

# Rewiev Essay: Mary Chesnut's Civil War

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Mary Boykin Chesnut of Camden, South Carolina, might well have written the novel about the Civil War that so many writers and critics have complained was never written,<sup>1</sup> but she only wrote what is known as her »Diary from Dixie.« Daughter of a Governor, she married into a family of great wealth and became the wife of one-time Senator and later Aide to Jefferson Davis, General James Chesnut, Jr. Accompanying her husband from Montgomery to Richmond and back to South Carolina, she was at the center of the affairs of the Confederacy, listening to high-level rumour, sharing the secrets and scandals of her intimate friends. But she also grieved with the wounded and bereaved, and mourned the loss of the gallant young men of the South. She believed in the abolition of slavery, and in the equality of the sexes, and she sensed that her own predicament as the childless wife of a slave-owner in many ways reflected that of her loved South. Jotting down notes of »current rumor,« telling the tale »as it is told to me,«<sup>2</sup> Chesnut inadvertently (but also very deliberately) came to tell a story of the tragic War Between the States, of her own plight, and of a way of life slowly but surely being disrupted and destroyed. *Her* time is, then, that past which Southern novelists so often have brought to life in their stories from later days: a past that remained very much part of a living present, but also a past that could be glorified and turned into romanticism.

Chesnut's »Diary« comes closer than anything I know of in evoking the atmosphere and mood of the Confederacy in its struggle. Edmund Wilson has said about Mary Chesnut, that

The very rhythm of her opening pages at once puts us under the spell of a writer who is not merely jotting down her days but establishing, as a novelist does, an atmosphere, an emotional tone.<sup>3</sup>

Daniel Aaron notes that the »Diary«

... abounds with evocative description, turns of phrase, comic episodes, anecdotes, dramatic situation, conversational exchanges, trenchant comment, and down-to-earth realities conspicuously absent in the sappy fiction of her day and later, and it is filled with nostalgic sad, bitter, and funny Confederate scenes.<sup>4</sup>

James B. Meriwether writes that Mary Chesnut

Again and again . . . turns inward, upon herself, her powers of analysis, her sharp weapons of wit and irony. She loves to expose pretention and self-deception in others; she is constantly alert for signs of such qualities in herself.<sup>5</sup>

Except for the third of these statements, they are based on severely cut, abbreviated, and adjusted versions of the so-called »Diary.« The badly needed and long overdue *reliable* version of Chesnut's journals and notebooks from the Civil War is now available. And although the second and relatively comprehensive version of *A Diary from Dixie* has existed for so long and has been so widely read and studied as to become almost a book in its own right, independent of the material it ought to rely on, there can be little doubt that *Mary Chesnut's Civil War*, under the editorship of C. Vann Woodward, supersedes the two former versions. Given the nature of the manuscripts, it is unlikely to be replaced by a new and improved version in the future. The comprehensive volume entitled *Mary Chesnut's Civil War* and published by Yale University Press, deserves to become the version for posterity.

The most important information revealed in the new book is perhaps that the two former versions of Mary Chesnut's »Diary« hardly deserve to be called »diary« at all. At best the manuscript used as the basis for these texts is a »simulated diary,« written about twenty years *after* the actual events, which everybody has presumed to have been recorded as they happened. Nonetheless, the Chesnut »diary« embodies the common characteristics of the real diary — freshness and actuality and spontaneity, without any knowledge about the final outcome of events to distort the real-life impression. The use by historians and literary critics of the »Diary« as a source-book for information about the situation in the Southern camp during these tragic years must now become a matter of real concern. Fortunately, Chesnut did keep a diary during at least some of the dreary years of war. Furthermore, she relied extensively on these »notes« or »journals« as she preferred to call them, when writing her »book« in the 1880's. The renowned historian, C. Vann Woodward, in his excellent introduction to *Mary Chesnut's Civil War*, assures us that the diarist's original impressions are less distorted by the lapse of twenty traumatic years in the history of the South than might be feared. In relation to »the classic historical problem of hindsight and relativism,« Woodward claims that Chesnut »comes off very well;«<sup>7</sup> thus implying that we can rely on her observations very far. There is, for instance, ample proof in the abundant manuscript material, that her abolitionist attitudes and rather militant feminism were genuine, and

not afterthoughts brought about by changes in the South following the defeat.

