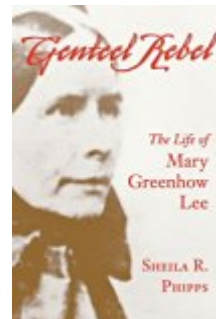


Shelia R. Phipps. *Genteel Rebel: The Life of Mary Greenhow Lee*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004. xiv + 259 pp. \$62.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8071-2885-5.



Reviewed by Kimberly R. Kellison

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An important contribution to southern biography, *Genteel Rebel* documents the world of Mary Greenhow Lee, an elite Virginia woman who used her gender, status, and independence to confront a variety of challenges in her life. Author Sheila Phipps draws primarily from Lee's antebellum and Civil War diaries, but she also employs a variety of additional sources to piece together the missing links of Lee's life. Throughout her life Mary Greenhow Lee exerted a spirit of independence and rebellion. Although she depended on her social position and her connection to urban elites to provide economic security and comfort, she also took an active role in shaping individual circumstances, particularly during the turbulent Civil War years. Lee's life, Phipps argues, "complicates the picture we think we have of the past," enhancing "understanding about the southern world of the nineteenth century and women's part in creating that world" (p. 221).

Mary Greenhow Lee grew up in an urban environment of wealth and privilege. Her father, Robert Greenhow, prospered in Richmond as a successful merchant and civic leader, and the

family developed acquaintances and friendships with many of the city's economic and political elite. Indeed, the Greenhows shared what Phipps terms a "visitable connexion" with other families throughout the urban South, one that drew individuals into "a wide network of family members among the elite" and amounted to "a self-perpetuating social class" (p. 2). Mary took advantage of this "connexion," visiting friends and relatives in Richmond, Washington, Williamsburg, and Winchester, Virginia. In the latter town she met Hugh Holmes Lee, a lawyer whom she married in 1843. Mary's diary entries reveal little about her feelings and relations with her new husband: the more personal her emotions, the less she recorded her innermost thoughts. Still, Phipps contends, Mary and Hugh enjoyed a loving marriage. When Hugh Holmes Lee died in 1856, Mary placed the following inscription on his tombstone: "Mark the perfect man and behold the upright for the end of that man is peace" (p. 75).

The death of Hugh Holmes Lee "left his wife's world in turmoil" (p. 76). Hugh left no will, and Mary struggled to settle legal matters associated

with her husband's property. The decade of the 1860s, however, unleashed even greater challenges for the new widow. The onset of the Civil War created a torrent of military instability for citizens of Winchester. Few southern towns experienced as much enemy turnover as this frontier community. Residents literally lived in a war zone, Phipps argues, as Union and Confederate forces alternately exerted control over the area. Most town inhabitants supported the southern cause after warfare began, but some, such as Mary's neighbor Julia Chase, remained steadfast defenders of the United States. Mary Greenhow Lee, by contrast, championed the Confederacy in no uncertain terms. The head of a household comprised of white women and a small number of slaves, Lee avidly contributed to the Confederate war effort, defying class and gender standards by performing what she called "soldier work" (p. 157). She obstinately resisted Union occupation of Winchester, demonstrating public displays of rebellion that included stealing supplies and defying requests of Union officers. Lee also visited wounded Confederates, wrote letters to soldiers' families, and found ways to smuggle mail through Union lines. Lee did not act alone; other Confederate women displayed similar behavior, actively challenging and circumventing the actions of Union soldiers and officers.

Lee's acts of rebellion and attempts to sabotage the efforts of Union soldiers proved effective. In February 1865, Maj. Gen. Philip Sheridan banished Lee and her family from the town, citing the "constant annoyance" the women had caused the Union Army (p. 200). The family found lodging in nearby Staunton, Virginia, where Mary continued to wage battle against the Union: visiting wounded soldiers, procuring food for troops, and providing information about Union armies. After the war ended, members of Lee's Civil War household disbanded. Lee debated several living options before ultimately settling in Baltimore, Maryland, where she opened a boardinghouse. Lee sometimes struggled with her postwar independence,

commenting on one occasion "no one knows how I dread the life before me" (p. 217). With the help of her 'connexion' she ultimately adjusted to her new life. She lived in Baltimore until her death in 1907, belonging to various civic organizations including the United Daughters of the Confederacy.

Phipps's biography of Mary Greenhow Lee provides important insights into the life of a wealthy southern woman in a divided, war-torn southern town. Like many white women in Civil War-era Winchester, Lee actively participated in the Confederate cause. Lee's consistent dedication to the South, Phipps argues, challenges the historiographical argument that white women abandoned support for the Confederacy by the closing years of the war. Although gender prohibited her from officially enlisting in the southern army, Lee's varied efforts to thwart and frustrate Union soldiers in Winchester proved a key contribution to the war effort. Other Confederate women in the town embraced similar "soldiering" tactics as they reacted to frequent Union occupation of their city, working to buttress the home front and the cause by confounding the enemy in a variety of ways.

A second strength is the author's depiction of wartime Winchester, Virginia, a town riveted by constant military change and, particularly before Fort Sumter, divided in political sentiment. Phipps's account of the everyday reactions of Mary Greenhow Lee--and other women in Winchester--to the flux of warfare enriches our understanding of urban life during the Civil War, serving as a reminder that wartime experiences varied not only depending on class, race, and gender, but also on location and place.

Some issues, however, merit further elaboration. Although Phipps argues that Lee "revealed in her musings the very complicated relationship between whites and blacks in the antebellum South" (p. 10), the monograph would benefit from greater discussion of the intersection between white urban elites, race, and slavery. Little attention is devoted to the Greenhow family's prewar

relationship with slaves, for instance. Phipps examines in some detail the changing, often-conflicting relationships between Lee and her slaves during the Civil War, but one wonders about her argument that Lee "abandoned her slaves" (pp. 150, 207) when she was forced to leave Winchester. Did leaving her slaves represent a victory of will for Lee or for her servants? More discussion as to how Lee's ideas of slavery and race changed over time, and to the ways the slaves themselves shaped white emotions and feelings would enhance this study.

Similarly, Phipps contends that Richmond's Monumental Church served as an "important neighborhood influence" on Mary Greenhow Lee's early life (p. 30), and she briefly discusses Lee's religious attitudes during and after the Civil War. Still, greater examination of the spiritual dimensions of Lee's adult life is needed. How did Lee's faith help her cope with widowhood, war, and death? Did religion allow her to better rationalize Confederate defeat or assist her in her new life in Baltimore? A stronger focus on Lee's religious pronouncements--or perhaps, why Lee neglected to leave a detailed record of her feelings on this subject--would prove illuminating.

Despite these drawbacks, Phipps presents a creative portrayal of the life of Mary Greenhow Lee. Impressively researched, *Genteel Rebel* entreats readers to question and explore issues concerning widowhood, femininity, and whiteness in the Civil War South. It presents an alternative portrait of life on the southern home front, challenging current views of white women's support for the Confederacy as well as shedding light on the divided nature of a small town in western Virginia. *Genteel Rebel* succeeds on multiple levels, depicting the world of one individual, Mary Greenhow Lee, while simultaneously enriching historical understanding of white womanhood and urban community in the nineteenth-century South.

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