ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

Mary Chesnut

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With the advent of the American Civil War's Sesquicentennial, there are no more complex and compelling Confederate reminiscences to revisit than those of Mary Chesnut, a diarist whose writings were never published during her lifetime, but whose "diary" has been reworked for print by a handful of editors and scholars over the past century. Her writings have been both berated and praised by critics and revisionists, and she continues to be an historical actor whose legacy fascinates, as her work remains the most cited diary in Civil War historiography.

The American Civil War armies were perhaps the most literate combat soldiers ever to face one another on the field, with the federal army's literacy rate estimated as high as 85%, and the Confederate troops not far behind with a rate estimated at nearly 80%. Naturally, writing about the war became a major preoccupation for soldiers—with so much time on their hands. So many combatants spent long stretches of weeks and months between intense moments on the battlefield, with loved ones far away. This war began with a bombardment in Charleston, multiple calls to arms, and ended with surrender at Appomattox—one thousand four hundred and fifty-eight days later. So many men torn from their families, so many families in fear for their loved ones—the drama of the Civil War era contributed to the outpouring of wartime chronicles, especially personal reminiscences. So many men and women were fastidious in preserving their experiences, recording daily events through diaries and journals. Paper and ink grew scarce, especially in the South, while the need to keep a record grew even more compelling, particularly for those left behind. Yet still, these hundreds of thousands, millions of pages of personal testimony, continue to be a treasure trove for appreciating the era of the American Civil War.

Chesnut's diary provides one of the most vivid voices from this era, because, as one of her editors, C. Vann Woodward, suggests: "The enduring value of the work, crude and unfinished as it is, lies in the life and reality with which it endows people and events and with which it evokes the chaos and complexity of a society at war. Her cast of characters includes slaves and brown half-brothers, poor whites and sandhillers, overseers

and drivers, common soldiers and solid yeomen, as well as the very top elite of state, military, and society that thronged her drawing room and saw her daily." [1]

The author was born Mary Boykin Miller on the last day of March, 1823, the daughter of Stephen Decatur Miller, a South Carolina statesman and Mary Boykin, his second wife who was sixteen years younger than her husband. Mary's father had been elected to the House of Representatives, where he would serve from 1822 to 1828. In 1828, he was elected Governor of South Carolina, then he competed and earned a seat in the U.S. Senate in 1830, when Mary was just seven. He campaigned vigorously against the tariff, and offered a rousing speech in Stateburg, South Carolina declaring: "There are three and only three ways to reform our Congressional legislation, familiarly called, the ballot box, the jury box and the cartridge box." [2]

As a young girl, Mary lived on her maternal grandparents' family estate near Stateburg, surrounded by powerful political men of the planter class within her state and attended school in Camden, South Carolina. When he renounced politics in 1833 (perhaps feeling overshadowed by John C. Calhoun), Stephan D. Miller decided to move his family to a plantation in Mississippi. Young Mary was left behind in 1835 to attend a Charleston boarding school, an exclusive female academy run by Madame Talvande, a refugee from the Haitian Revolution. Talvande's pupils were given rigorous, classical academic training, which included European languages. Mary became fluent in French and was able to read German.

Many of the South Carolina plantocracy sent their daughters to this prestigious school, and Mary was ensconced among the daughters of the upper crust. Through one of them, Mary Serena Chesnut Williams, she met her husband-to-be; Williams' uncle, the twenty-one-year-old James Chesnut, Jr., became a frequent visitor at Talvande's parlor and was smitten with the young Mary Miller, just thirteen at the time.

Chesnut's father was one of the state's wealthiest landholders, with a large stake in slaves. Born on Mulberry Plantation in Camden, Chesnut, Jr. had graduated from Princeton in 1835 and was studying law in Charleston when he met his niece's friend. His interest in the young girl was so intense, and obvious that Mary's father—to hush gossip and perhaps pre-empt impropriety—sent for his daughter, shipping her back to the family in Mississippi.