Before we take a closer look at the new book it may be useful to comment briefly on the two former editions of the »Diary.«

The first one appeared in 1905, entitled *A Diary from Dixie, as Written by Mary Boykin Chesnut, Wife of James Chesnut, Jr., United States Senator from South Carolina, 1859-1861, and Afterward Aide to Jefferson Davis and a Brigadier General in the Confederate Army*. It was edited by Isabella D. Martin and Myrta L. Avery, and the book publication was preceded by a serialization in the *Saturday Evening Post*. The title of the serialization and of the published book was apparently an invention of a *Post* editor, since the editors of the book had suggested the title »With the Heroes of Dixie.«<sup>8</sup> This version, as well as the 1949 version edited by the novelist Ben Ames Williams,<sup>9</sup> derive from the 1880's version of Chesnut's work on her Civil War material. Chesnut had left her manuscripts in the care of Isabella Martin, who apparently believed that she had been given complete authority over them, and accordingly cut and revised so that »passages out of line with the current Southern version of Confederate legend« were deleted.<sup>10</sup> The publishing house of Appleton also played an important part in the revisions and deletions, introducing chapter divisions and titles, etc. The book, inevitably, was by no means what Chesnut had left behind her, either in the 1880's version of her manuscripts or any other.

Ben Ames Williams seems to have been infatuated by Chesnut's personality more than by her work; so much, indeed, that she actually figures under a fictional name in his Civil War romance, *House Divided*.<sup>11</sup> Williams' primary aim as an editor of the Chesnut papers — he even had access to fragments of the original journals from the 1860's — was to do everything to increase readability. To gain this end he even went so far that he invented both the opening and the concluding passages, and, as Vann Woodward drily states, »the opening sentence [contains] three errors.«<sup>12</sup> Williams' book was far more comprehensive than the previous edition, but like the editors of the 1905 book, he gave no indication of his omissions, emendations, or alterations, except for general statements in the Introduction. Silent emendations and corrections, deletions and additions, thus abound. Nevertheless, the severely altered and condensed version prepared by Williams was of great value in the sense that it made the book available in a coherent and easily readable version. It brought increasing attention to the inherent value of the »Diary,« both as a document of its time and for its literary qualities. As a

source of information about the Civil War, the »Diary« has been regarded as almost indispensable. The need for a reliable version is accordingly self-evident. As mentioned above, Vann Woodward's edition appears to be this reliable version of the Chesnut papers. To give an impression of this edition, a survey of the manuscript material and the possible choices for the new edition is needed. This will also throw some light upon the complex process that the book went through before Chesnut ceased her work on it — a process that had to be understood and assessed by the editor when he, nearly a century later, began the immense work of editing *Mary Chesnut's Civil War*.

Mary Chesnut began her »journal« while she was in Montgomery, Alabama with her husband who helped with the founding of the new Confederate government. The first entry is dated February 18, 1861, and contrary to the rest of the journal, it deals more with the past than with the present. Thus it serves as an apt introduction to the later entries, giving forebodings of what lies in store in the future, setting the tone for what is to follow later on. Whether the dating of this entry is, indeed, correct, is of little interest. More important is her adamant resolution to keep a journal in the future, in order to give a portrait of »my world;« a world comprising much of the military, social, and political elite of the Confederate States of America. She may have kept her resolution to a much greater extent than we have information about today. Only seven volumes of the early journal survive;<sup>13</sup> the first five run from February 1861 to December of the same year, whereas one of the others covers most of January and February 1865, and the last one runs from May to July 26, 1865. Circumstantial evidence indicates that at least twelve volumes of this version once existed; perhaps Chesnut had even more than twelve volumes available when she set out to write the *public* version in the 1870's and 1880's. Woodward finds it unlikely that Chesnut should have kept a diary regularly in 1863 and 1864, using her preoccupation with her husband's correspondence and with hospital work, houseguests, entertaining, etc. to show that both time and circumstance worked against her resolution to keep a regular diary. But she had had the good luck »to stumble in on the *real show*,«<sup>14</sup> as she phrased it. It was good luck, indeed: the opportunity to acquire her material came through birth and marriage, but the treatment of it reflects her wide reading, her unusual wit, independence, ambition, energy and stubbornness, and a great literary talent.

