



Mary Chesnut's Civil War

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An authorized account of the Civil War, for which editor C. Vann Woodward won the 1982 Pulitzer Prize for History, drawn from the diaries of a Southern aristocrat, records the disintegration and final destruction of the Confederacy.

Mary Chesnut's Civil War Details

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From Reader Review Mary Chesnut's Civil War for online ebook

Bev says

Much more interesting to read what someone thought at the time than what historians think today.

Eric says

This monster diary might end up like Isherwood's, as something I nibble at before bed when I don't feel like reading anything else, or it might be an absorbing joy I plow through in a few weeks. All signs point to the latter. Skimming Chesnut, I feel the era opening up, as when Catton, in another prospective browse (of *Mr. Lincoln's Army*), discusses the variety of coughs and throat-clearings with which marching Union troops would signal the wayside apparition of pretty farm girls to the rest of the column. Chesnut's a heavyweight. A fierce Confederate partisan and planter's wife whose identity as a writer and intellectual transcends, makes mysteriously prismatic, those social identities. "You see, Mrs. Stowe did not hit the sorest spot. She makes Legree a bachelor." "God forgive us, but ours is a monstrous system and wrong and an iniquity. Perhaps the rest of the world is as bad—this only I see. Like the patriarchs of old our men live all in one house with their wives and their concubines, and the mulattoes one sees in every family exactly resemble the white children—and every lady tells you who is the father of all the mulatto children in everybody's household, but those in her own she seems to think drop from the clouds, or pretends so to think."

James says

I'll be honest, this was a bit of a slog. Mary Chesnut was the wife of a relatively high-ranking official in the Confederacy from South Carolina. She provides some really interesting perspectives on the war, government, slavery, and the role of women in her society. The most interesting parts of the book as a story occur at the beginning, when Fort Sumter is under attack and no one's sure what's going to happen, and toward the end, when she was forced to flee from her house because of Sherman's army. However, in between there's a lot of details of her social circle and calendar that I didn't find all that interesting. In particular there is a dizzying array of names and nicknames and while I got used to some of them it's not always easy to discern who she means. While the editor does a good job of annotating most of the names the first time and providing an index, there are just a lot of people to keep track of.

The textual history of the book is rather interesting. While it's presented as a diary, the editor makes it clear that the author rewrote it at least twice and apparently never settled on an adequate format for publication before she died. The edition that is presented was re-written in the 1880s. The 1905 published by a family friend was apparently substantially abridged. In contrast, this is a mostly complete edition of her final version. The editor selects passages from the earlier rewriting where he thinks they have something interesting to contribute. In most cases it seems like the earlier passages he chooses express more blunt and/or personal opinions of the events being reported.

Jane Thompson says

Very interesting reading. Mary Chesnut knew everyone who was anyone and knew all the inside stories. It could get somewhat repetitious as she visited friends and exchanged gossip. Her views on slavery were interesting, as she proclaimed herself to be antislavery, but her feelings were hurt if her slaves didn't stay completely loyal to her during the war, and she admitted she didn't like to do the work around the house and was glad she didn't have to.

Very good for the flavor of the war years.

Kara Thorpe says

I won't say how long it took me to finish this, but in the end it was worth it. Taking it with a healthy grain of salt (as I do all autobiographies), it portrays a view of life during the Civil War and the hardships faced by those left at home. It is an excellent, if long, historical text that will give you more than just dry facts and boring recitations. You get to see how war affected day-to-day living.

Catherine says

C. Vann Woodward really deserved his Pulitzer

for this masterful weaving together of Chesnut's many different versions of this diary.

It was a hard read, but rewarding, offering in its sheer volume of daily detail a better feel for life behind the lines than many a more polished and abbreviated narrative.

Anne says

I finally gave up on this, not because it isn't interesting, but because the choppiness drove me crazy. It would be a wonderful book for historical research but I just couldn't flow with the constant footnotes and interjections. That's a problem with me and reason for reading it, not with the researchers who did a masterful job in putting pieces of diaries together.

Phil Mullen says

A friend read this in the 80's, when it won a Pulitzer, but I began to want to read it when the 150th anniversary of the National Slaughterhouse caught my attention.

I found I liked Mary Chesnut quite a lot, even when she was saying something with which, as a matter of principle, I disagree. She was honest, apparently to a greater extent than most privileged slaveowners were able to be honest.