Her initial exposure to the deep South was both a shock and revelation to the impressionable young girl. She was bored by the absence of friends and the placidity of rural life on an isolated estate in the Delta. She was fascinated by her exposure to the elements, as well a growing fascination with the peculiar institution as slavery was called

[1] C, Van Woodward, *Mary Chesnut's Civil War,* 2 vols. (Norwalk, CT: Easton Press, 1998), 1: xxvii; Sandhillers is a nickname given to any "poor white" living in the pine woods which cover the sandy hills in Georgia and South Carolina.
[2] Elisabeth S. Muhlenfeld, *Mary Boykin Chesnut: A Biography* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press,1992), 18.

by southern statesmen like her father, and her future husband--both of whom were defenders of the southern way of life.

Her father sent her back to Charleston in the fall of 1837, but his untimely death shortly before her fifteenth birthday, plunged the Miller family into upheaval. Mary returned to Mississippi to assist her mother, forced to handle complex and overwhelming financial affairs. At the end of the legal tangle, it was determined that Miller had left his family with few resources, and in debt.

Meanwhile, Mary was being showered with attention, and gifts, and demands for her hand—with Chesnut at the head of a pack of suitors. Chesnut was able to win over the orphaned daughter, who agreed to his proposal of marriage in 1839.

In April 1840, less than a month after her seventeenth birthday, Mary and James were married. While his fortune was vast it was derived from slaveholding, and at the time of their marriage, his money was all tied up in his father's land and chattel. By the time they married, Chesnut was both a lawyer and an aspiring politician, not particularly anchored to the land. He would one day assume the Senate seat her father once held, reflecting the dynastic inbreeding of ante bellum South Carolina politics.

Mary Boykin Chesnut married and hoped to live happily ever after. But fate dealt her a different hand. First, instead of establishing her own independent household, the young bride was brought to Mulberry Plantation, expected to live with her husband's sisters and parents. This presented extreme domestic tensions for the high-spirited, and cosmopolitan newlywed.

Mary knew from the earliest days of her marriage that her duty was to become pregnant. She may have never conceived (the record is unclear), but, in any case, she never carried a child to term. Her hope for giving her husband an heir was extinguished. Setting aside the personal grief childlessness caused, she felt social stigma. Infertility was little understood and women were the ones faulted when couples failed to reproduce.

James Chesnut, Sr. expressed his fears that "with this war we may die out." He salted the wound when, in front of his childless daughter-in-law, he confided to his own wife: "You must feel that you have not been useless in your day and generation. You have now twenty-seven great-grandchildren.'" Chesnut lashed back in private, hinting that the Colonel had failed to mention the mixed-race children he had sired. [3]

Chesnut suffered "reproach among women," because, she confessed even females had "contempt for a childless wife." This was a lifelong sorrow, and in a letter to Confederate First Lady, Varina Davis, Chesnut confided in 1883: "You should thank God for your young immortals—I have nothing but Polish chickens—and Jersey calves." [4]

[3] Mary Chesnut, *Mary Chesnut's Diary*, Catherine Clinton, ed. (New York: Penguin, 2011), 127, 26.
[4] Ibid., 141: Muhlenfeld, *Mary Boykin Chesnut*, 203.

When she and her husband finally secured their own townhouse in Camden, she might have delighted in her own décor and management, but not in her inability to take on the role of matriarch.

Mary only found a métier worthy of her ambition when the couple moved to the District of Columbia following James Chesnut's election to the Senate in 1858.

She had spent nearly twenty years denied the spotlight she craved. Once in Washington, Mary Chesnut embraced the role of society hostess, and raised the level of her salon skills into an art form. She looked forward to reigning within Washington society, but her tenure was cut short when her husband resigned his Senate seat to support Confederate independence.

Far from disappointed, Mary Chesnut was energized by this new and exciting prospect. In a taunt she surely repented, Chesnut urged southern men to fight instead of talk. She prodded her husband to move aggressively, and accompanied her husband to the first Confederate capital, Montgomery and then on to Richmond.

