

*Mary Boykin Chesnut*

trait by Samuel Stillman Osgood, c. 1856, in the possession of Mrs. Hendrik B. van Rensselaer,  
Basking Ridge, New Jersey. On loan to Smithsonian Institution.

# *Mary Chesnut's Civil War*

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Edited by C. VANN WOODWARD

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NEW HAVEN AND LONDON / YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Designed by Sally Harris  
and set in VIP Baskerville type.  
Printed in the United States of America.

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*

Chesnut, Mary Boykin Miller, 1823-1886.

Mary Chesnut's Civil War.

Selections from this work were previously published  
under title: A diary from Dixie.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Chesnut, Mary Boykin Miller, 1823-1886.

2. United States—History—Civil War, 1861-1865—

Personal narratives—Confederate side.

3. Confederate States of America—History—Sources.

4. Southern States—Biography.

I. Woodward, Comer Vann, 1908- II. Title.

E487.C5 973.7'82 80-36661

ISBNs 0-300-02459-2 (cloth)

0-300-02979-9 (pbk.)

14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7

*To my students  
at Johns Hopkins and at Yale*



## Mary Boykin Chesnut, 1823-1886

She loved city life and lived most of her life in the country—mainly on plantations within a few miles of the old town of Camden, South Carolina, about thirty miles northeast of Columbia.<sup>1</sup> She was born on March 31, 1823, at Mount Pleasant, the home of her mother's family, headed by the wealthy planter Burwell Boykin until his death in 1817. Her parents, Mary Boykin and Stephen Decatur Miller, soon moved to their more modest establishment of Plane Hill a mile down the road, near the village of Statesburg. Her father was a busy politician on the way up and could spend little time with his family. He had been a widower with a small son in 1821 when he married Mary Boykin, who was then seventeen. Sixteen years his junior, she was barely nineteen when she bore her first child, Mary. Three more babies, Stephen, Catherine, and Sarah Amelia, were to follow in the next eight years.

Young Mary grew up among her numerous well-to-do Boykin relatives. They were an "old family" tribe, first established in Virginia in the 1680s and present in South Carolina two decades before the Revolution. Mary's mother was one of thirteen children, with brothers and sisters not much older than her firstborn, so that aunts and uncles and cousins and nieces and nephews and in-laws proliferated, to the confusion of generational distinction. Mary remained particularly close to her uncles Burwell and Alexander Hamilton Boykin, who were more contemporaries than elders. She was named for her grandmother, Mary Whitaker Boykin, and as the first granddaughter of the Boykins, she gained special favor and place in the family. Grandmother Boykin became her constant mentor in plantation management and the mysteries of bloom room, sewing room, smokehouse, pantry, dairy, storeroom. In an affectionate tribute written years later, Mary describes herself as "her shadow."<sup>2</sup>

Her father Stephen was a more remote, though fascinating, figure in her childhood. Of less distinguished forebears than the Boykins, he described the relatives of his father, whose parents were the first of the Miller family in South Carolina, as "honest respectable & unambitious," with an "exception or two," including a cousin who was "a drunkard & a vagabond." His mother's parents, named White, were Presbyterians who emigrated from Ireland. They appear to have achieved somewhat higher status, one of his aunts on that side having married a cousin of Gen. Andrew Jackson.<sup>3</sup> Stephen and two brothers some-

how managed to get an education, and Stephen was graduated from the new South Carolina College in 1808. He then read and practiced law and served a term in Congress (1817-19). His political fortunes continued to advance after a resolution of his, adopted by the state senate in 1824, served to launch the States Rights party in South Carolina. On the strength of that movement, he was elected governor in 1828 and United States senator in 1830. Governor Miller's legislative message in 1829 has been described by the leading historian of the proslavery movement as probably the first significant statement of the "positive-good" position on slavery. Miller became a central figure in the nullification controversy that followed.<sup>4</sup>

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In the meantime her father had resigned from the Senate in 1833, officially for reasons of ill health, but probably for more complicated political and personal reasons. In politics Senator Miller was soon overshadowed in the states rights movement by John C. Calhoun, and on the personal side he longed to be with his growing family and grieved over the death of his first son, which occurred in his absence. He took up the law again at home, but in little more than a year he decided on an even more drastic change. Abandoning his law practice and the political honors gained in his native state, he sold his home and moved his family to Mississippi. There, in the remote and rugged frontier state, he owned three plantations and hundreds of slaves, of which he proposed to take personal charge.

Before the Millers left for Mississippi, they enrolled twelve-year-old Mary in Madame Talvande's French School for Young Ladies, a handsome, high-walled boarding school on Legare Street, Charleston, which she entered in the fall of 1835. Ann Marsan Talvande, a refugee from Santo Domingo, was a headmistress with high standards and stern discipline, evidently a superior teacher. Mary soon learned to read and speak French fluently and to read German, among other accomplishments. She quickly became a favorite of Madame, who seated Mary at her right in the dining room. The taste for Gallic culture that she retained through life she formed as Madame Talvande's pupil and admirer. She also formed lasting social ties and friendships among the daughters of the great planters of Carolina tidewater and up-country who were

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Her closest friend was Mary Serena Chesnut Williams, who was a niece of young James Chesnut, Jr., a recent graduate of Princeton. He occasionally called on his niece, and before long James was seen walking on the Battery with her friend Mary Miller. When word of this friendship, perhaps in exaggerated form, reached her father, he decided to withdraw her from school in the fall of 1836 and take her back to Mississippi with her family on their return from a summer in Camden. The change was much against Mary's will at the time, but the overland trip of four weeks or more through strange country, among real Indians, by carriage and horseback, became high adventure. Life in Mississippi, in "a double log house"—where the nearest neighbor was the great Choctaw chief Greenwood LeFlore—opened her eyes to a world undreamed of in Charleston. Or dreamed of in terms of Chateaubriand's *Atala*, which she was comparing with realities. She saw Indians and slaves and whites all in a new light. "I received there my first ideas," she later wrote, "that negroes were not a divine institution for our benefit—or we for theirs."<sup>8</sup> In her fictional account of her western experience she wrote: "I learned many things not in my school books, while I was away from innocent slumbrous old Charleston, where like other inhabitants I saw no wrong, and am sure I would never have questioned any existing institutions to my dying day."<sup>9</sup>

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13. James Chesnut, Charleston, to Mary B. Miller, Camden, May 9, 1839, WMC Collection.

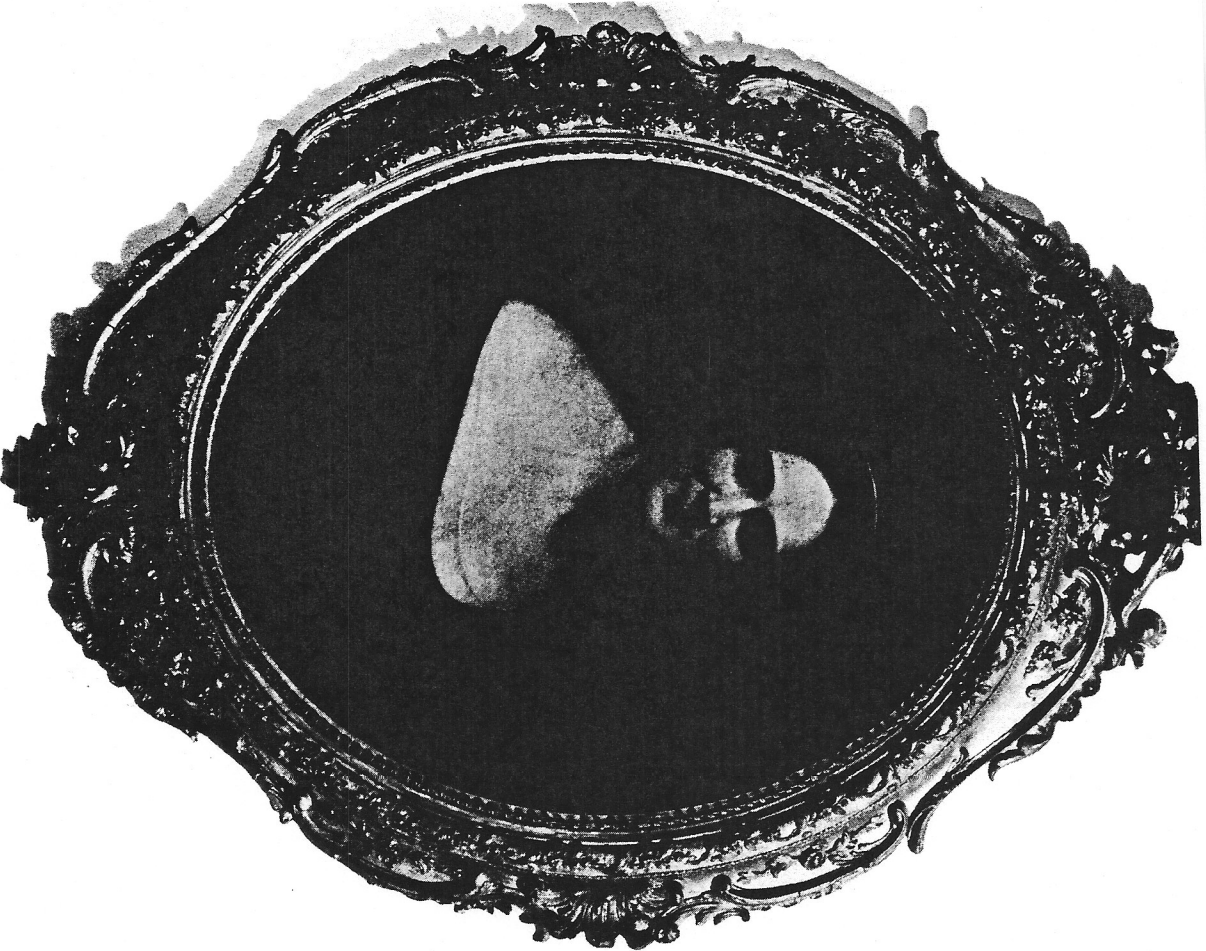
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Designed by Sally Harris  
and set in VIP Baskerville type.  
Printed in the United States of America.