This struck me as a slaveowner's plausible state of mind:

<< November 28, 1863

Those old gray-haired darkies & their automatic noiseless perfection of training -- one does miss that sort of thing. Your own servants think for you, they know your ways & your wants; they save you all responsibility, even in matters of your own ease & well-doing. Eben the butler at Mulberry [her father-in-law's country house, he one of S. Carolina's wealthiest planters] would be miserable & feel himself a ridiculous failure, were I ever forced to ask him for anything. >> (page 488)

By March 5, 1865 things were falling apart for the Confederacy, & Mary was sharp in her judgments:

<< That lowering black future hangs there -- all the same. The end of the war brings no hope of peace or security to us. ... Yarn is our circulating medium. It is the current coin of the realm. At a factory here, Mrs. Glover traded off a negro woman for yarn. The woman wanted to go there as a factory hand, so it suited all round. I held up my hands! Mrs. Munro said: "Mrs. Glover knows she will be free in a few days. Besides, that's nothing. Yesterday a negro man was sold for a keg of nails." ... [The great slaveowners] will have no negroes now to lord it over. They can swell & peacock about & tyrannize now over only a small parcel of women & children -- those only who are their very own family. >> (page 747)

April 23, 1865: << And these negroes -- unchanged. The shining black mask they wear does not show a ripple of change -- sphinxes. Ellen [her slave] has had my diamonds to keep for a week or so. When the danger was over she handed them back to me, with as little apparent interest in the matter as if they were garden peas. >> (p. 794)

Mary Chesnut lived from 1823 to 1886, & wrote & re-wrote versions of her notes, hoping to relieve what had become fairly severe poverty. She read & spoke French fluently, & also read German.

I can't help but like her, & her first-person account of the Civil War (*her* Civil War, with all her complex feelings as it wound through its terrible years) is, despite its imperfect form, fascinating. It will (I hope!) keep me from being quite so doctrinal as I judge women & men who made do with the lives they (like everyone) had to endure.

Tom Johnson says

I am a painfully slow reader. I read words like I chew meat - with care. This book is a slow, enigmatic and tedious read. A real slog over forty miles of bad road. That is not to say the book was a worthless read. On the contrary, our man C. Vann Woodward did yeoman's work in editing the thousands of pages of handwritten manuscripts, diaries, journals, and rewrites for possible publication, etc., etc... Mary offers her first hand observations of the Civil War - from within the milieu of the chosen few. For our Mary was of the crème de la crème of Southern Society. That those observations include rank rumor and the popular apocryphal stories of the day just adds a bit of flavoring. The most accurate reporting involved the endless weddings and banal courtships of plantation white folk. People who had for far too long lived as though they were all that mattered in creation. Insular in their favored status, well read, well mannered to each other, aloof, pious, etc., etc. (Our Mary is addicted to the etc., etc., yada, yada of life, read the book and you shall see) Read this book after reading, "The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism by Edward E. Baptist" lest you be taken in by our Mary's endless kvetching about the lazy and dirty slaves. I should give the book a 3 for it does have historical value in fleshing out a world that crashed and burned at the end of the Civil War. It all came back, of course. Jim Crow saw to that. And here we are

today with a brand-new, throwback of a white supremacist president. I chose this book as the only book I could possibly read given the catastrophic results of the 2016 pestilential election. The poor southern ladies at home alone - with their menfolk gone to war - the ladies left to fear the Yankees in their front and the Negroes in their rear. Stressful for them, I have no doubt of that. My two-star rating reflects my poor attitude, for to my utter amazement 63,000,000 of my fellow citizens thought that a carny-barker, flim-flam of a "business-man" would make a perfectly fine president. The decision the South made in attacking Fort Sumter was almost as intelligent. Given 836 pages of text there were some serious moments such as the murder of Betsy Witherspoon. But what of all those white on white murders? Surely those murders were as heinous? The South was a patriarchy and that chafed the sensibilities of MBC. I should imagine many a good southern wife was beaten to death by her God-ordained master, her husband. 90% Of the footnotes were of no interest, though on page 232: "In 1844, the governor of Mass. sent Samuel Hoar, a former congressman, to Charleston to challenge the constitutionality of state laws requiring black sailors on ships in S.C. ports to be imprisoned and, if they were unable to pay their jail fees, to be sold into slavery." Nasty bit of history, that. Mary's daily entries are often so cryptic that her writing becomes unintelligible. But I paid it no mind and sailed on through her turgid seas. On several occasions she related the common southern refrain, "We will never give it up - no never!", and so they haven't. A couple choice quotes from the book, "no plummet can sound the depths" and "life seems a senseless repetition of the same blunders." These are from the last chapters of the book and are exactly as they sound.