During the war years, Mary Chesnut assumed the role of Cassandra, and if given the chance, would doubtless have played Macaria—the character in Greek mythology who sacrifices herself to save Athens. At one point she references Shakespeare's *Hamlet* to make a point: "We want to separate from them; to be rid of the Yankees forever at any price. And they hate us so, and would clasp us, or grapple us, as Polonius has it, to their bosoms, 'with hooks of steel.' We are an unwilling bride." [5]

In the Confederate capital of Richmond, this liberated matron flourished, with her husband assuming a central role in the war's earliest days. With Lincoln's election in 1860, Chesnut left the Senate to attend South Carolina's secession convention in December 1860. His skills were employed with the drafting of the Confederate Constitution. He was involved in the fateful events that took place in Charleston Bay, when Confederate forces demanded the surrender of Fort Sumter on April 11, 1861, and commenced a bombardment the next day. James Chesnut, Jr. was sent in the rowboat out to the island fort. He had been sent with a note from General P. G. T. Beauregard and was instructed to negotiate surrender with Major Robert Anderson. Chesnut made keen observations about federal defenses in his report. We certainly know how it eventually turned out—Anderson's refusal to surrender, the clock running out and the Confederates ready to attack to defend their new nation. But our appreciation of these events is magnified with Mary Chesnut's vivid account of the anxious hours on April 12, "I do not pretend to sleep. How can I?" She knew when the appointed hour of surrender approached, and was hoping for a peaceful handover. Half hour after the deadline had passed, the booming of the cannons destroyed such hopes. After falling down to say her prayers, she arose from her knees to head for the rooftop for a view of the bombardment. She shivered at the hail of lead raining down in the harbor: "The regular roar of the cannon—there it was. And who could tell what each volley accomplished of death and

[5] Clinton, *Diary,* 72.

destruction." Finally, the bombardment ended and the quiet put everyone on edge. The next day, learning no deaths had been reported, she commented: "Sound and fury signifying nothing—a delusion and a snare." [6]

But with her retrospective revisiting of the night in editing the journal, she tipped her hand by including the following observation: "Not by one word or look can we detect any change in the demeanor of these negro servants…You could not tell that they even heard the awful roar going on in the bay. …Are they stolidly stupid? or wiser than we are; silent and strong, biding their time." So Chesnut is hinting at things to come, as well as offering an eyewitness account of the black-white dynamic from the white perspective during the war's earliest days. [7]

Is her book embellished memoir, propagandistic puffery, confessional, self-aggrandizing or all of the above? By the time she got around to editing the manuscript in earnest, Chesnut knew her tale would have to be episodic, epic—and well told. She concentrated on taking her readers on a dramatic revisiting of the era, a virtual roller coaster rise and fall of the Confederacy, tracing the inevitable trajectory of decline with the outcome determined at the outset.

Yet Chesnut keeps her readers hanging on to the end even though we know what's going to happen. Her pluck and wit, her rawness transforms this account into a page-turner. "We try our soldiers to see if they are hot enough before we enlist them. If, when water is thrown on them they do not sizz, they won't do; their patriotism is too cool." And her very forthright opinions and observations began to sizzle off the page; her diary has been a bestseller and standard ever since. [8]

Beginning in 1905 with the first, and posthumous publication of her Civil War chronicle, Chesnut garnered widespread critical attention. Her husband's status within Jefferson Davis's government had provided her with unfettered access to the great events of the day—knowing everyone and hearing everything. [9]

The intrigue of Richmond's palace politics was etched into Chesnut's vivid reflections. The document showcased her own idiosyncrasies, but her writing also spoke to her class, to her times, and to the larger issues dividing America.

During her time in the Davis inner circle, Chesnut would leave her account laid out for friends to consult, sharing amusing anecdotes as well as the sad record of military defeats.