The frankness and candour with which she wrote in her journal made it necessary to keep her writing a secret, and there can be little doubt that the original journals were intended to function as a private

diary. Here the I-narrator is omnipresent and at the very centre of all events, carrying on an inner dialogue with herself which was obviously not intended for publication.<sup>15</sup> This may also indicate that Mrs. Chesnut saw the inherent literary possibilities in the material she had stumbled upon, and accordingly she wanted to retain as vivid and fresh an impression of it as possible. Later she might rework and polish the material for public use. But even this earliest material shows that Chesnut had the eye and ear of a novelist; her observations are perceptive if sometimes misleading, and her interpretations are often penetrating.

It is thus fairly obvious that the journal in its original form, even if more of it were extant, would not have been publishable today. Woodward notes that it »contained too many indiscretions, gaps, trivialities, and incoherencies.«<sup>16</sup> The fact that only a few of the original journals exist made the editor's decision to rely on a later version of them inevitable. Whenever material from the original version was left out from the later version, this material might be inserted if interesting enough to deserve it. As we shall see, this is part of the policy the editor has pursued.

Ten years after the War had ended, Chesnut made her first attempt to revise the journal. She began her efforts in 1875 and stopped in the middle of 1876. Of this version only four sections remain, comprising some 400 pages, and dealing with periods in 1861 and 1864. The sections are numbered 10, 11, 21, and 22, and although we do not know whether she ever completed this version, the numbers indicate that a complete 1875 manuscript would have run to approximately 2,000 pages.

The fragments of the 1875 manuscript demonstrates that Chesnut's effort at this point was limited to »weeding out« some of the irrelevant and indiscreet passages from the original journal. Comparison with the 1860's version is not always possible, due to the many missing parts of both versions, but Woodward maintains that events and experiences are, basically, retained from the journal, while new episodes are added and some dates shifted about.

Mary Chesnut had certainly envisioned literary possibilities for her journal; she did not succeed in realizing these possibilities in her revisions in 1875 and 1876. But she still had her secret notebooks with the fresh and vivid memories from the War. She had to try once more to transform these raw impressions into a narrative (which might well be in the diary form) that could be published and that would be of more general interest. She had to deprivatize her journal, she had to separate her inner dialogue from the dialogue addressed to the public. Or,

rather: she had to find a form in which she could accomplish both at the same time: a narrative structure in which she placed herself at the centre and developed herself as character-narrator. She would have to narrate the drama of the Confederacy simultaneously, reconstructing it on the basis of her memory, creating, inevitably, an artifact, a product of her own mind, yet one based on personal experience. Woodward claims that Chesnut's integrity was so great that her considerable expansions and alterations of the original journal did not alter the basic **facts**. To talk about distortions or falsifications would be to misunderstand the nature of her revisions.<sup>17</sup> In a review of *Mary Chesnut's Civil War*, the Southern novelist William Styron, gives what I find to be a just description of Chesnut's final (1880's) revisions:

... The liberties she took in this reworking of her own material were plainly great, but the final product was not the creation of one who has distorted or falsified history but of one who, through the prism of memory and in the calm of reflection, has perhaps cast a brighter and more revealing light upon past events than might have been shed in an actual journal, with its frequent myopia.<sup>18</sup>