Colleen Browne says

This book is rather difficult to get into in the first few hundred pages. While one is immediately taken with the breadth of Mary Chesnut's intelligence and wit, the war has not started in earnest so we are treated to a constant diet on the social life of the Southern aristocracy. It is interesting from a social history perspective but I bought the book for what I expected to be a commentary on the issues and the ongoing battles. That is not the focus of this book. That said, there is much to learn here. What is also clear from the beginning is the enormous dedication C. Vann Woodward had to his project.

My introduction to Woodward's work came way back in the late 70's when as an undergraduate in history I was assigned *The Burden of Southern History*. Since that time, my respect for his work has only grown. He was, in my mind, a giant in the study of the history of the South and richly deserved the Pulitzer he was awarded for editing this book.

Mary Chesnut has a perspective on her world that most women of the time would not have had. She was well educated and exceedingly well read. She had social position and a husband whose position in the Davis government gave her access to people and information unavailable to most mortals. Her husband, J.C., had resigned his seat in the U.S. Congress before secession. He was never a fire eater but supported Southern independence. It is difficult not to like and admire Mary. If she had been a man it seems likely that she would have achieved more than her husband who she seemed to find a bit timid when it came to self promotion. At one point, when pondering her husband's refusal to put himself forward to be an envoy to France, she exclaimed "I would love to go to France!" I believe in a more perfect world she would have been the envoy to France.

The book makes clear the toll the war took on the society of this class of Southerners. It is also clear how prevalent death was even outside of war. Life seemed to happen faster, people engaged and married more quickly, children came quickly (and women often died as a result). Life for Mary Chesnut, until she began moving around seemed like a constant party. The extravagant feasts enjoyed by those in her social class

reveal a group of people enjoying themselves so much that they seem blind to the fact that they are doing it on the backs of a people who have been given no choice but to provide it for them.

Mrs. Chesnut made a great many revisions to her work and while that is common when writing any book, my common sense kept asking me why. She claimed to have always hated slavery (the slaves were her husbands) and yet it is she who seems to profit by their labor most. They dressed and undressed her, styled her hair, prepared her meals, cleaned her house, etc., etc.... She claims to have taught "her negroes" to read but no where in the book does she make mention of ever having done it on a particular day. Maybe she did teach them but are we to assume that they are all literate so she no longer does it? It is a bit suspicious to me. The reader is regularly reminded of how good she and her husband are to their "negroes". She relates a story of how, when traveling home in his carriage one day, her husband comes upon a black woman crying on the side of the road, beaten to a pulp on the verge of giving birth. He stopped and asked if he could do anything for her to which she replies: No my mistress has beat me again. Go ahead on your way. (paraphrased) And so he did. It struck me as strange that he would even need to ask the question. Would most people not have, if not carried her to safety or at least gotten someone else to do it?

Overall, I would highly recommend this book to any historian, teacher, or anyone with an interest in the CW or American history generally. I could not help but admire and like Mary. Given her circumstances, she handled herself admirably, as far as the reader could tell and tells a story that as far as I am aware, is unavailable elsewhere. This is a book I would have loved to have read in a group and discussed. There is so much in it that is rich and interesting; there are so many layers of complexity to this fascinating woman! I am sorry that I didn't read it a long time ago.

El says

I've mentioned before having some conflicting issues with reading posthumously published diaries or journals, because I always get stuck on the point that the deceased may not have meant for their words to see the light of day... or, for that matter, the lights of many days. However, in this instance, Mary Chesnut knew exactly what she was doing.

She started the diary in 1861 and used it for the following four years, keeping abreast of the news of the day, specifically the beginning, the middle, and the end of the American Civil War. Twenty years later she revised it, and as she was childless, passed the diary on to a close friend, urging her to have it published after she died. She *wanted* the world to read her thoughts. Luckily her friend listened, or else we wouldn't have this perspective from a Confederate woman.