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*

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E487 C5 973.782 80-36661

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James and Mary did not take place for nearly four months. Her fiancé was now the only surviving son of Col. James Chesnut, Sr., one of the wealthiest planters of the state, and with prospects for a brilliant future, he was a more desirable match than ever. Born on January 18, 1815, James, Jr., was prepared for college in local schools and was sent to Princeton, where his father and brother had also gone. He finished with honors in 1835 and delivered an "honorary oration" at his graduation. After declining at his father's insistence an appointment as aide to Gov. Pierce Mason Butler, James read law in Charleston under James Louis Petigru, a leader of the national bar, and began practice of his profession at Camden in 1838.<sup>15</sup> He was well launched on his career when his long romance with Mary Miller finally resulted in their marriage on April 23, 1840, at Mount Pleasant, the old Boykin home, where she was born. She had just turned seventeen, the same age at which her mother married. After a round of parties James took his bride to live with his parents and two unmarried older sisters at Mulberry, the chief country seat of the Chesnuts, three miles out of Camden.

For the young bride, Mulberry meant many adjustments—adjustments she never fully made or accepted. Her life till then had been a succession of small triumphs: oldest of her mother's brood, favorite granddaughter of the Boykins, favorite pupil of Madame Talvande, budding belle of the ball in Charleston, adventurous traveler whisking back and forth from the Wild West, bearing tales of New Orleans, steamboat races on the Mississippi, wild Indians, and wolfpacks. Then Mulberry. Mulberry was magnificent, elegant, luxurious—"with everything that a hundred years or more of unlimited wealth could accumulate"—large, airy living quarters with deep window seats; saddle horses, barouches, carriages, coaches for everybody, anytime; servants to do everything and more than were ever needed. In full bloom the place could be lovely, "old oaks, green lawn, and all."<sup>16</sup> Even Mary could at times admit its charm and grace. More often, however, at the thought of Mulberry, she vented her boredom, frustration, and vexation. There were first of all her elders, including sisters-in-law Sarah and Emma (only eleven and ten years her seniors) to cope with, but especially the senior Chesnuts, James père and Mary mère.

Her unforgettable portrait of the old Colonel pictures him in his nineties, but he must have seemed even more formidable to Mary when she was seventeen and he was sixty-seven. "Partly patriarch, partly grand seigneur, this old man is of a species that we will see no more. The last of the lordly planters who ruled this Southern world. He is a splendid wreck. His manners are unequalled still, and underneath this smooth exterior—the grip of a tyrant whose will has never been crossed. . . . He came of a race that would brook no interference with their own sweet will by man, woman, or devil. But then such manners would clear any

man's character—if it needed it." And in Mary's opinion it did. She was revolted by what she took to be his brood of colored children and was enraged at his tight-fisted grip on his vast estates, "his gods," and at the way he sometimes baited his impetuous heir. She called him "as absolute a tyrant as the Czar of Russia, the Kahn of Tartary, or the Sultan of Turkey." In spite of all that, a mutual affection and respect of sorts grew and flourished between the old man and his brash daughter-in-law.<sup>17</sup>

If Colonel Chesnut dominated by his impeccable Old World manners, Mary Cox Chesnut used her angelic *goodness*, sweetness, and charity to much the same end—as she did her efficiency, deafness, and composure. She was exasperating, and she was irreproachable. Mary admired her inordinately and choked with impatience. Mrs. Chesnut refused to see evil in anyone or anything, and Mary saw plenty—in herself as well. Mary Cox came of a distinguished Philadelphia family, and after sixty years in the South she refused to eat hominy for breakfast, rice without a relish, or watermelon, sweet potatoes, hot cornbread, or hot buttered biscuits. Yet she denied herself nothing she wanted (including an incredible number of books) and usually had her own sweet way. Every summer in the old days she took off to visit home in Philadelphia "with coaches and four, baggage wagons—children, nurses, outriders, &c." She bore fourteen children and lived to bury eleven. She told Mary that when she met her husband as a Princeton student in the 1790s, "they called him there the Young Prince." It was Mary's view that the Prince had met his match. "Somehow I find her the genius of the place," she wrote.<sup>18</sup>

Speaking of the Chesnut family as Mary pictures it at Mulberry, Edmund Wilson writes, "This household of the old-world Chesnuts reminds one of the Bolkonskys of *War and Peace*," and he goes on to compare Chesnut père with Bolkonsky père, James, Jr., with Prince André, and so on, with the reflection that "comparisons with Russia seem inevitable when one is writing about the old South."<sup>19</sup> Whether Tolstoy's Bolkonskys measured up to Chesnut standards of hospitality is a question. Rarely were many of the six chambers on the second floor or the six on the third vacant, such was the constant stream of guests, mainly relatives, and their servants. Carriages were always pulling up at the house. Endless activity, but it was not to Mary's taste. She glanced around the Christmas dinner table, across the silver, china, and damask, where "the others sat stiff and lifeless as pins stuck in rows—showing only their heads." Their "one absorbing interest" was "Mrs. Chesnut's health—what he eats—what she says—and nothing more." No, no! "These people have grown accustomed to dullness. They were born and bred to it. They like it as well anything else." But not for Mary.<sup>20</sup>

Yet Mary took a perverse pride in Chesnut family history and legend. She cherished and recorded stories of how the old Colonel's grandfather, a Virginia

15. John Chesnut to James Chesnut, Jr., Dec. 26, 1836, WMC Collection; J. H. Easterly on James Chesnut in *Dictionary of American Biography*, 4:57.

16. 1880s Version of Journal, Nov. 30, 1861, Dec. 25, 1861; Dec. 27, 1864.

17. 1880s Version, May 25, 1865; cf. 1860s Journal, May 25, 1865; 1880s Version, Dec. 8, 1861.

18. 1880s Version, May 29, 1862; Nov. 30, 1861; May 25, 1865.

19. Wilson, *Patriotic Gore*, p. 288.

20. 1880s Version, Nov. 30, 1861; Dec. 25, 1861; June 8, 1861.



landowner, under Washington's command was killed in Braddock's defeat in 1755, how his widow fled with her young sons James and John to South Carolina and James began as planter with title to the Mulberry land signed by George II, how John started as a merchant's clerk, took over Mulberry after James's death and expanded his holdings greatly before the Revolution, John suffered serious property losses in the Revolution and for the rest of his life bore scars on his ankles, left by chains while he was prisoner of Lord Rawdon in Charleston.<sup>21</sup>

The Washington-Chesnut legend on both sides of the family fascinated Mary, who half-seriously regarded a Washington connection as the nearest thing to "a patent of nobility in this country." Mary Cox, whose father had served on the general's staff, was a neighbor and close friend of Nelly Custis, a daughter of Martha Washington, "and a great deal thrown with the Washington household" as a girl in Philadelphia.<sup>22</sup> During his tour of the South in his first term, President Washington was entertained by John Chesnut, and in the family archives was a letter from the president to his host, in which he describes the uses of "one of my drill plows," which he was sending Chesnut, as he had promised.<sup>23</sup> On the walls of the hall at Mulberry hung a portrait of Washington by Gilbert Stuart, along with portraits of John and his son James and wife, by the same painter.<sup>24</sup>