She cherished domesticity and her marriage appeared a long and happy one. At the war's beginning, she would doze on the sofa, listening to the scratches of her

[6] Ibid., 31-33.
[7] Ibid., 33-34.
[8] Ibid., 68.
[9] Chesnut's edited diary was first published as: Mary Boykin Chesnut, *A Diary from Dixie* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1905).

husband's pen as he worked well past midnight. Another evening, when she came home late from a party (her excessive socializing was a source of friction between the couple), she "put on my dressing-gown and scrambled some eggs, etc. there on our own fire. And with our feet on the fender and the small supper table between us, we enjoyed the supper and glorious gossip." These intimate details, as much as her political perspicacity, contributed to the book's success. [10]

In the late 1870s, when she decided to return to autobiography, Mary embellished her scribbles: transforming as she transcribed. Chesnut's alleged clairvoyance was retroactively sprinkled into her chronicle. Even before the first anniversary of the firing on Fort Sumter, she confesses: "I cry that outside hope is quenched. From the outside, no help indeed cometh to this beleaguered land." As she reshaped her journal, imagination overtook center stage. She blended memos and memories with hindsight—heightening the drama, creating an account massaged for effect. [11]

At the war's end her husband avoided imprisonment despite his prominent position within the Rebel administration, and Mary counted her blessings rallying her family in the face of surrender and Reconstruction. Chesnut took up her pen to try to earn money, but unfortunately was paid only $10—for a sketch printed in a newspaper—over her entire writing life. Chesnut spent her later years wrestling with the manuscript. During her prolonged bouts of editing, she put her materials into forty-four notebooks and fifteen pads. She then recalled and recast events, assembling a complex jumble of palimpsests to be interlaced into an epic.

During her final years, Chesnut preserved only three of her original volumes, completely refurbishing her "diary" into a memoir. She would interleaf amplifications into the original text to make herself look prescient. One entry, allegedly penned in December 1860, was tinged with melancholy: "I had better take my last look at this beautiful place, Combahee. It is on the coast, open to gunboats." Two years later, this was the site where Harriet Tubman, the great conductor for the Underground Railroad who worked as a scout and spy for the federal army, would lead a raid of Union gunboats up the river. The invading soldiers liberated slaves from their masters, robbed warehouses and torched plantations. [12]

Scores of former Combahee slaves enlisted in the Union army. This drove home the message that blacks would collaborate with the Yankees to destroy the Confederacy. Chesnut's warning that the Combahee region would be prey to gunboats was a fake harbinger. We know from comparative analysis of her copybooks that Chesnut made insertions—after the fact—to dramatize her narrative. Despite these efforts, she failed to complete the project before her death and left her magnum opus unfinished.

[10] Clinton, *Diary*, 8, 151.
[11] Ibid., 136.
[12] Ibid., 4.

Her dear friend Isabella D. Martin, a South Carolina educator to whom Chesnut entrusted her jumble of pages, shared the manuscript many years later with Myrta Lockett Avary, whose 1903 memoir of the war—*A Virginia Girl in the Civil War*—launched her literary career. Avary discussed the project with her publisher, D. Appleton & Company. Appleton editor Frances Halsey signed Martin and Avary as co-editors for the project. Confederate memoirs were finding fans abroad as well as at home. Halsey pruned enthusiastically, as the editorial troika culled roughly 130,000 words from the more than a million Chesnut left behind. [13]

The canonization of Chesnut slaked the thirst for Confederate heroines. Varina Davis, the First Lady of the Confederacy had faded from the spotlight and died in 1906. Her namesake, Winnie Davis, known as the "Daughter of the Confederacy" had predeceased her mother, dying in 1898. Lost Cause advocates were casting around for a new idol.

Mary Chesnut had been a very empathetic figure, particularly in the dramatic episode when Varina Davis lost her son Joe during a tragic accident in April 1864. She had planned to depart from the capital and had taken Varina's sister Margaret out for a picnic—on a boat on the James River. Many of the details of the family's grief, and the sad funeral which followed the next day, were recorded in Chesnut's diary.

