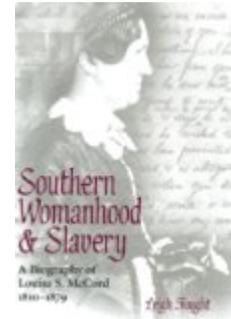


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Leigh Fought. *Southern Womanhood and Slavery: A Biography of Louisa S. McCord, 1810-1879*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003. xiv + 216 pp. \$32.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8262-1470-6.

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A Woman of Contradictions

Louisa Susanna Cheves was born in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1810, the daughter of Langdon Cheves and Mary Dulles Cheves. Her father would become a prominent politician, serving as the president of the Bank of the United States between 1819 and 1823. He would also become a wealthy planter, owning four plantations and as many as three hundred slaves (p. 28). Her mother's family was closely tied to the planter elite of South Carolina, providing access to the highest social circles.

The family moved around a great deal in Louisa's early years, including a residence in Philadelphia. They finally settled in South Carolina, where their family connections and personal holdings made them part of the southern planter aristocracy. Leigh Fought's biography provides a detailed picture of Louisa's family connections and shows how familial influences shaped her.

Louisa remained in her paternal home, caring for her father and siblings after her mother's death, until the age of thirty. Then, in 1840 she married David McCord, compelled, Fought suggests, as much by a sense of social obligation as by any romantic sentiment. Being a married woman meant that she was fulfilling her destiny in southern society; it also meant, not inconsequentially, that she had more freedom to publish her writings without becoming a social outcast.

After her marriage, McCord became the mother of three children and the mistress of her own plantation household. Yet McCord's experiences within these roles

did not always match the conservative social ideals that she advocated in her writings. McCord refused to become a stepmother to her husband's children from a previous marriage, and she even remained somewhat removed from the nurturing of her own children (pp. 94-97). Her version of the plantation mistress also set her apart because she continued to hold title to her plantation and slaves rather than turning them over to her husband upon her marriage. Leigh Fought clearly captures these contradictions between the ideals and realities in McCord's life.

Fought laments that, despite McCord's contributions as a southern intellectual, she has not received the historical attention she deserves. Existing studies have largely focused on McCord's literary contributions. Such works on McCord include Jesse Melville Fraser's 1919 master's thesis, which remained the sole academic study of McCord for many years. In 1996, Richard C. Lounsbury's two-volume collection of McCord's writings provided important access to information about McCord but also focused primarily on McCord's literary output. Fought notes that the development of women's history reignited an interest in southern women like McCord. Fought particularly credits Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, whose *Within the Plantation Household* includes a chapter featuring McCord. While Fox-Genovese used McCord to illuminate larger social issues in the plantation South, Fought is more interested in exploring McCord as an individual (p. 5).[1]

Louisa McCord found her greatest personal fulfillment in writing. Her published works include a play, *Caius Gracchus*; a book of poetry, *My Dreams*, published in 1848; and a number of essays. These essays often focused on defending the southern social order, in particular the subordinate position of slaves and women. In one of her essays, McCord wrote, "God, who has made every creature to its place, has, perhaps, not given to woman the most enviable position in his creation, but a mostly clearly defined position he *has* given her" (p. 25).

Again, Fought's work is particularly strong in addressing the paradox of McCord's position as an advocate of the social subordination of women who meanwhile sought a public voice for herself. Such behavior made McCord a "living contradiction" (p.91), and Fought suggests that "the ways in which she grappled with these issues and resolved these conflicts in her own life can illuminate the ways in which elite women rationalized and negotiated their position not only in a slave society but within the nation as a whole" (p. 13).

McCord's views on slavery and her role as a slaveholder were not nearly so contradictory as were her ideals of womanhood and her role as a writer. Her writings adamantly defended the slave system. Fought argues that McCord viewed slavery as necessary "not only for her own well-being and upkeep, but also for the improvement of people of African descent and for the maintenance of peaceful relations between classes and races" (p. 43). Fought suggests that this defense stemmed not merely from a southern upbringing and an inherited belief in the importance of slavery but also from McCord's understanding of class relations derived from the periods of her childhood spent in the North.