When Mary Chesnut in 1881 finally undertook the difficult task of writing a sustained and consistent version on the basis of her wartime journals, time and circumstances were not favourable. Woodward describes her plight at this time:

... she was fifty-eight and in a wretched health, plagued by a heart condition, lung trouble, and minor ailments. Among her daily responsibilities were running a dairy farm and a household full of aging, ailing, and often demanding relatives<sup>19</sup>

Still, she spent her next few years (she died in 1886) to write two drafts for her book; presumably she worked on both versions from day to day rather than completed the first draft before beginning the second one. Altogether some 4,200 pages of the two drafts survive — most of the first and all of the second one.

The second draft is the last version that Chesnut made, although one must be cautious not to regard this draft as a final copy. Chesnut felt that she would have to »overhaul it again — and again.<sup>20</sup> On the basis of her revisions of her other work,<sup>21</sup> one may assume that she would have put in a great deal of work even on this second draft. Yet this draft is what Mary Chesnut finally left behind: this is where an editor must start, before working his way backwards through the other versions. There is little choice, however, but to use the second draft of the 1880's version as the basic copy text for a published version; which is what Woodward has done.

In one of her letters Chesnut writes about »leaving myself out«<sup>22</sup> of the book, and even though she could not possibly have left herself out in

any real sense, the fact is that additions and expansions are much more numerous than are omissions and deletions. The »simulated diary« from the 1880's takes great liberties with the material in the 1860's journal. The literal record of events is changed, dates are shifted, speakers switched, etc., but »the integrity of the author's experience and perception is maintained in this transformation.«<sup>23</sup>

The abundant manuscript material, often in a handwriting that it takes considerable skill to decipher, must have put heavy strain on the many people involved in the transcription and collation of the manuscripts. Moreover, with all this work accomplished and with the knowledge that the >)day-to-daydiary« from the Civil War was, basically, written in the 1880's, the editor must have been tempted to use as much as possible of the original journal (and of the 1870's text) in the new edition. He has resisted most of the temptations he may have felt, but the problem would still be whether to use material from the early versions in the published book, and to what extent? In a scholarly edition this material could have been presented in footnotes, appendices, or the like; in a book for a more general reading public, readability had to be one of the editor's chief concerns. Woodward had to balance rather precariously between the need for accuracy and documentation, setting forth all his choices and the reasons for them, and a natural wish to make the material easily accessible, without use of extensive annotations. The mannerisms and personal idiosyncracies and eccentricities of Chesnut's spelling and handwriting posed many, but minor problems: they had to be corrected and regularized. As the volume now stands, much is deleted from Chesnut's manuscripts, but deletions are always indicated ( . . . ), and in most cases only quotations from books and songs are left out. Emendations are used to correct not only spelling, but punctuation and capitalization, too, and Woodward has, with good reason, felt less obliged to some absolute standard of textual purity than to the reader. It would, in my opinion, be unfair to criticize these silent emendations: they are needed, and the apparatus required to explain them would have been of doubtful value. Omissions and restorations of erased passages are, however, both indicated ( xxx and angle brackets < >, respectively). Excerpts from other versions than the final 1880's draft are directly inserted into the text within double angle brackets. Most of these are naturally from the 1860's journal. Explanatory insertions and conjectural passages by the editor are given in square brackets; fortunately they are only as many as are absolutely necessary for our understanding. All persons are identified in footnotes, as are

quotations from books and poems. An extensive and very useful index is also added to the volume.

Although I have relied on Woodward's admirable introduction for much of what I have written above, there are altogether four parts of this introduction, and it is worth a brief comment. The first part is called »Diary in Fact—Diary in Form,« and deals with the textual problems posed by the many versions of the manuscripts and of the two previously published books. This section is followed by a biographical account, »Mary Boykin Chesnut, 1823 -1886,«<sup>24</sup> which is complemented by a brief discussion of her attitudes and the many tensions in her life in a section called »Of Heresy and Paradox.« Both sections ought to be required reading before one enters the realm of Chesnut's War itself. The final section of Woodward's introduction sets forth the editorial problems and policies.