John left Mulberry and another plantation to James and divided four more among other descendants, but James eventually purchased and reunited all the divided lands under his ownership. At their maximum his holdings were said to have run to five square miles. In addition to the usual plantation equipment, Colonel Chesnut daily inspected his sawmills, gristmills, tanyards, and brick-yards, and at the landing on the Wateree River lay his boat that, before the railroad came, took his cotton to Charleston.<sup>25</sup> His cellar was famous for its wines. The maximum number of his slaves is unknown, but in 1849 they numbered "about five hundred, all raised on his plantations," and they multiplied rapidly and were not sold. The family legend about their treatment, condition, and contentment was not unusual save in adherents gained outside. A visitor to the slave quarters of two of the plantations in 1849 wrote to her brother in Massachusetts that at "four o'clock we passed many negroes returning from labours, all were clothed in . . . homespun gray, good shoes, and stockings, walking leisurely, the females knitting." She also remarked on the comfort of

their quarters, the attention to religious services, and the "asylum" for slave mothers and children in the summer months.<sup>26</sup>

Mary chafed under the tedium of plantation life but did not escape from it for any length of time until the summer of 1845, when James, Jr., took her, then twenty-two, to Saratoga and Newport to recover from an illness. James's sister Emma went along as far as New York and from there reported a remarkable recovery in Mary. Although the other ladies took seashore walks out of Charleston harbor, "she was not at all sea sick, went to every meal, & laughed & talked with any body that was well enough to join her."<sup>27</sup> It was a characteristic response of hers on escaping Mulberry. After a month at the resorts the couple impulsively took ship to England for a brief sojourn. Other Northern trips followed in the next few years, visits with prominent relatives of old Mrs. Chesnut in New York, New Jersey, and Philadelphia. One of these trips was prompted by a more serious illness and depression. The latter trouble may have been partly relieved by moving into their own home, built in Camden in 1848, for her spirits picked up the next year.<sup>28</sup> But part of her troubled spirits came of her failure to have a child, for which there proved to be no remedy. Instead, she began a practice she continued through life of borrowing children, beginning with her "little sweet Williams," children of her sister Kate Williams. A new and grander house built in Camden in 1854 and named Kamchatka made that and other entertainment more feasible.

Meanwhile James's political career gained momentum. The year of his marriage he was elected to represent his district in the state legislature, where he served six years, then six in the state senate, of which he was elected president in 1856. Something of an orator in the round style of the time, James was no fire-eater but a moderate. Mary, daughter of a nullification leader, was conscious of casting her lot with the opposition in her union with the Chesnuts, for the old Colonel had opposed nullification and remained a unionist all his life. In temperament and personality as well as in politics, James, Jr., was cool and reserved, traits that proved a frequent source of friction with his more volatile and passionate wife. She followed his political course closely and helped with his correspondence and speeches but retained her right to disagree.<sup>29</sup> People turned to James Chesnut not for inspiration and excitement but when steadiness was required. On such occasions, however—and they were increasingly numerous—he had to be asked, sought out. His code precluded self-serving—

21. "Let Sleeping Dogs Lie," MSS in several versions in M. B. C.'s hand, WMC Collection; "The Chesnut Family Chronicle (Compiled by Miss Sally Chesnut at the Dictation of Her Father James Chesnut)," typescript copy by Stephen Miller Williams, in WMC Collection.

22. 1880s Version, Sept. 21, 1861.

23. G. Washington, Mount Vernon, to John Chesnut, Camden, June 26, 1791, photostat of original in WMC Collection.

24. The Stuart paintings of the family are still in family hands, but the one of Washington had to be sold in the 1870s.

25. Sally Chesnut, "The Chesnut Family Chronicles"; Esther S. Davis, *Memoirs of Mulberry* (n.p., n.d.), pp. 6-10.

26. Lucy Carpenter, Camden, to Dr. William Blanding, Rehoboth, Mass., Jan. 23, 1849, William Blanding Papers, South Carolina Library.

27. Emma Chesnut, New York, to James Chesnut, Sr., Camden, July 20, 1845, WMC Collection.

28. Evidence of depression is in exhortations from St. Augustine, Jeremy Taylor, and others, copied in a daybook she kept in 1848-49, now in the hands of Mrs. Katherine Herbert, Columbia, S.C.

29. While James was a delegate to the Nashville Convention of Southerners in 1850, Mary wrote him she was "in danger of turning a regular Somerset in my politics. . . particularly I am not the hearty lover of slavery that this latitude requires." M. B. C. to James Chesnut, Jr., May 28, 1850, WMC Collection.

another source of Mary's exasperations. His unanimous election to the United States Senate in 1858 was regarded as a victory for the moderates.<sup>30</sup>

Preparations for life in Washington included the selling of Kamchatka, the purchase of one of the old Colonel's plantations for which James gave his bond, and the assembling of an appropriate wardrobe for Mary. On the latter she had advice from her Philadelphia dressmaker, who knew "just what a Senators wife ought to have," particularly "now at the height of balls and parties and every thing in Lace is bought up."<sup>31</sup> After her long rustication, Mrs. Senator Chesnut must have relished the prospects. Her life in the capital in the crisis years of 1859 and 1860 was a lively and exciting experience that she later recalled as "happy days." She was long enough settled in her house on H Street to absorb the full flavor of Washington society and get to know many of its leaders well. Naturally thrown much with the Southern delegation, she formed close ties with the wife of Sen. Louis Wigfall of Texas and the wife of Sen. Clement Clay of Alabama. She also began her attachment to Varina Davis, wife of Jefferson Davis of Mississippi, which deepened considerably later on. The Washington years were interrupted by summer vacations at White Sulphur Springs and visits with her family in North Carolina, Alabama, and Florida. She was returning from a visit to her sister Kate Williams in Florida when she heard the news of Lincoln's election and soon after that of Senator Chesnut's resignation. Characteristically the senator had reserved judgment on secession, but on November 10 he "burned his bridges" and returned home immediately to help draft the ordinance of secession, urge the cause, and then attend the first Confederate Congress in Montgomery.<sup>32</sup>

In the great war that followed, Mary Boykin Chesnut was for the first time to find fulfillment for some of the yearnings that life with her cool and aristocratic husband had somehow denied her. She feared and dreaded the war, but she embraced its demands with all the fierce passion of her nature. It meant outlet for many frustrated impulses and energies dammed up within her. It meant being involved, challenged, needed, wholly committed, and totally absorbed. It also opened doors of escape from dullness and boredom and self-absorption. "My subjective days are over," she wrote in an early entry of her Civil War diary, "no more *silent* eating into my own heart—making my own miseries. . . ." <sup>33</sup> The diary, she vowed, would be "objective," and into it she poured her wartime experiences. As rewritten later for eventual publication, it gives a vivid picture of the life she led during the war and the distraught society around her. In the original diary, however, despite her vow, much that she would have called "subjective" appears that is omitted from the later version—along with new frustrations.

Watching the political and military affairs of the Confederacy with a keen

and critical eye, from an inside and informed point of view, she often exploded with impatience and disgust at the incompetence, stupidity, and inertia she witnessed at high levels. Again and again she would exclaim, "Oh that I were a man!"<sup>34</sup> or "If I had been a man in this great revolution. . . ." <sup>35</sup> The unmistakable implication was that she (or he!) could have managed things better. "Oh if I could put some of my reckless spirit into these discreet cautious lazy men!" she exclaimed.<sup>36</sup> Once, while she was still hoping that James might get the ministry to France, she burst out, "I wish Mr. Davis would send *me* to Paris."<sup>37</sup> Yet when she compared the "meek humble little thing" she had been with "the self-sufficient thing" she had become, she was startled. "I had grown insufferable with my arrogance," she feared.<sup>38</sup> "Why was I born so frightfully ambitious," she wondered.<sup>39</sup>

Her ambitions, in the nature of things, had to find realization through her husband, and James's aristocratic code proved an obstacle. As Mrs. Davis observed to Mary, James was "too high South Carolina" to lift a hand in his own behalf. After his conspicuous service at Sumter and Manassas, military glory seemed open to him. "I feel so deeply mortified that Mr. C will not accept a commission in the army—everybody says he could get whatever he wanted," confessed Mary to her diary. But he would not ask, and Mary would not insist, "because if anything happened what would I feel then?"<sup>40</sup> Her high hopes for the London or the Paris mission then went aglimmering, again because of James's pride, she felt; and to top that, South Carolina failed to return him to the Confederate Senate, largely because of his refusal to turn a hand to get reelected.<sup>41</sup> Instead he accepted the difficult and thankless post in charge of military affairs on the executive council of five that virtually took over the government of South Carolina from the ineffective Gov. Francis W. Pickens. Toward the end of 1862 he returned to Richmond as aide to Jefferson Davis and settled down with his wife across the street from the White House for over a year. Early in 1864, however, he was commissioned brigadier general and sent back to South Carolina to take charge of conscripting very reluctant troops.<sup>42</sup> "Varied as were his duties," says the historian Douglas Southall Freeman, "James Chesnut was, in reality, liaison officer between the Confederacy and South Carolina."<sup>43</sup> As such he bore the brunt of mounting anti-Davis animus in his state.

Mary Chesnut took her disappointments with what composure she could

34. 1860s journal, Oct. 25, 1861.

35. 1860s journal, Oct. 17, 1861.

36. 1860s journal, April 27, 1861.