As the carefree party returned from its excursion, Davis sent a carriage to fetch the group, who were told by the coachman that little Joe was dead. Mary Chesnut recorded that on the ride back to the Davis home the "silence [was] broken only by Maggie's hysterical sobs." When the party arrived, the house was lit up in every room, but the mansion was silent. [14]

The Chesnuts postponed their departure to attend the funeral. The death of a child was always a tragic affair, and the people of Richmond took their opportunity to shower the Davis family with condolences. Nearly a thousand children wound up the hill to Hollywood Cemetery for Joe's burial. While the President and his pregnant wife stood witness, each child dropped a bunch of spring flowers or a green spray on the plot, which became a mass of white flowers. So many of the mourners were struck by the cloaked figure of the First Lady, burying one child while pregnant with another. Davis's biographer commented, "Richmond had no remembrance of a more moving funeral." [15]

Scores of readers ached for the lost world where Confederate hopes were not yet erased. Chesnut's manuscript contained popular motifs present in most epics: homecoming and hospitality. Though Chesnut was long gone by the time her book

[13] Myrta Lockett Avary, ed. *A Virginia Girl in the Civil War 1861-1865. Being a Record of the Actual Experiences of the Wife of a Confederate Officer* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1903).
[14] Catherine Clinton, "Mourning in America: Death Comes to the Civil War White Houses," in Harold Holzer, Craig L. Symonds and Frank J. Williams, eds., *Exploring Lincoln: Great Historians Reappraise Our Greatest President* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 86.
[15] Ibid., 87.

appeared, her work spoke posthumously and passionately for a vanquished nation. The *Saturday Evening Post* christened her work "A Diary from Dixie" in its popular serialization. In 1905, Mary Chesnut was ready for her close up.

Fire more than warmth, and tartness more than saccharine contributed to the popularity of these reminiscences. Chesnut derided Rebel generals, as she complained in November 1863: "Misery is everywhere. Bragg is falling back before Grant. Longstreet, the soldiers all call him Peter the Slow, is settled down before Knoxville." Or she might take double-barreled aim at an African American servant and the Yankees he ran off with: "Minus his fine watch and chain, Eben returned a sadder and wiser man. He was soon in his shirt-sleeves, whistling at his knife-board…'I thought may be better stay with ole marster that give me the watch and not go with them that stole it.'" [16]

She quite often braided together her contempt for African Americans and the enemy: "The Yankees, since the war has begun, have discovered it is to free the slaves that they are fighting. So their cause is noble…we bear the ban of slavery; they get all the money. Cotton pays everybody who handles it, sells it, manufactures it, but rarely pays the man who grows it. Second hand the Yankee received the wages of slavery. They grew rich. We grew poor." [17]

Chesnut did not always genuflect to Confederate hagiography, but strayed into heresy with her vitriolic commentaries on sex and race. Ahead of her time, she frequently compared the plight of slaves with that of women: "I have seen a negro woman sold on the block at auction. She overtopped the crowd. I was walking and felt faint, seasick. The creature looked so like my good little Nancy, a bright mulatto with a pleasant face. She was magnificently got up in silks and satins. She seemed delighted with it all, sometimes ogling the bidders, sometimes looking quiet, coy and modest, but her mouth never relaxed from its expanded grin of excitement. I dare say the poor thing knew who would buy her. I sat down on a stool in a shop and disciplined my wild thoughts. I tried it Sterne fashion. You know how women sell themselves and are sold in marriage from queens downward eh? You know what the Bible says about slavery and marriage; poor women! Poor slaves!" [18]

Indeed, her caustic racism was in lockstep with the white majority of the New South, and the nation as a whole. Many scholars have cross-examined her cryptic language, her use of masks and racialized imagery. [19] She wrote passionately about slavery: "A hired man would be a good deal cheaper than a man whose father and mother, wife and twelve children have to be fed, clothed, housed, and nursed, their taxes paid, and their doctor's bills, all for his half-done, slovenly, lazy work. For years we

[16] Avery, *A Virginia Girl*, 258, 397.
[17] Clinton, *Diary*, 200.
[18] Ibid., 13
[19] See in particular ibid., 38, 325,381.

have thought negroes a nuisance that did not pay. They pretend exuberant loyalty to us now." [20]

Blacks appear frequently in Chesnut's text, as one of her most complex manipulations. She might use ventriloquism to give black characters a voice—literally or figuratively putting words in their mouths. This reflects a particular post-war style of memoir—whites in blackface—one described in *Tara Revisited: Women, the War and the Plantation Legend* as "Confederate porn." [21]

As Chesnut's critics point out, accuracy, arrogance and audience must be triangulated when considering such published accounts. Chesnut accused others of wearing a mask, but her use of this metaphor underscored the ambiguity of who it was maintaining the masquerade.

