AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra, and today I'm joined by historian Emily Lapisardi to discuss U.S. Civil War spymistress Rose O'Neal Greenhow, who just so happens to be in my book, *The View from the Hill: Women Who Made Their Mark After 40*. So first, could you introduce us to her as a person?

EL: So Rose was a native of Montgomery County, Maryland. Her father died when she was very young. He was murdered by his enslaved valet. And so she and her sister were sent to Washington, D.C. to live with her mother's sister, who provided lodgings for senators, congressmen. Rose grew up in a political milieu from her mid-teens on. Became very well connected in political circles in Washington, D.C. society. Married the translator and librarian from the Department of State, which enabled her to stay in Washington and become really a political force in an era when women couldn't even vote. However, her sympathies were very decidedly Southern. And when the Civil War began, she was recruited as an espionage agent by the South, which was work that she was very willing to do and was really quite successful at it. Both her supporters and her detractors credited her with crucial information before the First Battle of Manassas or Bull Run, which was the first major battle of the U.S. Civil War. And if the South had lost that one, there probably wouldn't have been much more of a war. Rose was imprisoned. I think she thought her position and her connections would protect her, but they didn't. She was in prison for about nine months with her eight-year-old daughter, who turned nine during that time. They were eventually sent to the South, where her old friends, who are now high up in the Confederate government, made her a diplomatic emissary, sent her to Europe to try to plead for recognition from Britain and from France for the Confederacy. And that, as far as we can tell, makes her the first American-born woman to serve as a diplomat abroad. She died when she was coming back. The coast was under blockade, being patrolled by Union gunboats. And her ship was attempting to run the blockade near Wilmington, North Carolina, and it ran aground. The captain told her that they just had to wait for the tide to change. She was not willing to be captured again, insisted that he put her out in a rowboat with several men who were also on the stuck ship, the Condor. And the rowboat capsized. The men made it to shore. However, she did not. She was (unclear) with full military honors by the Confederacy in Wilmington, North Carolina.

AT: Now, correct me if I'm wrong, but my understanding is that the reason that she didn't make it to shore was that she was weighed down by a bunch of gold. Is that correct or is that legend?

EL: So she did have a diplomatic pouch and she had the royalties from the sale of her book, which she had published in London while she was there. Dr. Chris Fonvielle, who is a Wilmington, North Carolina-based historian, calculated what the weight of the gold would have been. It's about six pounds, which is not enough that I think it would have been an insurmountable obstacle if she were a strong swimmer. I don't think she was. Very few women of her social class had any exposure to learning how to swim. And certainly the clothing of the 1860s would not have helped. There are also very strong currents. Even today in that area, there are signs warning of the danger to swimmers. So the gold is a good story. It might have been a factor. I don't think it was the sole cause of her death.

AT: Now, I want to come back to something that you said earlier about how she assumed that her connections would get her special privileges, right? Basically get her out of accountability, if you will. I feel like I need to point out that before she was imprisoned in the actual prison, she was under house arrest. And again, obviously correct me if this is just embellishment, but my understanding is that even when she was under house arrest in her own home, she was still getting intelligence in and out to the point that, I believe I read that it was referred to as Fort Greenhow because the house arrest was so ineffective.

EL: So she was under house arrest for the first several months. And by her own admission, she was still in contact with members of her ring. I will say, though, that the number of them who were arrested on or about the

same date that she was was pretty substantial. So while they didn't manage to net everyone, this must have been a fairly serious blow to the organization. We do know, too, that it was fairly strict. There were Pinkerton detectives. There were U.S. regulars as well who were guarding the house. And she seems to have delighted in finding ways to outsmart all of them. I think the term Fort Greenhow comes from the fact that other women were incarcerated there as well. This came from newspaper coverage at the time. Many of the prominent Southern women who were arrested in August or early September of 1861 were brought there. It was serving as sort of a de facto women's prison for a time.

AT: And you've mentioned her daughter. I'm curious because I feel like I never hear any mention of her husband. So was she widowed and doing all of this as a single mother?