37. 1860s journal, Aug. 12, 1861.

38. 1860s journal, Dec. 7, 1861.

39. 1860s journal, Aug. 19, 1861; in the revised version this becomes "Why am I so frightfully ambitious?" 1880s Version, Aug. 18, 1861.

40. 1860s journal, Aug. 19, 1861.

41. 1860s journal, Aug. 13, 1861; 1880s Version, Nov. 30, Dec. 6, Dec. 16, 1861.

42. Cauten, *South Carolina Goes to War*, pp. 143-47, 153, 176-77.

43. Douglas Southall Freeman, *The South to Posterity* (New York, 1939), p. 124.

30. Charles E. Cauten, *South Carolina Goes to War, 1860-1865* (Chapel Hill, 1950), p. 11.

31. Mary M. Wharton, Philadelphia, to "Dear Madam," Jan. 7, 1859, WMC Collection.

32. Cauten, *South Carolina Goes to War*, pp. 60-61.

33. 1860s journal, March 11, 1861.

muster. "I am trying to look *defeat* of my personal ambition in the face," she wrote of one. "So if it does come I can bear it better!"<sup>44</sup> And come it did—regularly. The most dreaded consequence was rustication in Camden. Facing one such exile from Richmond, she exclaimed, "I am having such a busy, happy life—so many friends. And my friends are so clever, so charming. And the change to that weary dreary Camden!"<sup>45</sup> Back and forth on jerky trains she traveled from Richmond to "my country," as she called her native state—two long stays and shorter ones at Mulberry, two extended ones in Columbia (much better), and one at Flat Rock, North Carolina, with her sister Kate—these in addition to the earlier shuttles between Montgomery and Charleston. Most of the time, when not ill, she managed to keep quite busy, to some extent in hospital work—rising at 5:00 A.M. for a time—but mainly helping with her husband's work. So pressing were her duties that she seems to have abandoned diary-keeping between August 1862 and October 1863, but otherwise she put in long hours over the multiplying volumes.

The best of times, from Mary's account, were those in Richmond—first in 1861 at the Spotswood, then at the Arlington Hotel, where life was one extended house party and gossip-fest in cramped quarters with the domestic affairs of great and near-great under close scrutiny. The next round at the capital was the year and a half beginning in November 1862, across the street from the Davises. After a few weeks of strained relations with Varina Davis in 1861 that were recorded in her diary but suppressed in the version she intended for publication, Mary swore eternal loyalty to the Davises and remained for life the devoted friend of Varina and champion of Jefferson Davis.<sup>46</sup> In and out of each other's homes constantly in this period, the Chesnuts and Davises were political allies as well as social intimates. Dragging an often reluctant James along, Mary cut a conspicuous role in Richmond high society, especially in political and military circles. With Buck, Mamie, and Tudy, the beautiful daughters of John S. Preston, as houseguests (more borrowed children), Mary was in great demand. She delighted in amateur theatricals, lavish dinners, good wines, and late parties. Freeman, the historian, finds her an "oddly Gallic" figure, difficult to fit into "hungry Richmond" and his "Anglo-Saxon South."<sup>47</sup>

In the background, however, Mary was always hearing strains of the "Dead March," forever burying her lost relatives and friends, and consoling their survivors. Her story is predominantly one of grief, anguish, pessimism, and anxiety, and her role increasingly Cassandra-like rather than one of Calliope. She knew she was watching "our world, the only world we cared for, literally kicked to pieces," and she told her story "with horror and amazement."<sup>48</sup> The last three months of the war, while Confederate defenses collapsed and Sherman completed his march, Mary spent as a refugee without any

negotiable currency, in makeshift quarters first at Lincolnton, North Carolina, then at Chester, South Carolina. When the fighting finally ended, James joined her there, and together they returned through a ruined countryside to Chesnut's Ferry, where they "had not a cent to pay the ferry man—silver being required."<sup>49</sup>

They found Mulberry heavily damaged and pillaged, the mills and gins and all the cotton burned, 100 bales they had counted on for a new start. Old Mrs. Chesnut had died the year before, and the old Colonel, ninety-three, blind and nearly deaf, had lost everything but his land, and it was encumbered by large debts. The former slaves professed to be "more humble & affectionate & anxious" to stay than ever, but Mary expected them to leave when "they can better their condition."<sup>50</sup> The only cash the Chesnuts saw for months was brought in by Molly, Mary's maid, who peddled butter and eggs on shares. Food enough came from the gardens, but there was no money to operate the plantations—not even enough for postage. The death of his father on February 17, 1866, left James in nominal possession of Mulberry and Sandy Hill plantations and eighty-three "slaves" by name, but he was an empty-handed her more deeply in debt than ever. As executor of the estate, he was required by the Colonel's will made in 1864 to discharge all debts before dividing the property—which proved to be impossible. He was also made responsible for support of the Colonel's numerous female dependents, to be supplied out of money James owed the estate for the plantation he had given bond for before the war.<sup>51</sup>

Mary Chesnut's personal code prohibited whimpering but permitted an occasional shriek. As she wrote her friend Virginia Clay, "there are nights here with the moonlight, cold & ghastly & the hippoorwills, & the screech owls alone disturbing the silence when I could tear my hair & cry aloud for all that is past & gone."<sup>52</sup> In her diary she described herself as "sick at heart" and "ill and miserable," and in moments of hysteria she more than once wished for death.<sup>53</sup> Her illness seemed tied in with spells of depression. Mulberry and Camden had never been good for that, and now they were worse than ever. Gradually her spirits lifted, however, improved no doubt by her sister Kate's son Miller Williams, and later his brother David, coming to live with their aunt in the familiar role of borrowed children. Early in 1867 Mary visited Varina Davis in Charleston and kept up an ongoing correspondence with her and other old friends.<sup>54</sup>

For more than a year after the war, James was adrift about his own plans, but by 1868 he was deeply involved in politics and public affairs and was thus kept

49. Undated entry on flyleaf of the last volume of the 1860s journal.

50. 1860s Journal, June 1, 1865.

51. Dated Feb. 16, 1864, the will assigned to heirs some four hundred slaves by name; James, Jr., was given Mulberry and Sandy Hill, but he was involved in administering the will the rest of his life.

52. M. B. C. to Virginia Clay (ca. April 1866), in Wall, ed., "Letters of M. B. C.," p. 73.

53. 1860s Journal, May 15 and 16, 1861.

54. Margaret G. Howell, Fortress Monroe, to M. B. C., Feb. 25, 1867, copy in M. B. C.'s hand, WMC Collection.

44. 1860s Journal, Aug. 13, 1861.

45. 1880s Version, April 27, 1864.

46. 1860s Journal, July 1861 entries and Aug. 12, 1861.

47. Freeman, *South to Poverty*, p. 128.

48. 1880s Version, March 13, 1862.



away from home much of the time. Mary took over home affairs and shared management of plantation and business in his absence. From her account books it is evident that the family lived on a tight budget at first and cash was sparse indeed.<sup>55</sup> But under the new management the outlook improved enough for the Chesnuts to build a new house in Camden and move into it in 1873. Mary took special delight in her library with a bay window on the first floor of Sarsfield, as they named the new house. She moved all her books, papers, and Confederate mementos into it from the old quarters on the third floor of Mulberry.<sup>56</sup> It was there that at the age of fifty she began the most productive period of her life and in the next ten or eleven years wrote the numerous works discussed above, including the revisions of her diary.<sup>57</sup>

Literary labors in the Sarsfield library were never long uninterrupted. Hard times came knocking at the door in 1875. Debts of the old Colonel's estate, plus debts for the new house, went unpaid, and to raise money the Chesnuts sold the Gilbert Stuart portrait of Washington to a dealer<sup>58</sup> and scrounged for loans. An indigent aunt and her jobless son were added to the Sarsfield household for a time, and more family dependents were to follow. Mary lost one of the dearest of her kin in the death of Johnny Chesnut in 1868 and, most crippling of all, her sister Kate in April and a favorite niece, Kate's daughter Serena, in September 1876. Mary's decline thereafter alarmed the family, and though she pulled out of the depression eventually, she continued to be troubled with old heart and lung ailments and was never completely well the last ten years of her life.<sup>59</sup>

In spite of poor health, she continued to write voluminously when she could get time from her dairy business and the demands of her ever-growing household. Her nephew Miller Williams, who helped manage plantation affairs, married, and his wife and, before long, two babies added much delight to the family at Sarsfield. When Miller and his family moved to Kentucky in 1882, his younger brother David came to replace him. In the meantime Mary's aging mother had also moved in with the Chesnuts, and for a time her sister Sally. All these people made demands on the distracted writer's work time. On the back of a page from the rough draft of her journal revision she once wrote, "One must have solitude at will—for intellectual work," and added, "I have been interrupted three times in trying to *accomplish* this sentence."<sup>60</sup> Nevertheless he manuscript kept piling up at a remarkable rate.