But whether she was describing verbatim or disremembering an exchange or even if she was consciously inventing dialogue, Chesnut employs African American agency to advance her message. She brings in a chorus to reinforce the points she hammers home about the wickedness of Yankees and the virtues of her fellow Confederates. Chesnut's recollections stress masters' benevolence and African American fealty. She was, above all, an unapologetic promoter of her class.

Most episodes highlighting racial conflict (in the Martin and Avary edition) end harmoniously, like the tale of a drunken footman brandishing a knife, who is disarmed by his mistress. [22] Scenes of faithful slaves figure prominently—the legendary "loyalists" like Isaac McLaughlin who guarded family possessions [23] and Scipio Africanus, her father-in-law's manservant, who remained by the Colonel's side, facing down Yankee hostility. [24] Mary Chesnut boasted when her household maid Ellen hid diamonds from the Yankees, then returned these precious jewels to her mistress "as if they had been garden peas." [25]

In spite of plentiful examples of trustworthy blacks, Chesnut powerfully and personally confronted slavery's consequences when in September 1861 her cousin Betsey Witherspoon was found dead in her bed. That she died in her sleep is reported in Martin and Avary's edition. But they conveniently omitted the fact that authorities later discovered Witherspoon was murdered by her slaves, smothered with a pillow. This image of slave treachery and betrayal haunted Chesnut; for the next five months following this incident, Chesnut did not write in her journal, only resuming her chronicle in February 1862.

[20] Ibid., 387.
[21] Catherine Clinton, *Tara Revisited: Women, the War and the Plantation Legend* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1995), 203.
[22]Clinton, *Diary*, 168.
[23] Ibid., 345, 364.
[24] Ibid., 397.
[25] Ibid., 381.

Despite Chesnut's own self-censorship and editorial interventions, despite its hybridity, this volume remains riveting reading. G. Thomas Couser calls it "a novelized chronicle in diary form." The snap, crackle and pop of the book's creativity fascinates--for what it reveals, as much as what it attempts to disguise.[26]

On May 15, 1862, General Benjamin Butler, the Union commander of occupied New Orleans, issued his infamous General Order Number 28, warning southern females to be respectful of the Union soldiers on the street, or face the consequences. Chesnut railed: "We thought that generals always restrained by shot and sword if need be, the brutality of soldiers. This hideous cross-eyed beast orders his men to treat the ladies of New Orleans as women of the town—to punish them, he says, for their insolence." [27] Chesnut admired those who defied stereotype, like her South Carolina contemporary, Louisa McCord, "She has the intellect of a man and the perseverance and endurance of a woman." Despite prohibitions, Chesnut frequently spoke her mind. She even made fun of this trait, when she confessed in third-person, "For once in her life, Mrs. Chesnut held her tongue." [28]

Her bluntness on the page reflected Chesnut's famous wit. She suggested Byron might be: "a trying lover; like talking to a man looking in the glass at himself." [29]She carped about the foreign press: "Those Englishmen come, somebody says, with three P's—pen, paper, prejudices." [30] She encountered a woman who blamed South Carolina's "mischief" for causing the war. Chesnut let this insult pass, as [she]: "told me she was a successful writer in the magazines of the day, but when I found she used 'incredible' for 'incredulous,'...I left her incredible and I remained incredulous." [31] Martin and Avery styled the manuscript to reinforce this image of their author, as a, "woman of society in the best sense." [32] In post-war Carolina whether bartering for food or reduced to tattered gowns, Chesnut maintained her dignity.