Married to a politician, Mary was privy to details about the war that not everyone (especially not every woman) at the time knew. She wrote about these encounters in extensive detail, as well as her opinions on the war, slavery, and society. She was also an avid reader, and included thoughts on the books she was reading - she was, for example, a huge fan of Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, and wrote about her first impression upon reading it, the paper it was written on, why she read it and loved it.

While I might not have agreed with all of her beliefs, occasionally there'd be a witty passage that would surprise me for feeling so modern. And then other times I'd be equally surprised for just how... dated her beliefs were.

Reading Mrs. Stowe or Redpath's *John Brown*, one feels utterly confounded at the atrocity of African slavery. We look upon the miserable black race as crushed to earth, habitually knocked

down, as John Brown says, 'by an iron shovel or anything that comes handy.' At home we see them, the idlest, laziest, fattest, most comfortably contented peasantry that ever cumbered the earth and we forget there is any wrong in slavery at all.

I daresay the truth lies between the two extremes. - (p428)

Christian soldier, &c&c. There cannot be a Christian soldier. Kill or be killed, that is their trade, or they are a failure. Stonewall was a fanatic. The exact character we wanted was willing to raise the 'black flag'. He knew: to achieve our liberty, to win our battles, men must die. The religion of mercy, love your neighbor before yourself, prefer [WORD OMITTED?] in every act - why, that eliminates war and great captains. - (p501-02)

One woman so pretty, I had seen her before at her home in the South. They say her husband beats her. Here we said, let us look at a creature who stays with a man after a beating. - (p600)

That fearful hospital haunts me all day - worse at night. So much suffering, loathsome wounds, distortion, stumps of limbs exhibited to all and not half cured. - (p641)

Boozer, who is always on exhibition - walking, riding, driving - wherever a woman's face can go, there is Boozer. She is a beauty - that none can deny. They say she is a good girl. Then why does she not marry some decent man, among the shoals who follow her, and be off, out of this tangle while she has a shred of reputation left. - (p695)

Mrs. Johnston said she would never own slaves.

'I might say the same thing. I never would. Mr. Chesnut does, but he hates all slavery, especially African slavery.'

'What do you mean by African?'

'To distinguish that form from the inevitable slavery of the world. All married women, all children, and girls who live on in their father's houses are all slaves.' - (p729)

It doesn't really matter which side of the war you believe in, this is a fantastic account of an important period in American history, and is highly recommended. There are moments that drag when it seems Mary is busy name-dropping or carrying on about things I personally find less than interesting, but still a rare record from an even rarer perspective. It's easy to forget that women had much of a role in the late 19th century since most of the history books involve men, or were written by men. But the women were there, and some of them even wrote about it. Some of them (gasp) even had thoughts of their own. Mary Chesnut is a great example of that.

Margaret Harris says

In the first paragraph of the Second Epilogue of *War and Peace*, Leo Tolstoy writes:

History is the life of nations and humanity. To seize and put into words, to describe directly the life of humanity or even of a single nation, appears impossible.

When his novel was published in Russia in 1869, Tolstoy did not know that Mary Chestnut of South Carolina had come exquisitely close to achieving just such an "impossible direct description" in the personal journal she had kept between 1861 and 1865. Her compelling creation of story was accomplished by recording dialogue, by which I mean quoting from conversations she had with her friends, family, and servants, all enhanced by her personal commentary, often with analogies from the books she voraciously read. By such means, she filled her pages with a powerful story of daily life in the Southern states during the American Civil War.

Because her husband was a political aid to Jefferson Davis, later an appointed military officer, Mrs. Chestnut observed the experience as an ultimate insider. She moved with him between hotel rooms and boarding houses in Montgomery, Alabama; Charleston, Camden, and Columbia, South Carolina; Richmond, Virginia; several smaller western North Carolina towns; and, when the formal military operations were over, back over roads through burned destruction to Camden and the partially destroyed Chestnut plantation of Mulberry.