Also, hard times kept knocking. Crop failures and the old debts probably combined with the needs of the extending family to account for extremely

pinched conditions in the early 1880s. Mary wrote of "scraping and saving" to afford small purchases and pay debts of a few dollars.<sup>61</sup> In these circumstances she tried her hand at earning money by her pen: a short piece called "The Arrest of a Spy" expanded from her current revision of the war diary for the Charleston *Weekly News and Courier* series entitled "Our Women in the War." It was accepted and published, and she was paid ten dollars, the only money she received for the only writing she published, so far as is known, during her entire life.<sup>62</sup> It may have meant some encouragement to her, but by that time, at any rate, what she intended as a preliminary draft of the huge revised manuscript of her war journal was nearly finished. The extensive additional work she intended to do in order to put the manuscript in shape for publication was soon cut short by events beyond her control.

For several years things had not gone well for James Chesnut, as one disappointment followed another. Having taken an active role in the conservative opposition to Republican rule and in the campaign that eventually led to the election of Wade Hampton as governor in 1876, he had reasonable expectation of public office. He succeeded in having his franchise restored in 1878, but an office was not forthcoming.<sup>63</sup> His next disappointment came when President Arthur did not offer him an appointment to the new Federal Tariff Commission that he was expected to get in 1882.<sup>64</sup> Late the following year he fell seriously ill and in January 1885 suffered a stroke. While James was in this condition, Mary's mother began to hemorrhage and appeared to be near her end. On February 1 her husband died, and five days later, her mother. The sudden loss of both those nearest her caught Mary in very poor health herself and in desperate circumstances.

Immediately confronting her was a struggle with lawyers to salvage anything whatever from her husband's estate. He had left her everything he owned, but there proved to be extremely little to which she was legally entitled. The will of his father, the old Colonel, had bequeathed him Mulberry and Sandy Hill plantations during his lifetime only. They then went to a male descendant of the Chesnut name, and Mary was denied any income from them. Furthermore she learned that because of James's "failures as a business man (as connected with this estate)," as executor his debts amounted to several times the property he owned.<sup>65</sup> Mary evidently unburdened her accumulated resentments of the

55. "Annual Expense Book," two of them in WMC Collection.

56. M. B. C. to Varina Davis, June 18, 1883, in Wall, ed., "Letters of M. B. C.," p. 84.

57. See above, pp. xxiv-xxv.

58. Correspondence with W. W. Corcoran of Washington in WMC Collection. The portrait found up in the Library of Congress.

59. On these years Muhlenfeld, "Mary Boykin Chesnut," is indispensable, and the following count is much indebted to it. A correspondent of James refers to Mary as "a patient sufferer of veral long years." Thomas F. Drayton to James Chesnut, Nov. 10, 1879, WMC Collection.

60. A loose page not with the bound scratch pads, WMC Collection.

61. M. B. C. to Jane Williams, undated, ca. 1882, in S. Miller Williams papers, privately owned.

62. F. W. Dawson to M. B. C., Jan. 21 and April 8, 1884, WMC Collection; her piece was reprinted with others in F. W. Dawson, ed., *Our Women in the War* (Charleston, 1885). The same story in shorter form is found in the present volume, pp. 459-61.

63. Wade Hampton to James Chesnut, Sept. 21, 1876, WMC Collection; M. C. Butler to James Chesnut, Jan. 14, 1879, WMC Collection.

64. M. C. Butler to James Chesnut, May 10, 1882, WMC Collection; an undated clipping in box 10, WMC Collection, says Chesnut was offered but declined the appointment. No other evidence of an offer has been found.

65. G. N. DeSassure to M. B. C., Jan. 31, 1886; Edward McCrady, Jr., to David R. Williams, March 15, 1886. Both letters in possession of Mrs. Sally Bland Metts, Camden, S.C.

old Colonel to her trusted friend Varina Davis, who replied: "The miseries that old men entail by their unbridled wills would be understood by mankind if the sex were reversed and women did it."<sup>66</sup> According to Mary, "one by one the things my husband thought he left me have been taken away from me by these Camden lawyers...."<sup>67</sup>

In the end she was left with Sarsfield and an income of a little more than one hundred dollars a year. She never mentioned the antebellum years of wealth and plenty—though they must have crossed her mind often—but she repeatedly mentioned the paltry income to which she was reduced. To supplement that there was only what she could make by her small butter-and-egg enterprise, "about twelve dollars a month," she estimated, "by strict attention to my dairy." With that, she bravely declared, she could still "laugh & gird at the world as of Yore."<sup>68</sup> But the "strict attention" to the dairy she meant quite literally, including concern for the death of a fine bull named Rex, the dropping of a calf that was his last progeny, and the sickness of a cow named Virginia Dare.<sup>69</sup>

As soon as she could find time for writing again, her first thought was of a suitable memorial for her husband, perhaps a biography, and she sought help in filing his papers and advice about the whole enterprise. Varina Davis wrote, "I think your diaries would sell better than any Confederate history of a grave character."<sup>70</sup> After similar advice from another friend, she must have recalled that she *had* earned money that way, and more was certainly needed. There is no evidence that she ever seriously returned to the enormous task of putting the last draft of her revised Journal in final shape. She did, however, write three revised drafts of one section of the manuscript, dealing with the first two weeks of 1864, that she entitled "The Bright Side of Richmond. Winter of 1864—Scraps from a Diary." Describing a series of charades and amateur theatricals, it is in effect an ironic metaphor of a society on the brink of ruin.<sup>71</sup> Perhaps her last effort at writing, the piece was never published.

The spring and summer of 1886 were cheered by the approaching marriage of her nephew David Williams, who continued living at Sarsfield, to Ellen, the daughter of her old admirer ex-Governor John L. Manning, with whom she had flirted at Charleston on the eve of the firing on Fort Sumter. Mary declared the bride to be "as splendidly handsome & clever" as the groom and took genuine pleasure in the wedding, pleased to find that the "young delight to talk to the old woman yet." In the course of her spirited account of the festivities to Virginia Clay in September, she mentioned her "poor weak heart" twice. "Earthquakes for all & Angina Pectoris for me," she put it.<sup>72</sup> The first reference

was to the terrible quake that had recently shattered Charleston, and the angina was an old story with Mary. She had lived with it a long time. An unexpected attack struck her in November. She died the next day, November 22, 1886, at the age of sixty-three, and was buried at Knights Hill, by the side of James.

66. Varina Davis, Beauvoir, Miss., to M. B. C., March 25, 1885, WMC Collection.

67. M. B. C. to Jane Williams, June 21, 1885, S. Miller Williams Papers, in private hands.

68. Ibid.

69. M. B. C. to Jane Williams, Aug. 16, 1885, S. Miller Williams Papers.

70. Varina Davis to M. B. C., March 25, 1885, WMC Collection.

71. All three drafts in WMC Collection.

72. M. B. C. to Virginia Clay, Sept. 12, 1886, in Wall, ed., "Letters of M. B. C."

## Of Heresy and Paradox

The bare facts of Mary Chesnut's biography lend themselves more to deepening the paradox than to advancing the explanation of her heresies. Here was the daughter of the man credited with launching the "positive good" defense of slavery and anticipating Calhoun in nullification and states' rights. More than that, she was the wife of the heir to one of the great slave estates of her time, a product and an elite member of a slave society, an intimate of its chief defenders and champions, and a close friend of President and Mrs. Jefferson Davis. And yet she repeatedly declared her hatred for slavery, a loathing she thought exceeded that of its Northern opponents; she called herself an abolitionist, predicted the end of the institution from the beginning of the Civil War, no matter which side won, and rejoiced at the collapse of slavery at the end of the war.

She combined this heresy with a second that was closely associated in her mind with the first—the heresy of militant feminism and defense of oppressed womanhood. This was less paradoxical than the antislavery heresy, since she thought of herself as a victim rather than a beneficiary of the oppression. The element of paradox lay in the thoroughness with which her life was enveloped by the patriarchal society into which she was born and the unquestioned male dominance and female subordination that it bred. If anything, this institution was more deeply entrenched than slavery, and Mary's reaction to it was, if anything, more vehement.