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Chesnut's book has often been referred to because of the information it gives about the South in the days of the Civil War. If this was its real or only value, the facts of the extensive revisions of the original journals, combined with expansions and additions and omissions, would have reduced the book's value as a source of information. From an editorial point of view, the material she left behind is fascinating. As autobiography the work has its obvious interest. And yet the value of *Mary Chesnut's Civil War* lies somewhere else. Chesnut's Civil War story is valuable because she had the good fortune of being at the right places at the right time and could chronicle the contemporary events in a very dramatic period, but mostly because she accomplished to give a vivid picture, crowded with interesting people, filled with heart-shattering events, evoking the chaotic days and ways of a society at war, a society in the throes of a life and death struggle, since defeat would mean the end of that society and the way of life it represented.

Thus there can be little doubt that the lasting value of this work does not lie in the information it gives about the war — which is not reliable on all points; it is rather her depiction of how the war somehow affected every aspect of daily life in the South and changed the situation for rich and poor, white and black alike, that gives the account such unusual strength. The battle and campaigns seem endless and the book abounds with references and allusions to them. The horrors of war come through very realistically in descriptions of hospital work, of dead and mutilated

soldiers, of mourning relatives. Even in the remotest corners of the Confederacy privations are experienced, the prospects are bleak, and at times the darkness is pervasive. Small talk and gossip, from places such as Richmond, Charleston, and Camden, often soften the gloom a little, and Chesnut's apparent feeling that the South fought a losing battle strangely and almost intangibly lessen the burden of war and make it endurable. Battles are lost and battles are won, hopes are fulfilled but more often deferred; ambitions and dreams have to yield to a stoic acceptance of life in the South in the reconstruction period.

Strong in spirit and sharp in perception, independent in judgment and firm in her most basic conceptions and attitudes, Mary Chesnut told and retold her story, enhancing its effectiveness, adding to its enthralling charm and its appalling tragedy. She had, like all great diarists,<sup>25</sup> two subjects, perhaps even a third, all interwoven so as to become inextricable. Her story had to be one, however, and May Chesnut's *Civil War* presents the great epic drama of the Civil War — the greatest of all American events; it tells the story of Mary Chesnut herself, an abolitionist and feminist in a society in which slavery and patriarchal domination were facts of life; and it evokes the prevailing mood of a society and a way of life in its period of decline and fall. Her treatment of the themes of slavery and oppression of woman coincide; they are both forms of exploitation, and Chesnut simply equates the lot of women with that of slaves.

By telling the stories of a war, a woman (herself), and a way of life in one narrative, Chesnut could make each subject benefit from the others. Her own marriage, obviously a stormy one, could be used as a vehicle for relating the major conflict in the book. Her barrenness becomes the barrenness of the society in which she lived. The romantic adventures of some of her female characters provide other metaphors which are used in the description of the Confederate cause. Obviously, the plight of the slaves and the oppression of women provided other useful parallels and metaphors, in addition to their being important aspects of the story in their own right.

In her *Civil War* narrative, Mary Chesnut appears as vain, conceited, ambitious, and skeptical, but she subjects her own shortcomings and failures to the same scrutiny she aims at other characters in the book, men and women, rich and poor, brave and foolish, at all levels in her society. Vehemently she despises hypocrisy and pretensions; her emotions can be passionate, her expressions are often strong and apparently unguarded. She gives ominous forebodings of what the War will lead to, but she accepts her society's destiny — and her own dark fate —

with wry skepticism. In addition to the dense texture of her Civil War journal, with its abundance of acute observations of character and scene and its masterly evocation of mood and atmosphere, the extraordinary personality of its narrator is most fascinating. Mary Chesnut was torn apart by conflicting attitudes and tensions of many sorts; her life was broken in half by the War, and this led her from wealth and position to poverty and privation in later years. To us she cannot be separated from her great book, which she did not live to finish, but which now has found the form it so richly deserves. Mary Chesnut's *Civil War* is likely to remain one of the basic books in Southern literature; and there is nothing quite like it anywhere.