Mrs. Chestnut was a listener. She simply wrote down what other people said. And what she herself said—or thought, without saying aloud. She was witness to the political disunion and the making of war. That appears to be the reason for her journal. She was studying the story as it unfolded, unable to see the end until it occurred. Was she searching for reasoning in the chatter among her friends? The gossip concerned flirtations and romances of the young. There were weddings to attend as well as funerals. A social whirl filled the civilian world, even after brides' dresses had to be fashioned from homespun because finer fabrics could not be found at any price, and at any rate Confederate money ceased to be accepted as currency.

Her seeming attempt at honesty lends the quality to her writing. She does not neglect reporting a few murders of plantation owners by their slaves, and she fears what the future will bring for all of the people of the South. From the earliest pages Mrs. Chestnut acknowledges her recognition that the custom of slavery is wrong and is inevitably ending, despite her resentment of "those Yankees bullying the South." A reader may be surprised to note how much animosity was apparently felt by many South Carolina aristocrats against Jefferson Davis and the other political civilians who run the war from a safe haven as a whole generation of young men are sent to the physical battles to die of either horrific wounds or terrible infectious diseases. Civilians criticize the generals, and generals criticize each other.

Emotions stay raw throughout as they evolve from dismay, anger, indignation, misgivings, skepticism and uneasiness to confusion, fear, sorrow, despair, regret, agony, heartache and sadness. In the end, the poignancy and power of this long diary is that Mary Chestnut wrote, probably unwittingly, a version of universal truth about human fallibility.

Elizabeth Jennings says

As a native of South Carolina, I have had this on my "to read" list for several years. It was both painful to

read and fascinating because it offers such an intimate look into the complex heritage of my home state.

For much of it, I was reminded of "The Masque of the Red Death" as this elite group of Confederate leadership focused on dinner parties with champagne, ice cream and roses, while horrific battles were taking place. Chesnut's snobbish tendencies were also hard to take at times--worst among these, to me, was making fun of misspellings in letters taken from dead Union soldiers. At the same time, she is insightful and self-aware and by the end I did have empathy for her and admiration for her tenacity.

The most interesting aspect of the memoir was reading about books and authors of the time and how they were received, as well as getting an intimate view of the complexity of the era. There was a lot more intermingling among Union and Confederate civilians than I imagined. There was also a lot more trust in the servants--at several points, Chesnut gives her valuables to her servants for safekeeping. And while there is a lot of brutality, I have to say that there is more humanity and reasonableness depicted from both sides than I expected, so in the end, reading it was almost an uplifting experience.

P says

Mary Chestnut was the well-educated wife of a South Carolina gentleman-an attorney and former US senator who joined the confederacy and eventually rose to the rank of General in the CSA. Her perspective includes not just the vantage point of a member of the CSA hierarchy and their families, but also a working knowledge of many of the opponents with whom she had been well-acquainted while a dame in Washington circles in the years preceding the war.

For an American Civil War enthusiast who can appreciate the diary form; i.e., this book is not for everyone!...this is a fascinating, though albeit sometimes slow read. The stilted prose of the era and Mrs. Chestnut's penchant for frequent literary allusions and sprinkling of French phrases required rereading of passages throughout the length of the book. C. Vann Woodward did an admirable job of researching the people, events and publications mentioned, but the prodigious number of footnotes required also slowed the reading down. And I am that person who wants to glean every bit of information to better understand what I am reading, so I had to read every one! However, the insight into the war as viewed from a progressive mind of a woman well-placed in Southern society was too fascinating to make me abandon my mission and put it down.

Woodward includes a lengthy preface detailing Mary's life and times which proves extremely helpful in putting the diary into context.

Not a book for the faint of heart...but definitely an enlightening and fascinating read for a die-hard Civil War history buff.

booklady says

Although I haven't finished this book, 8 years ago I read over 390 pages worth and it's not light or easy reading. *Mary Chestnut's Civil War* is one woman's experience of the war between the states from the Southern perspective. I do agree with the adage that History is written one biography at a time. In any event, I think it can often best be understood that way. While watching the Ken Burn's series, "The Civil War", I

noticed hearing Mary Chestnut quoted so frequently I wanted to read more of her. I wasn't disappointed with her journal. She's intelligent, well-educated, erudite and has a very broad grasp of the overall situation for having lived in one region of the country at a time in our nation's history when travel and communion were extremely slow and limited.

On the down side, there are many footnotes, asides, digressions, etc., which are interesting and lend authenticity -- from a scholarly point -- but after a period of time make tough reading.