Overriding these and minor paradoxes was the greater one that enabled her to combine the provinciality of her life with a cosmopolitanism of outlook that often transcended it. Apart from her school days in Charleston and a few months in Mississippi, her one trip abroad, a few antebellum vacations in the North, her two years in Washington, and travels during the war, Mary Chesnut lived her whole life in one community of her native state—the plantation and village life of Camden. Since this is the most easily resolved of the paradoxes, it may be disposed of at once: she overcame the provinciality by her reading. She was a constant, voracious, and passionate reader. One story will suggest the place of books in her life. It was the eve of Columbia's fall to Sherman and she had to leave on the last train from the city, in a hurry, with light baggage. Seeing her off, her husband even persuaded her to leave behind food that proved to be much needed in her flight. But she *did* find room for the works of Shakespeare, Molière, Sir Thomas Browne, *The Arabian Nights* in French, and the letters of Pascal.<sup>1</sup>

Her devotion to literature started early and was encouraged by circumstances. At Mulberry the young bride found a library of more than fifteen hundred calf-bound volumes started in the eighteenth century (many of them there now).<sup>2</sup> Her tastes included French literature, classic and contemporary, and she read German critically. But her deepest roots were always in British letters, lore, and history. As she once wrote, "I was always up to my ears in English novels, English reviews, English tall talk."<sup>3</sup> She often bristled at British arrogance, but English opinion and standards claimed her special attention, if not her deference. Mary Chesnut was an Anglophile chastened by French skepticism and American and Southern nationalism. Writing a cousin after "faithfully" reading Taine's *Histoire de la littérature anglaise*, she said she had "read everything he criticizes" and was "as familiar with his Frenchmen that he kept at his elbow as never failing reference in all cases—La Bruyère, Montaigne, Molière, Balzac, &c&c—as I am with his English." She was not impressed. She found Taine "untrue to our ideas as to men and things, *morals* and *taste*," and was appalled at his "preferring Alfred de Musset to Shakespeare," and his "finding Addison commonplace & vulgar, Milton as faulty as any &c&c."<sup>4</sup>

A constant inflow of current books and periodicals, American, British, and French, continued until slowed by war and blockade. Few of her English or French contemporaries of stature appear to have escaped her attention. She read as they were published, usually, or as soon as she could get hold of them, the books of Dickens, Carlyle, Trollope, Thackeray, Disraeli, Tennyson, the Brownings, George Eliot, Charlotte Brontë, Charles Kingsley, Charles Reade, and George Meredith. A contemporary book by Balzac, Sand, Dumas, Scribe, Sue, Hugo, or more ephemeral authors was regularly at hand, often borrowed from the Francophile Preston family.

If American letters were a comparable part of her mental furniture, it is not evident from the record. She continued to read and quote Emerson and mentioned a few Northern novels, but their New England origins evidently put her off. With the Southern literary and intellectual community, on the other hand, she was much at home and knew personally many of its members. William Gilmore Simms was a guest in her home and a political supporter of her husband,<sup>5</sup> and she counted the poets Henry Timrod and Paul Hamilton Hayne among her friends. John Reuben Thompson, poet and editor of the *Southern Literary Messenger*, was another member of her intimate circle, as were numerous authors, editors, and aspiring writers of Charleston and Richmond. Scientists such as the LeConte brothers and scholars of several colleges were among

2. A bound volume listing some fifteen hundred books by short title was prepared in the 1890s, but is not assumed to be complete. WMC Collection.

3. 1870s Version, Jan. 1, 1864.

4. M. B. C. to Mary Kirkland, March 3 [1873]. "My fiftieth birthday," in possession of the Chesnut estate.

5. William Gilmore Simms to James Chesnut, Jr., Feb. 5, 1852, WMC Collection; Simms to Chesnut, Jan. 12, 1854, Simms Papers, South Caroliniana Library.



her associates. She was on close terms with William Henry Trescot, historian and diplomat, and with L. Q. C. Lamar, through whom she met Lamar's father-in-law, Augustus Baldwin Longstreet, author of *Georgia Scenes*. The school of southwestern humorists to which he belonged appealed to her, and she referred to their stories often. She was never overly impressed with the Southern literati, but she knew them and kept up with their work.

Another intellectual interest of Mary Chesnut, mainly inspired by the Civil War and her efforts to come to terms with it, was history. She began with a keen sense of participating in historical drama of world significance. Early in the war she manifested a playful impulse toward comparative history and soon developed an interest in other rebellions (slave rebellions included), revolutions, struggles for independence, invasions, defenses, and wars generally—all with a view to gaining perspective on the struggle in which her own people were involved. "Having lived on the battlefield," the Revolutionary battlefields near Camden, she had read a surprising number of revolutionary memoirs, English and American. Clarendon on the English Civil War, Motley on the Dutch Republic, and Carlyle on the French Revolution were at hand, and she reached out for more. A list of "books wanted" in October 1861 included four histories of England. Having hit on Creasy's *Decisive Battles* with relish, Mary was soon spicing her references to daily news with learned references to "Anabasis business" and "Thermopylae business" and to more recent "Moscow business." To keep abreast of the news, she read several local papers in addition to Richmond and Charleston newspapers every day as well as a surprising number of New York newspapers, even in wartime.

Mary Boykin Chesnut was a provincial in a residential sense only. Her mind roved widely over the world of her time and reached out to the past as well. She carried on an eighteenth-century Southern tradition of the plantation intellectual, which was not without worthy precedent. It is interesting to speculate about what figure she might have cut (had her ambition for one of the foreign missions for her husband been realized) in the salons of Paris or London. She could probably have held her own quite well.

The antislavery paradox is rather more complicated. To resolve one question right off, however, there is no reason to suspect that her position on slavery was the consequence of *arrière-pensée* or the result of hindsight. She had made her views known quite early. In 1842, when she was nineteen, she put them in a letter to her husband. Of this letter she writes: "It is the most fervid abolition document I have ever read. I came across it burning letters the other day. That letter I did not burn. I kept it—as showing how we were not as much of heathens down here as our enlightened enemies think."<sup>6</sup> In her autobiographical novel she suggests that she held such views even earlier, at the age of fourteen. There she quotes the father of her fictional counterpart as calling her "a rabid

abolitionist" who was "seized with horror of me as a slave owner." That, of course, is questionable evidence. More to the point is the declaration in her original Journal, a month before the war began, that "Sumner said not one word of this hated institution that is not true. . . . God forgive us but ours is a monstrous system, and wrong and iniquity."<sup>8</sup> No Southerner and few Americans went further than that. Charles Sumner said a great many words about slavery, and one of the most noted replies and rebukes to him was delivered by Sen. James Chesnut, Jr., of South Carolina.

Mary Chesnut appears to have made no secret of her heretical opinions, and her outspokenness was probably one cause of the chill of which she complained around Camden. James Team, a Chesnut overseer who shared her view that most white women of the South were "abolitionists in their hearts, and hot ones too," went on to say: "Mrs. Chesnut is the worst. They have known that on her here for years."<sup>9</sup> Mary was given to exaggeration in her insistence on the amount of antislavery sentiment among Southern women. "And they hate slavery worse than Mrs. Stowe," she declared.<sup>10</sup> She was more specific in her discernment of generational and class distinctions in attitudes toward slavery. Among the young in the very wealthiest planter families of her circle (and that circle included virtually all those with a hundred or more slaves) she encountered outspoken unorthodoxy during the war. "Those Preston and Hampton boys loathe slavery—and all its concomitants," she wrote. And so did their sisters, even more vocally. She thought it worth adding that the Hampton estate in Mississippi had more than fifteen hundred slaves. Her nephew Johnny Chesnut was "not sound on the goose either, but then it takes four negroes to wait on him—satisfactorily." Asked why they fought, they would likely answer, "Southern rights—whatever that is."<sup>11</sup>

Her heresies on slavery did not inspire unorthodoxy on race. Moved as she was by their plight and affectionate and close as her relations could be with personal slaves, she never seriously challenged orthodox assumptions about the innate inferiority of the enslaved people. She was indeed capable of casually dropping such stereotypes as "dirty, slatternly, idle, ill smelling by nature" in reference to them in the mass.<sup>12</sup> Referring to slaves of her own family, she fell into the conventional pattern of making an exception. "When I hear everybody complaining of their negroes," she wrote in 1861, "I feel we are blessed, ours are so well behaved and affectionate—a little lazy but that is no crime."<sup>13</sup> The explanation, implied or explicit, was the familiar one that good treatment bred contentment. She was proud to boast that her husband never bought but one slave, and that at the slave's own request, to keep a family intact. But she was

7. Fragment of "Two Years of My Life," p. 163.

8. 1860s Journal, March 18, 1861 (quoted below, p. 29; reproduced p. 30).

9. 1880s Version, Dec. 6, 1861 (p. 255).

10. 1880s Version, Nov. 27, 1861 (p. 245).

11. 1880s Version, March 5, 1862 (p. 298), May 6, 1862 (p. 334).

12. 1880s Version, Nov. 27, 1861 (p. 245).