The records of McCord's own slaveholding were destroyed, so it is impossible to get a full picture of how she interacted with those she personally held in bondage. Her expressed opinion, however, that blacks freed from slavery would become "brutish" clearly indicates that racial attitudes contributed to McCord's view of slavery (p. 56). McCord believed not just that slavery should be preserved but that it should be extended north and west. Her views on slavery were extremely conservative, even within the conservative South. The question then becomes not what made McCord proslavery, but what made her so very conservative in these views?

Fought's ability to know Louisa McCord's private sentiments, as she herself points out, is somewhat limited by the lack of available sources. McCord unfortunately left no diary of her innermost thoughts. To overcome this

informational shortfall, Fought has done an admirable job of recreating the context of McCord's life through the documents left by family members and others within McCord's social circle (pp. 8-9). This allows Fought to reconstruct McCord's actions and probable motivations. Fought also uses McCord's public writings to reconstruct her ideas and sentiments. While McCord's essays reveal her belief system, some readers may find the interpretative uses of her poetry to ascertain her feelings more problematic.

Perhaps because of the limits of available sources, Fought's work tends to focus on how McCord's views reflected her social context. Fought uses biography to suggest larger social patterns of gender or race. This study may have been strengthened, however, by a greater exploration of what made McCord unique within southern society. Fought notes, for example, that unlike most southern women, McCord did not generally turn to other women for emotional support (pp. 84-85). The diaries of many of McCord's contemporaries are available; a comparison of their attitudes and experiences might have illuminated both what they shared with McCord and what made her unique. Similarly, the range of attitudes these women held on slavery might have, in comparison, further demonstrated the extreme conservatism of McCord's opinions.

At times Fought seems to struggle with the scope of what *Southern Womanhood and Slavery* should be. There is not a sufficient comparative context with other southern women, or indeed with the views of enslaved southerners, to make it fully a history of southern womanhood and slavery as the title suggests. Nor does this work ever really become about "national" struggles, as the author fleetingly suggests in her introduction (p. 6). McCord's writings seem to indicate that she first and foremost identified as a southerner.

Although biography is certainly at the center of this work, it is surrounded by many other layers of information. Readers may grow frustrated by the frequent asides to provide explanations of events such as Nullification or the Denmark Vesey incident. This basic information often proves cumbersome, taking the focus away from McCord's experiences and writings. On the other hand, this book could be used to great advantage in an undergraduate classroom, allowing students to explore many events and issues of the antebellum South through the prism of both individual and social experience. It would also provide a useful discussion of sources and interpretations, and the idea of historical perspective.

Louisa McCord was a unique woman, remarkable for her articulation of her views on gender and race relations in the antebellum South and for her struggle with these ideals in her own life. She envisioned herself, through her writings, as a spokeswoman for her society, yet she also set herself apart as an intellectual and theorist. Her life offers important insights not just for historians of southern women, but also those who study issues of race, class, and politics of the antebellum South.

While Leigh Fought's *Southern Womanhood and Slavery* offers a start in understanding the personal and familial factors that shaped Louisa McCord's views, it also suggests the need for a more in-depth study that moves from the personal to the political. Such a study would require a closer parsing of the meaning of McCord's writings. It would also place McCord in a larger context, directly comparing and contrasting her viewpoint with others in

her society. Who read her essays and how did they react? How representative were her views? Where did she fit on the political spectrum of southern society? Ultimately, at the end of *Southern Womanhood and Slavery* one is left with more questions than answers about these issues.

Note

[1]. Jesse Melville Fraser, "Louisa C. McCord" (Master's thesis, University of South Carolina, 1919); Richard C. Lounsbury, ed., *Louisa S. McCord: Political and Social Essays* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995); Richard C. Lounsbury, ed., *Louisa S. McCord: Poems, Drama, Biography, Letters* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996); Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988).

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