#### NOTES

1. Cf. Daniel Aaron, *The Unwritten War: American Writers and the Civil War* (London, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1975).
2. See »Introduction« to *X Diary from Dixie*, edited by Ben Ames Williams (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1949), p. x, and Aaron, *The Unwritten War*, p. 251.
3. Edmund Wilson, *Patriotic Gore: Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War* (New York, 1962). Quoted from Woodward's »Introduction« to *Mary Chesnut's Civil War*, p. xv.
4. Aaron, *The Unwritten War*, p. 259.
5. James B. Meriwether, »Mary Chesnut's Diary Tells Story Of A Woman And A Way Of Life.« Review of Woodward's edition in the Columbia, S.C. newspaper, *The State*, 12 April 1981.
6. The book is much more comprehensive than the former editions; it is better edited, and the reader is informed about the various choices and decisions the editor has made. *Mary Chesnut's Civil War* gives a full and accurate text, well documented and with much additional information about the author and the genesis of her Civil War journal.
7. *Mary Chesnut's Civil War*, »Introduction,« p. xxvii.
8. See Woodward's discussion of this in *Mary Chesnut's Civil War*, »Introduction,« pp. xxviii-xxix, and Meriwether's review, referred to in note 5. The information about the intended title is from this review.
9. This book was reissued by Harvard University Press in 1980, with a 1962 essay by Edmund Wilson, described as a »Foreword,« added to the Williams edition of the text.
10. *Mary Chesnut's Civil War*, »Introduction,« p. xxiii.
11. Ben Ames Williams openly acknowledges this fact in his introduction to *Diary from Dixie*, »Introduction,« p. [7].
12. *Mary Chesnut's Civil War*, »Introduction,« p. xxix.
13. Together with almost all Chesnut's surviving manuscripts, these notebooks are in the South Caroliniana Library at the University of South Carolina, Columbia, S.C.
14. *Mary Chesnut's Civil War*, »Introduction,« p. xx.
15. See Woodward's description of this in his »Introduction,« p. xix, and Daniel Aaron's statements in *The Unwritten War*, p. 251. Aaron says that the diary »even at the time of its composition could hardly be described as secret or pri-

vate,« but our knowledge about its actual composition reduces the validity of this evaluation.

16. *Mary Chesnut's Civil War*, »Introduction,« p. xxi.
17. Kenneth Lynn, in *The New York Times Book Review*, describes Mary Chesnut's *Civil War* as »one of the most audacious frauds in the history of American literature,« calling the work a »hoax.« See his review, »The Masterpiece That Became a Hoax,« (*The New York Times Book Review*, 26 April 1981). Lynn's charges are, to say the least, unfair.
18. William Styron, »In the Southern Camp,« *The New York Review of Books*, 13 August 1981, p. 25.
19. *Mary Chesnut's Civil War*, »Introduction,« p. xxiv.
20. *Ibid.*, p. xxiv.
21. I have in mind her *novels* in particular; e.g. »The Captain and the Colonels and »Two Years of My Life.« See Woodward's »Introduction,« pp. xxii-xxiii.
22. Letter to Varina Davis in June 1883; quoted from Woodward's »Introduction,« p. xxiv.
23. *Ibid.*, p. xxv.
24. Woodward relies extensively on Elisabeth Muhlenfeld's Ph.D. dissertation (South Carolina 1978), »Mary Boykin Chesnut: The Writer and Her Work.«
25. I have borrowed this expression from Meriwether's review of the book, referred to in note 5 above, and much of *my* review of the book is indebted to conversations with him during the summer of 1981; a debt I gratefully acknowledge.