13. 1860s Journal, Nov. 12, 1861 (p. 235).



candid to admit she relished the attentions of skilled servants who anticipated every wish.<sup>14</sup>

From the outset of the war Mary Chesnut watched the black faces around her for any sign of change. For the most part she marveled at seeing none whatever. They seemed as quiet and respectful as ever. She called them "sphinxes" and wondered what went on behind "their black masks." Laurence, James's man, took charge of their cash and did all their shopping; Ellen, her maid, returned her jewels as if they were so many garden peas; Isaac McLaughlin took care of the family silver. "Why don't they all march over the border?" she wondered.<sup>15</sup> Minor, personal mutinies she noted, and she was disturbed at the defection of some of Jefferson Davis's hired slaves. The great shock, the murder of her cousin Betsey Witherspoon by her slaves, came early in the war and had no apparent relation to it. From the start of the war Mary Chesnut assumed that "slavery has to go of course—and joy go with it." A year later she professed amazement that "there are people who still believe negroes to be property."<sup>16</sup> She thought that if anything could reconcile her to a failure of the South to gain its independence "it is Lincoln's proclamation freeing the negroes." And when it was over she shared "an unholy joy" with her husband at the end of slavery.<sup>17</sup>

Abhorrence of slavery and welcome of its abolition did not prevent Mary Chesnut from embracing many aspects of the romantic Southern legend. She could tell stories of cruelty, brutality, and sadism that matched any the abolitionist agitator had to tell, but they were the acts of "bad" masters. She was not unaware of the unconscious callousness and heedless injustice of "good" masters nor of the blind hypocrisy and self-righteousness of some of them. Little of that escaped her, and she was unsparing of illustrations. On the other hand she told many stories that suggested the loyalty, affection, and contentment of slaves, their response to paternalistic benevolence, and their devoted service under stress. She did cite instances of treachery, violence, and rebellion but she was certainly no abolitionist of the Garrison school.

The underlying motive in her attention to paternalistic benevolence seems to have been defense of her own people against Northern propaganda rather than defense of slavery itself. What did they know of the evils of slavery, and what did they suffer as compared with Southern white women trapped in the midst of it? They sat in their quiet New England libraries and relieved their consciences by writing outrageous indictments of the South when they did not know the half of it. Mary was frankly intent (as quoted above) upon "showing how we were not as much of heathens down here as our enlightened enemies think." Part of her strategy was to divert attention from the South by appeal to comparative history. "Virtue in a nation is a matter of latitude and longitude," she wrote. "Look at the English in India, or even in Ireland, the French in

Algiers—both in Turkey." She thought that "Russia ought to sympathize with us. We are not as bad as this even if Mrs. Stowe's word be taken. Brutal men with unlimited power are the same all over the world."<sup>18</sup>

Men and their unlimited power are the thesis of her feminist heresy. But it is interwoven with the antislavery heresy, and neither is completely intelligible without reference to the other. In fact they do much to explain each other.

The plight of the slaves—mistreatment, injustice, oppression—was part of Mary Chesnut's case against slavery, but only a part and not the main part. Her bitterest indictment was what slavery did to the wives, children, and families of the masters, as well as to the masters themselves. Like the slaves, women were all subject to the absolute authority of the patriarchal system. The feature that most offended her was the sexual abuse of the slave women—"we live surrounded by prostitutes"—and their offspring. The men were probably "no worse than men everywhere—but the lower the mistresses the more degraded they must be." And yet "they seem to think themselves patterns—models of husbands and fathers."<sup>19</sup> What outraged her beyond endurance was the hypocrisy of the stern puritanical code these libertarian patriarchs imposed on their womenfolk and children.

In a dozen ways she equated the plight of women with that of slaves, not only in a slave society but elsewhere as well. They were bought and sold, deprived of their liberty, their property, their civil rights, and the equal protection of the law, humiliated and reduced to abject dependency. "There is no slave after all like a wife," she declared. Sufficiently provoked, she could go further: "All married women, all children and girls who live in their father's houses are slaves."<sup>20</sup> It was no wonder that "our women of the planters' wives caste—if they were not *notable* &c, took to patent medicine & hypochondria."<sup>21</sup> To her mind it was their abject plight that accounted for the celebrated personality of Southern womanhood. "So we whimper and whine do we? Always, we speak in a deprecatory voice do we? And sigh gently at the end of every sentence," and "they say our voices are the softest, sweetest in the world." If so, it could be because "we are afraid to raise our voices above a mendicant moan."<sup>22</sup>

Any search for possible sources of inspiration for these heretical ideas in South Carolina could hardly overlook the rebellion of another South Carolina woman of the previous generation. Sarah M. Grimké of Charleston, sister of Angelina Grimké, published her *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes and the Condition of Women*<sup>23</sup> in 1838, while Mary was a schoolgirl at Madame Talvande's. No reference to this work has been found in any writings of Mary Chesnut. In spite

14. 1880s Version, Nov. 28, 1863 (pp. 488 and 490).

15. 1880s Version, July 24, 1861 (pp. 113-14).

16. 1880s Version, June 29, 1861 (p. 88); April 29, 1862 (p. 331).

17. 1880s Version, July 3, 1862 (p. 407).

18. 1880s Version, Sept. 1, 1864 (p. 642); April 23, 1865 (p. 793).

19. 1860s Journal, March 18, 1861 (pp. 29-31).

20. 1880s Version, May 9, 1861 (p. 59), Feb. 25, 1865 (p. 729).

21. Autobiographical fragment, "We called her Kitty," p. 19.

22. 1880s Version, Feb. 26, 1865 (p. 735).

23. Published in Boston.

of similarities between the ideas the two South Carolina women held of slavery and feminism, there is no evidence of a direct influence of Grimké on Chesnut.

Mary Chesnut was a shrewd and original observer of the human comedy on her own, particularly the man-woman parts of it. Filtrations, philanderings, fornications, courtships, and marriages passed under review, and marriage came off little better than the patriarchy and slavery as an institution. "What a blessed humbug domestic felicity is," she observed. Its fortunes did not depend on what the partners "felt or thought about each other before they had any possible way of acquiring accurate information as to character, habits, &c. Love makes it worse." It raises impossible expectations. At best, marriage is a compromise—"if they have common sense they make believe and get on—so so." "It is only in books that people fall in love with their wives." Men were the main offenders, "blustering around . . . to show that they are the masters." For all men's blunders and mistakes, wives were somehow to blame. "Dogmatic man rarely speaks at home but to find fault or ask the reason why. Why did you go? or why, for God sake, did you come?"<sup>24</sup>

Given the contrast of temperaments and the conflicts of interests between Mary Chesnut and her husband, it is natural to look to their domestic relations for clues to her rebellious feminism. Need for caution on this matter, however, is indicated. It is true that they had their difficulties. Both partners to the union took an obvious interest in the attentions of other members of the opposite sex, and each gave signs of resenting such interests on the part of the other. Since Mary recorded at least some of her experiences and James did not, the evidence is one-sided. It is clear, however, that Mary at times took pleasure in James's jealousy and that she suspected him of carrying some of his adventures further than she did her own. After an improbable plea of mistaken identity that James offered to explain the effusive greetings he received on the street from a handsome woman she did not know, Mary exclaimed, "What a credulous fool you must take me to be!"<sup>25</sup> How much of his coolness and reserve on which she often commented entered into their personal relations is not clear. But it is clear that they shared intervals of warm companionship and could talk at length of war and politics and art and the preposterous human condition on terms of relative equality. She certainly did not think of James as a typical patriarch. None of the charges of dalliance in the slave quarters was aimed at him. Insofar as they were personal, they were directed rather at his father.

Whatever her personal experience, it is evident that Mary Boykin Chesnut was not one of the craven white domestic "slaves" she wrote about. She was no whimperer or whiner, and her voice was not the sweetest or the softest. Something of a Cassandra she turned out to be, but the fortunes of war determined that role. More characteristic of her was her laughter, and all the repressive provinciality of Mulberry and Camden could not smother that. "Thank God it

is *irrepressible*," she declared, "and I will laugh at the laughable while I breathe."<sup>26</sup> Nor could the weight of patriarchal authority mold her into any of its conventional patterns or crush her indomitable individuality. So long as there was a Mary Chesnut, there would be heresy and paradox of some sort in South Carolina.

24. 1880s Version, Aug. 29, 1861 (p. 173); July 3, 1862 (p. 407); Jan. 1, 1864 (p. 523).  
25. 1880s Version, May 8, 1864 (pp. 605-06).

26. 1870s Version, Sept. 22, 1864 (p. 645).

## Editorial Problems and Policies

Among the reasons for undertaking this edition of Mary Chesnut's book are the excessive liberties taken by previous editors. To replace their work with a more elaborate and complete edition claiming license for erratic and unacknowledged editorial interventions, changes, and deletions would be to invite an ironic outcome of the enterprise. Some liberties will have to be claimed, but they will be taken with full notice and explanation. The general purpose will be to publish *what* the author wrote and, insofar as appears practicable within the rules adopted, *how* she wrote it. Both the *what* and the *how* present difficulties. What she wrote included a great many quotations from her reading. The original 1860 Journal contains a large number of them, and she retained numerous passages of the sort and occasionally added some in the 1880s Version. When they are of apparent relevance they are preserved, but otherwise they are deleted. Also frequently deleted are characterizations or descriptions of persons whom she refrains from identifying. Deletions are indicated and explained in footnotes.