EL: Yes. The daughter that was imprisoned with her was her youngest child, named Rose after herself. And her husband, Robert, who had worked for the State Department, died in 1854. So she had been a widow for quite some time. Her older children, several of them had passed away. The eldest was married by this point. Her next eldest daughter was living with the oldest daughter. So only the youngest child was at home. And I think being a widow, being a well-placed and relatively wealthy widow in that society gave her more freedom than she might have had if she were married.

AT: Now, I have a separate episode with Grace Beattie about wicked women, which is her area of interest, shall we say. And one of the things that we talked about is how biases shape narratives about women. And often those are misleading, right? This woman was not nearly as bad as people say she was. But I feel like when it comes to someone who is pro-slavery, you kind of have to say “no, that person does sound awful.” I don't think I would want to hang out with her. I feel like she'd be a nightmare on Twitter. But I also feel like it is important to talk about the women that we consider history's villains and not reduce them to like this one-dimensional thing.

Listen to Grace Beattie on Wicked Women or read the transcript.

EL: I think Rose Greenhow was in her time and still is today a tremendously polarizing figure. Certainly there are people who will exaggerate the nefariousness and the deviousness of this woman. And Alan Pinkerton was one of the first people to do that in his memoir. But she was considered by the South to be, at the time of her death, a martyr and a heroine as well. And I will say for me in studying her, what I have found is that so much for her was about politics. She did not come from a large plantation-owning family. She was a political creature through and living in Washington. Her connection with the South, I think was as much political as it was anything else, political and cultural. And it's very hard for us to understand from our perspective how anyone in that time period would have condoned slavery. But it was all wrapped up in the culture that she identified with. And certainly for me, perhaps the redeeming traits of Rose Greenhow, if we can call them that, are that she was incredibly intelligent, very determined, and perfectly willing to manipulate society to achieve her goals.

AT: I feel like I need to point out, because you mentioned, Alan Pinkerton is one of the earliest sources of how people view her in a certain way. And from what I know of him, he was a huge self-promoter and not necessarily the most reliable narrator. If he could make himself look good by making her look bad and being like, “oh, yes, look at this horrible person that I helped take down. And aren't I so great?” I feel like that is something he would have done. I haven't studied him, but from what I know of him, that feels like that would be consistent with his vibe.

EL: Oh, very much so. And Pinkerton also portrays her as a seductress. This was a widow in her 40s with grown children. So perhaps there was a degree of that going on, but I think he overplayed that and underplayed her social and political connections, because that was what made her even more dangerous.

AT: Well, I think it also fits a certain type of gender narrative, that the woman's power comes from being a seductress rather than a strategist.

EL: Yes, definitely. And this was not Rose operating in isolation either. She had a whole network of agents, both male and female, from various social strata, various ages, who were all working with her to do this.

AT: Now, speaking of perhaps not the most reliable narrators of their own stories, we do have Greenhow's prison diary, which you have annotated a version of, and that is available to order online if anybody wants to read it. So how accurate would you say her own version of events is?

EL: Well, the book that I annotated is the memoir that she published in Britain when she was there on her diplomatic mission. The nucleus of it is the prison diary, but she certainly did a great deal of editing and expanding beyond that. First of all, it's clearly a work of propaganda. This was something that was intended to aid the Southern cause in Europe. And yet, when we compare her account of her hearing, written, as far as we can tell entirely from her own recollection of the event, with the official transcript of the hearing, it is very, very accurate. So that part, at least, we have corroborating outside sources that she wasn't embellishing.

AT: If I recall correctly, I believe that she didn't have a public trial, again, this could be apocryphal, but they didn't want to have a public trial because they were afraid of what she might say, not just in terms of secrets, but in terms of embarrassing important men. Is that correct?