Many of her comments about slavery were out of step with neo-Confederate ideology: "But what do you say to this—to a magnate who runs a hideous black harem with its consequences, under the same roof with his lovely white wife and his beautiful and accomplished daughters? He holds his head high and poses as the model of all human virtues to these poor women whom God and the laws have given him. You see Mrs. Stowe did not hit the sorest spot. She makes Legree a bachelor." This was a searing indictment for any advocate of the Lost Cause. [33]

[26] G. Thomas Couser, *Altered Egos: Authority in American Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 160.
[27] Clinton, *Diary,* 164.
[28] Ibid., 335, 3.
[29] Ibid., 297.
[30] Ibid., 60.
[31] Ibid., 9 9
[32] Ibid., xvi.
[33] Ibid., 114-116.

Chesnut viewed sex—the category and the act—as significant dynamics, causing ripples within the dead calm seas of cultural dissemblance where she was expected to float. But Chesnut liked to stir things up. Although she might include light-hearted aspects of the battle between the sexes, her journal more often reflected harsher realities. She knew women, white and black, were expected to endure circumscribed lives, obedient to the patriarchal order where white men preached a doctrine of their own infallibility.

Many bluestockings could and did challenge this doctrine and some went so far as to suggest female "superiority," claiming the high moral ground. With her own superior intellect and manifold frustrations, Chesnut espoused some strain of "magnolia feminism," a precursor of "second sex" sensibility.

Since the first publication of her autobiographical writings in 1905, Chesnut's reputation has been on the rise. She has attracted two fine biographers, Mary DeCredico and Elisabeth Muhlenfeld. The latter has also edited Chesnut's unpublished fiction (2002) and co-edited Chesnut's unrevised wartime journal entries (1984).

She has caused many a great literary man of the twentieth century to lavish praise: Douglas Southall Freeman called her book "the most famous war-diary of a Southern woman." Louis D. Rubin, Jr. declared she had produced "by all odds the best of all Civil War memoirs, and one of the most remarkable eye-witness accounts to emerge from that or any other war." And finally, William Styron proclaimed Chesnut the author of "a great epic drama of our greatest national tragedy." And despite her text's anti-Yankee bias, none other than Lyman Butterfield, as editor in chief of the Adams Papers--with impeccable Yankee credentials—anointed her work, "the best written by a woman in the whole range of our history."[34]

In 1962 Edmund Wilson elevated Chesnut into the pantheon of great civil war memoirists with his magisterial *Patriotic Gore: Studies of the Literature of the American Civil War*. A parade of modern scholars has succumbed to Chesnut's charisma, including Daniel Aaron (1973) and, most famously, C. Van Woodward (1981 & 1984). [35]

[34] Ibid., Introduction.
[35] Edmund Wilson, *Patriotic Gore: Studies of the Literature of the American Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962); Daniel Aaron, *The Unwritten War: American Writers and the Civil War* (New York: Knopf distributed by Random House, 1973); Woodward, *Mary Chesnut's Civil War.*

Mary Boykin (Miller) Chesnut

Born	March 1, 1823 near Stateburg South Carolina
Died	November 22, 1886 Camden South Carolina
Buried	Knight's Hill Cemetery Camden South Carolina
Father	Stephen Decatur Miller
Mother	Mary Boykin
Career Milestones	1835 attended Madame Talvande's boarding school in Charleston SC | April 1840 married James Chesnut, Jr. | 1860 moved to Charleston SC where her husband assumed important roles with the new Confederate government and witnessed the firing on Fort Sumter in April 1861 | Her "diary" opens on November 8, 1860 | late 1870's began revising and editing her material | 1886 on her death she left her jumble of pages and over 1 million words to the care of her friend Isabella D. Martin | 1905 Isabella Martin and D. Appleton & Company. Appleton editor Frances Halsey culled her writings to 130,000 words and published Mary Boykin Chesnut, *A Diary from Dixie* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1905) | 1949-2011 a series of books have been written by a variety of historians analyzing Mary Chesnut's Diary.

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