard**, Women and Gender Collections Archivist—Special Collections and Archives, Georgia State University Library

In her role as unlikely feminist and a leader of the suffrage movement, Ella Gertrude Thomas could be the fictional heroine of a rip-roaring historical novel. Instead, Carolyn Curry brings to life a real woman whose courage and endurance is truly inspirational.

—**Cassandra King**, *The Sunday Wife*

Carolyn Curry's *Suffer and Grow Strong* is a masterfully researched and written story of a remarkable woman, whose journals recorded soul and spirit and engaging insight into the exploding of history that both illuminated and scarred nineteenth-century America. Carolyn Curry has captured the quintessence of both character and period, and the result is a mesmerizing reading experience.

—**Terry Kay**, *To Dance with the White Dog, The Book of Marie*