EL: Yes. Yes. She wrote a great deal about that in her memoir and said essentially that she would have welcomed a public trial. She would have, as she put it, reserved the right to defend herself, and there would have been rich revelations. But that the sources that she would reveal under those circumstances were very high-placed, and that there was an awareness that she likely would do that. And it was an attempt to shield those people, both military officers and politicians, from that exposure that would have resulted through a public trial. One of the things I find fascinating about that aspect, which has not been particularly emphasized by biographers, is that she tried to hire Edwin Stanton to be her attorney just before he was appointed to Lincoln's cabinet, and he turned her down.

AT: Bold. Whatever else you want to say about her, I feel like you have to acknowledge how bold she was.

EL: Absolutely. And I think a lot of that came from having to make her way in society, largely through the power of her own mind and her own connections. Because as far as we know, she had no formal education. And reading her writing, that is absolutely shocking because of the number of historical and political and literary references she made. This is a highly intelligent, very well-read woman who was essentially self-made, learned how to navigate the world of Washington, D.C. politics, with astonishing skill, as far as we can tell, on her own.

AT: Well, that's the thing. When I've read her story, because I haven't gone deeply into her background, it's mostly her activities during the war, obviously. But I just assumed that she was born into a socialite-type family. But you mentioned that not only is she staying with, I believe you said an aunt growing up. But that aunt was boarding important people. She wasn't, presumably, super wealthy in her own right. So I had this vision of what I assumed to be her background, but then what you've said so far doesn't mesh with the privilege I assumed that she grew up with.

EL: Looking at the documents surrounding her father's death, what seems to be the case is that they were what we might describe as middle-class or maybe upper-middle-class farmers in Maryland. But that the death of her father, at a relatively young age and very unexpectedly, left the family essentially destitute. That's why

the daughters were shuffled off to other relatives. The aunt and uncle in Washington were connected with prominent people, but certainly not at the same social class as the politicians who boarded with them. John C. Calhoun was one of the people that we know stayed at, it was called Hill's Boardinghouse. But they would not have been his social equals. What is fascinating, though, is that every one of the daughters who was sent to Washington made what we would consider a social-climbing marriage. They all married very well-connected, well-established families. Her sister Ellen married the nephew of James Madison. And then Rose's niece, Ellen's daughter, married Stephen Douglas. (AT: Wow.) So one of the political contenders in the election of 1860 was the husband of Rose's niece.

AT: You've referred to the daughters. How many sisters did she have? And were there no brothers?

EL: There were no brothers. There were five daughters altogether. She was in the middle. The eldest two, the eldest one was sent to Washington on her own. Then Rose and the next eldest sister, Ellen, went together after the eldest sister had made what they would have probably termed an advantageous match at the time. And then the younger two sisters, we know that they were in Washington at some point. We don't know that they lived at Hill's Boardinghouse for any length of time. That's a little bit unclear. But it was a family of five girls, all relatively close in age. And from what we can tell in the record, all relatively physically attractive, which may have been part of the social currency that allowed them to make these connections in Washington.

AT: Do her sisters connect to what she was doing during the war? Either were they also doing things or did her actions impact their social standing, especially if they're married to like political men? What happened there?

EL: So her eldest sister, Susan, was married to a man who had been a minor diplomat in the Buchanan administration. And they were very pro Southern. In fact, Susan came to visit Rose in prison, was very possibly trying to help her, may have been carrying messages. Susan was at least advocating for Rose, trying to improve her conditions in the prison, trying to get her released, and possibly also in connection with the remaining members of the espionage ring. Now, Ellen was a very different situation. Ellen's son was serving in the Union Army. Her entire family, that branch of it, was very pro-Union. And that includes Adele Cutts Douglas, Ellen's daughter, who by this point was the widow of Stephen Douglas. Now, Adele also came to visit Rose in prison. She had a whole stream of very influential people stopping by that prison.

AT: This would be a very different version of *Little Women*. (laughter) That's actually something that's come up before, is we tend to tell women's stories in isolation, especially if they're doing something that would not have been traditionally "a woman's role." And there's always more women there, if you dig a little bit.

EL: Another very important woman in Rose's story, who probably was, in many ways, a role model to her, was Dolly Madison. Because she knew her. Ellen had married into that family. Dolly Madison was in Washington at the time when Rose was there, as an elderly woman. She had first-hand exposure to her. And Dolly Madison was the same sort of highly intelligent and socially manipulative woman that Rose was.