The problems presented by *how* she wrote are more numerous and complicated. It should be remembered that Mary Chesnut left the last draft of her manuscript unfinished. Her proclaimed intention to "overhaul it again—and again" remained unfulfilled at the time of her death. The manuscript was left virtually devoid of the extensive interlinear revision characteristic of other manuscripts she worked over and polished—works that proved her capable of astute self-criticism. (Editorial tinkering with the manuscript done in handwriting other than her own, if so identified, has been ignored.) Lacking the correction and polish the author might have given it, the manuscript is also encumbered with numerous eccentricities and idiosyncrasies of her own, many of which she probably would not, even with ample opportunity, have removed. These include some quite erratic capitalization, punctuation, and spelling. Capitalization is often rather random, and in any event the distinction in her handwriting between capital and lowercase letters for almost half the alphabet is often arbitrary. Punctuation is largely a matter of dashes of varied length, and quotation marks are employed with high disregard for consistency. Her writing suggests an aristocratic scorn of detail that could be left to others. In spelling, she frequently made two words out of one: "bed side," "stair case," "any thing," "any how," "every body," "friend ship," "break fast," "inter view," "to day," "my self," "with in," and "with out." She sometimes preferred English spelling but often used the American equivalent. A few words—"dispair," "dispic," and "discribe," for example—followed an orthography all her own. Spelling at times seems to have approximated her pronunciation, as in "tobacca," and

unfamiliar proper names regularly came off the way they sounded. She spelled McLean three different ways. Overseer Team became Teams if the cadence of the sentence required, and Mr. Chesnut's valet was Laurence or Lawrence, depending apparently on whim.

Some of Mrs. Chesnut's mannerisms were those of her time, such as the superscription and underlining in *Me* and *Mrs.* Some were of her own making, such as the French use of the dash in dialogue to introduce each speaker—though she often combined the dash with quotation marks. She was lavish in the use of abbreviations and ampersands and the substitution of initials for names. These eccentricities were as characteristic of her original Journal as of the 1880s Version, and in the Journal, syntax received even less attention. In the later version, however, the number of eccentricities, idiosyncrasies, and spelling errors averages about thirty-four to the typewritten page of literal transcription and can run to twice that number or more on some pages.

To preserve tens of thousands of oddities and errors in a formal edition out of literal regard for some standard of textual scholarship seems misguided. Such an editorial policy would be of doubtful fairness to the author and a distraction rather than a service to the reader. Care has been taken not to "improve" her writing or change its substance, but her spelling, capitalization, and punctuation have been regularized, though the edited text still preserves rather more dashes than usual. American spellings are adopted as the norm, instead of English alternatives. Some eccentric spellings are retained (Mrs. Chesnut probably said "Texian" or "Texican" instead of "Texan"), as is her abbreviation "&c" for "et cetera." Initials in place of names are left unchanged when the reference is clear. She very likely called her husband "Mr. C" or "J. C." With these and some other exceptions, abbreviations and contractions, including ampersands, have been silently expanded. Military and political titles are given standard abbreviations when used with the full name, but spelled out with the last name only—for example, Gen. Robert E. Lee but General Lee. All titles of books, periodicals, and newspapers and names of ships have been italicized. The original paragraphing has been retained insofar as Mrs. Chesnut's divisions are intelligible or recognizable. Some liberties have been taken in quotations from the 1860s Journal, which often has no paragraphing. Indentations, which on the manuscript page vary widely, have been made uniform, as have the lines often used to separate paragraphs and sections of an entry. The manner of dating entries has been made uniform save for an occasional "Christmas Day" or "New Year's"; where errors in dating, such as the wrong month or year, are corrected, the change is noted and explained. Conjectures of the pen or unintentional repetitions, however, are silently corrected. Conjectural words or passages supplied by the editor are placed in square brackets, save where the missing element is small and obvious. Explanatory insertions by the editor to indicate, for example, a missing or torn page are similarly bracketed but are italicized. All ellipses are the editor's, not the author's, and are not bracketed. Effaced or erased passages that are restored by the editor are printed in angle brackets < >. The author indicates omissions by x x x x.



Other editorial interventions remain to be accounted for and explained. Mary Chesnut made no divisions in her thousands of pages save those of the dated entries and mid-page rules within or between entries. For the sake of readability, the editor has divided the book into chapters and has given them titles. Where feasible, the title is a phrase quoted from the chapter and was selected to suggest its predominant subject matter. The author's treatment of her experiences and impressions lends itself to such divisions, but she left no overt clue of this intention. She also left no title for her book, so far as is known, and the one used for this edition is the choice of the editor.

The selection and use of texts presented unusual problems and exceptional opportunities. As pointed out above, for almost all parts of the book there is more than one version, and for some parts, several. There could be little hesitation in choosing the "final" version of the 1880s as the basic copy text. The real question was what use to make of other versions available to the editor, especially the surviving parts of the original 1860s Journal, which parallel about one-third of the 1880s Version. In this decision conflicting obligations and values make their demands. Insofar as her writing is a conscious work of art, the values make their demands. Insofar as her writing is a conscious work of art, the author's final judgment deserves utmost respect. But whatever art is brought to bear, the subject matter purports to be factual, not fictional. As "diary" it partakes of both autobiography and history and is offered as a faithful account of real people and events and the writer's perception of them. Is it the primary obligation of the editor to confine what he includes strictly to the final (though unfinished) copy text? If so, he will in effect find himself at times silently concurring with the author's decision to withhold from the reader information, incidents, views, and motives that are significant, relevant, important, and sometimes essential to a full understanding of the author and the events of which she is writing. To withhold such information runs very much against the grain of the historian's instincts and values. On the other hand, if the editor intervenes with information from other texts (however scrupulously identified), will he not violate the author's intent and the integrity of a work of art? Perhaps there is no entirely satisfactory way in this instance of reconciling the obligation to history with the obligation to art.

Although full commitment to the final 1880s Version as copy text is retained, excerpts from the other versions and especially from the original 1860s Journal are occasionally used to complement and supplement the 1880s Version. Instead of being relegated to appendices or footnotes, however, such excerpts are inserted directly into the text as near as possible to the place from which they were omitted (if from the 1860s Journal) or where they are most relevant (if from another version). They are always placed within double angle brackets << >> and, unless they are identified in footnotes as being from some other version, they are from the 1860s Journal. Unless a different date is indicated in a footnote, the excerpt is from an entry of the same date in the quoted version as the one in which it is inserted. In her 1880s Version, Mrs. Chesnut frequently telescoped or combined under one date entries from more than one date in an earlier version. While deletions from the copy text are both indicated and

explained, those in inserted excerpts from other versions are only indicated by ellipses but are not explained. No effort will be made to point out all differences between the 1880s Version and earlier ones, but departures that appear to the editor to be of significance and relevance will be noted or inserted in the text in the manner indicated. The editor is quite aware that the insertion of excerpts does some violence to the integrity of the final version and that this will not please some scholars. It is hoped, however, that the enrichments and illuminations such excerpts add to the book and the convenience and illumination they provide the reader will more than compensate for the losses.

In rare instances (only three in the entire book) and for exceptional reasons, parts of other versions are substituted for parts of the 1880s Version. The first instance is the very opening pages of the book. Mrs. Chesnut drafted at least three alternative openings and appears never to have decided which to use. All three surviving draft fragments are mutilated or incomplete, or the pages are misnumbered. All are evidently based on an original version in which she summarized the three months before she began keeping her Journal regularly. It is this original version that is substituted for the others. The remaining substitutions are taken from one of the various drafts of the sketches she called "The Bright Side of Richmond. Winter of 1864—Scraps from a Diary." Written near the end of her life with a view to separate publication, this is a polished revision and expansion of a segment of the 1880s Version, which she apparently scratched up in the process of preparing the new revision.

In the annotation all persons mentioned, with a few exceptions, are identified upon first reference if it has proved possible to identify them. With a few exceptions, the facts are only brought up to the time the person is introduced in the text. In addition to those who could not be found are a number considered too well known to require identification. Specific literary references and quotations are identified when possible, but not all literary allusions. No attempt has been made to keep the reader posted in footnotes on the progress of the Civil War, nor was it thought necessary to correct all the false rumors of war news Mary Chesnut records. Some she herself corrects and some seem unnecessary to correct.

The scholar who wishes to compare the original 1860s Journal with any of the later versions, in all their complexities and all their eccentricities, will find the surviving parts of all manuscripts at the South Caroliniana Library at the University of South Carolina. A copy flow reproduction of them is available at the Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University, and literal typescript transcriptions, carefully collated, are to be found at the Southern Studies Program, Lieber College, University of South Carolina.

### Editorial Symbols

- [ ] Used for two purposes: (1) to enclose conjectural words or passages supplied by the editor and (2) to enclose in italics explanatory insertions.

< > To enclose effaced or erased passages restored by the editor.

<< >> To enclose excerpts from other versions inserted in the text. Unless identified in footnotes as being from some other version, they are from the 1860s Journal.

... To indicate deletions by the editor, which are explained when occurring in the 1880s Version but are not explained in other versions.