AT: I find the word manipulative really fascinating because, particularly towards women, it's so often presented as this negative trait. And I feel like people don't want to acknowledge that pretty much all social interactions are manipulation on some level. (EL: Yeah.) And not saying what you actually want to say to your boss is a form of manipulation. But when women do it, particularly in situations where they might be doing this to survive, they might be doing this because so-called soft power is the only type of power women were allowed to have, oh, God forbid.

EL: And she was. She wasn't just throwing parties. I think sometimes that's the impression that we're given of

her. She was just entertaining these politicians and they happened to say things in her hearing. She was a political force. Even in the election of 1860, she is getting telegrams from the Democratic Convention as it's going on, from high-ranking male politicians telling her what's going on.

AT: I think that comes back to that question of, it can't be deliberate strategy when we tell this story through a sexist lens. It has to be, “oh, she just kind of lucked into people doing things that they shouldn't have because she threw a party.” And that's not it. It's not giving her the credit she deserves.

EL: Yes. And she very clearly says in her memoir that she did this deliberately. She set out to extract information from politicians, from military leaders, and that she was very successful in doing it.

AT: Now, you also do live interpretation as Greenhow. So for anyone who's not familiar, this is when someone, you know, puts on the clothes and kind of inhabits the persona of sometimes an actual historical person. Other times it might be a fictional character that they've created. So if you've ever been to someplace like Colonial Williamsburg, for example, a lot of people are doing live interpretation there. So people can interact with you, the interpreter, as that character/person. And so both, inhabiting her, and also, as mentioned, annotating her memoir, both of those things involve getting pretty deep into someone's story. So how does that work for you? What is your process?

EL: I have been studying her for over 20 years at this point. And she's not the only woman I play either. In fact, I'm doing Margaret Fuller later this month in North Carolina, and she's fascinating too. With any of these portrayals, I begin with their words. If they wrote a memoir, an autobiography, their correspondence, trying to find their voice. And then I look at accounts from people who knew them, how they described the way in which they spoke, the way in which they moved. And the combination of those things allows me to, as an actor would do, build the character. But it's all from primary source material. And with Rose, her voice is so distinctive and so strong in her writing that it really was not a terribly difficult thing to do.
The book arose out of my research for the portrayal. I had recorded an audiobook with the O'Neal Genealogy Society reading her memoir. And as I was going through doing that, there were so many things that I was looking up. What does she mean by this? Who is this person? She was a consummate name dropper. And she very rarely gave much context about these people. She just assumed that her readers would know. But to a modern audience, many of these names are not familiar anymore. And I was just astonished time and time again, as I was doing this research, in what she was really telling us. The connections she was describing, the way in which she moved through society, and the way in which she influenced things deliberately and directly. And I realized that it was all there in the book. But it required context for the modern reader to really grasp what she was saying. So the book came from my own personal research for the portrayal.

AT: How did you decide what's important to include versus what maybe could be left out? Because I know whenever I write books, I always have too much. And I always end up having to cut things because otherwise it would be an encyclopedia.

EL: Well, there are over 600 footnotes. So I tried to be relatively thorough, I think. Anything that, as I was reading it, I thought, what does she mean by this? Who is this person? What is this reference? And then, once I had done that, I had several friends, fellow scholars whom I trust, who know the period very well, read the book and tell me if there were things they thought were unnecessary or if there are things they thought required further explanation. And also, a few historians who are not specialists in the Civil War. Because there are some things that, to Civil War historians, it may be very obvious, to the general reader might not be so apparent. Rose didn't spell terribly well. And her British editors didn't always know who she meant. So part of what I had to do was track down the identities behind some of these misspells as well.

AT: Well, you said she wasn't formally educated, so it makes sense that her spelling wouldn't be the best. (EL: Yes.) So coming back to the live interpretation, I would imagine that it is potentially more difficult doing this with someone who was, shall we say, on the wrong side of history. I would imagine that that that's a different experience if people are viewing you as embodying someone that could reasonably be considered a villain, as opposed to someone that they would consider a hero.

EL: It depends on the situation in which I'm presenting the portrayal. A lot of what I do is for academic institutions or for Civil War roundtables, where scholars are interested in hearing perspectives from both sides of the war. And that there is an understanding that, yes, that was the side on which she was on, and they don't necessarily feel that that was the right decision. But they want to understand her and the choices she made and the impact she had, because it was considerable. And what drives a person in her position, a person of her social standing, to risk everything and ultimately die for this? She could have just stayed in her house in Washington and had nice little parties with Seward and Lincoln and the gang. And she didn't choose to do that.

AT: It is just kind of fascinating that she identified so strongly with the South when she was from Maryland, largely grew up and lived basically her whole life almost in DC.

EL: Yes. I think much of that was the influence of John Calhoun. She writes a great deal in her book about the connection she had with him. Calhoun had daughters who were very well-educated, who were about her age. I think he was someone who believed in the intellectual capacity of women in a time period when that was not common. And he saw that in Rose. He saw this interest in politics in her when she was probably still a teenager because that's when they met. And so she even says this, her perspective on politics was shaped through her association with Calhoun.

AT: Now I have a separate episode with DeAnne Blanton on women in the U.S. Civil War more broadly, as well as one with Madeleine Thompson about Clara Barton. So I've covered on the podcast before how there were so many incredible women doing things during this period. And even in my book that I mentioned Greenhow is in, I pair her story with that of Elizabeth Van Lew, who was a spy mistress on the Union side. So a question that I'm always curious about, especially when, as you have, someone has been studying a particular person for literally decades. Why her? What is it about her that made you want to focus so much of your time and energy on her story specifically?

EL: You're right. There are lots of very interesting women during the Civil War period. And I think that the societal upheaval of the time allowed women to step into roles that they would not necessarily have in peacetime. That was definitely the case with Rose. And many of these women, it's sort of a one-off thing. They provided some information. They did one thing that really mattered. For me, the difference with Rose is that it was the entire period of the war until her death. And she had been a powerful and influential woman even before that. This was someone who, in her time, was regarded as an exceptional woman, and also in choosing to side with the South, a direct threat to the highest levels of the US government. I work for the government. We have to do training about recognizing insider threats. And every time I do it, when I look at insider threats, I think, “well, this fits Rose. This is pretty much her profile.” In her book, she mentions William Henry Seward more frequently than she does Lincoln. The two of them have been friends for years. And I think Seward probably could have used that warning. But because of the long-established friendship, he trusted her. When he really probably shouldn't have.

AT: From a big-picture perspective, you mentioned the Battle of Bull Run/Manassas, which for anyone who's not familiar,

Listen to DeAnne Blanton on women in the US Civil War or read the transcript.
Listen to Madeleine Thompson on Clara Barton or read the transcript.

basically the North and South named battles differently. That's why there's two names. But other than that, what is the impact that you would say she had on the Civil War and US history more broadly?

EL: I had someone once at a presentation say to me, as Rose, that all of the casualties of the Civil War were a direct result of her actions, which is perhaps a bit of an exaggeration. But certainly if the South had not been victorious at that major battle, there would have been far fewer casualties in the war. So I can understand to a certain extent this person's perspective. This was something that directly led to the scale and the scope of the war. She also, in her book, talks about providing information to Richmond about a very secretive Union naval expedition. This was a situation where even the captains of the ships did not open and read their orders until they were onboard ship and sailing. And yet somehow the government in Richmond knew exactly what was going to happen. And Rose said that that was her doing, and it was her doing while she was under house arrest. Now, the weather ultimately played a bigger role in that than any sort of foreknowledge by the South. But that does show us that she was still an active espionage agent during that period.
And I think we cannot underestimate either what her position in prison during that period did to public perception. There is a very famous Matthew Brady photograph of Rose and her daughter in prison with the bars of the prison behind them. It was widely reprinted and sold and circulated. And this was a shocking image to many people, because here was a clearly very well-dressed woman, a very well-dressed child, in mourning, indicating that they had suffered a recent loss. And they're in prison. There was a perception in many circles that genteel upper-class women would not be involved in these sorts of things. And here was visual proof that things had drastically changed in society as a result of the war. And whatever Rose did, her daughter, at eight years of age, should not have been in prison. A child does not belong under those circumstances. And she states very clearly in her memoir that she was never given any alternative. That the child was to be treated as a prisoner throughout the course of that imprisonment, both in house arrest and then at the Old Capitol.

AT: Do you think that that was true, or do you think that was propaganda? Because she had plenty of relatives that she could have sent the child to stay with. And I have to assume that the child herself wouldn't have been seen as a threat. So it seems like requiring this child to also be imprisoned doesn't make a lot of strategic sense for anybody else to be insisting on, except if it's her in a bid for sympathy.

EL: There is nothing in the official record about sending the child away. The child is listed under house arrest. The child is listed at the Old Capitol. And she was not the only child there. There was a little boy whose mother had been arrested who was also in the Old Capitol prison. So this was not a Rose-only situation. I would think, too, with Adele Cutts Douglas coming to visit, with Rose's eldest sister coming to the prison, if the prison officials, the superintendent of the Old Capitol in particular, had felt that having the child in the prison was not something desirable, they could very easily have sent her away with or without Rose's permission. “Here, you're a relative. Take her. We don't want her here.” That never happened.

AT: I just feel like so much of this comes down to not just that she is strategic, but also that they keep making stupid decisions from a strategic standpoint. (laughter)

EL: One of the things that absolutely baffled me is that they let her keep her pistol. She didn't have any ammunition, but they let her keep it. In prison.

AT: What?!? That's so dumb. It's so dumb. There's also a story that someone smuggled in a Confederate flag that she flew from her prison window.

EL: So what she talks about is making a flag during the period of her arrest. She was allowed to keep her sewing machine when she was under house arrest. So the version of the story that comes most directly from

her is that this was something she created with her own hands.

AT: And she hung it out the window of her prison cell?

EL: She never claims that she did that. (AT: OK.) What she says is that she wore it under her shoulders when she was on the flag of truce boat, being sent to Richmond. It was under her shawl, wrapped around her shoulders. And that she later went to Charleston and presented the flag that she had made during her imprisonment to General Beauregard as a gift. But she does also say that she was determined to be defiant in prison. So she stated that they might imprison her body, but they could not break her spirit. And so she set out deliberately to be provocative and troublesome as a prisoner.

AT: And so I feel like there's two main purposes that she served. First being the intelligence-gathering strategist, but then also this propaganda machine in terms of the photograph that you were talking about and the impact that that would have had on public sentiment, writing her own memoir, going to Europe and promoting the cause across the ocean. So which of these do you think was more important to her, but also more important to the Confederate cause?

EL: Well, I think the greatest impact came from the early espionage work. But from what she wrote, I think she felt that her diplomatic work had the potential to be far more significant. And while ultimately, neither Britain nor France recognized the Confederacy, during the period she was there, there was a lot of pro-Southern sentiment, particularly in the upper classes in both of those countries. One of the most remarkable things in the diary that she kept in Europe is her account of her private audience with Napoleon III. The fact that she even got in the door there is pretty extraordinary.

AT: It is fascinating that she was so well received because you can kind of understand how she would have worked her way up in D.C. society, having lived there for so long and having made these connections over time. So was it just her reputation combined with her personality and her skill at social manipulation that gained her entry?

EL: I think she was very socially savvy. She knew how to present herself in these high-ranking circles in a way that not only was acceptable, but was really quite fascinating to many of the people she met. And what she did in Europe was to present herself as this woman who had endured such a terrible imprisonment at the hands of these despots in Washington. And there were many people who were very sympathetic to her. She must have been tremendously magnetic as a person.

AT: Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast. And remember, well-behaved women rarely make history.