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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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Will the Real Louisa McCord Please Stand Up?

Nineteenth-century Southern women have recently enjoyed new prominence through academic treatments of their lives. Explorations of elite women as a group abound. Biographies like Leigh Fought's *Southern Womanhood and Slavery* allow a closer examination of one elite woman's daily life, concerns, and views and how she fit into the larger picture. Fought's account of Louisa Susanna Cheves McCord reveals a woman, like others, shaped not only by her society, but also by her family. As Fought asserts, McCord's life merits attention not only because of her role as an author, but also because she "grappled with" the century's central issues of "slavery, the 'woman question,' individualism, social order" and "resolved these conflicts in her own life." Her experience, therefore, "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). Fought places McCord into a larger context, using one woman's story to reveal nuances similar to that of others in her position. McCord's life, although unique, offers a window into the lives of other elite slaveholding women.

The daughter of politician and planter Langdon Cheves, Louisa grew up amongst the nation's elite, surrounded by prominent politicians of the time, including Henry Clay, John C. Calhoun, James Monroe, and James Buchanan. She and her siblings spent their childhood moving constantly as their father's career advanced: starting as a lawyer, earning a seat in the South Carolina House of Representatives, becoming the Palmetto State's attorney general and then a state judge, being appointed president of the Bank of the United States, and cultivating the life of a Southern planter. Louisa idolized her father and admired the power he commanded in both his household and in the public sphere. As a girl, Louisa also spent time with her mother, Mary Dulles Cheves, training for her future duties as a housewife and mother. Louisa observed firsthand the difficulties and dangers of motherhood from Mary, who had fourteen children. Louisa's mother, Fought states, "taught her the difference between a man's importance and a woman's duty" (p. 26). This dichotomy between the sexes and their power in the world would shape Louisa's life as she constantly struggled to come to grips with her own dreams of independence and society's expectations of her as a woman.

Throughout this volume, Fought paints McCord's life as a series of compromises. McCord, an intellectual born into a prominent political family, struggled to find her place in the patriarchal slaveholding society that expected her to become a submissive wife and mother. Limited to the domestic sphere as a Southern woman, she could not exert the power she saw her father wield. Perhaps enjoying the household power she had as a single woman, Louisa remained single until she was thirty years old. Fought asserts that Louisa avoided the bonds of marriage because she understood the dangers and restrictions placed on a woman as a mother and a wife. Fought also argues that Louisa's marriage to David McCord in 1840 reflected her ultimate belief in the importance of hierarchy and her sense of obligation. Louisa McCord ultimately "accept[ed] her position in the patriarchal society that she so strongly defended" (p. 6). As a result, despite Louisa's confidence in her intellectual equality with men, in the end she willingly subjugated herself to a man in marriage.

Marriage did, however, offer Louisa some new freedoms. As the woman of the house, she took charge of its day-to-day operations. She also ran the plantation given

to her by her father upon her marriage and retained all rights to it. She raised her three children, although she did not fully involve herself in their day-to-day lives. She refused to act as a stepmother to her husband's seven children. Louisa found a way to satisfy her own needs within the confines of marriage and "managed to negotiate between her desire for independence and her duty as wife, mother, and mistress" (p. 99). In addition, having fulfilled her societal obligations as a woman in becoming a wife and mother, she could now publish her writings without the public criticizing her as unfeminine. She began an extensive writing career in 1848, publishing poems, a play, essays, book reviews, and a translation of a work on political economy. Fought asserts that McCord even "framed publication as another sacrifice" for her society (p. 186). Through writing, McCord asserted her support of the Southern hierarchy as she seemingly stepped outside of its bounds.

Fought focuses much of her attention on an interpretation of McCord's writing, arguing that "the key to understanding Louisa McCord and her view of her world lies in the work that she generated" between 1848 and 1856 (p. 101). Consequently, Fought offers analyses of these works and what they say about McCord's attitudes about the world around her. First, McCord vehemently defended slavery, arguing that it elevated whites, offered an effective form of social control, and improved the lives of African Americans. She further argued that the "superior" intellect of whites naturally allowed whites to control blacks. Like other proslavery authors, McCord used ancient history to justify American slavery. She also argued for the expansion of race slavery, criticizing wage labor and its effects on white Americans, and focusing much of her attention on wage labor's lack of paternalism. She "inverted the arguments of the abolitionists," praising slavery as "the highest form of charity" (p. 112). Fought notes that unlike other elite Southern women, McCord ignored the subject of miscegenation in her discussion of slavery. She did, however, connect slavery to the overall social system of the antebellum South. She believed that "slavery … required a hierarchy of both race and gender" and that "she had to accept an inferior position" to preserve the social order." Consequently, Fought continues, "she sacrificed her own independence for the maintenance of a social order based upon slavery" (p. 185).

However, McCord did not completely accept her position in life. Within her essays, she grappled with the condition of women. She, as Fought highlights throughout this volume, believed in women's intellectual equality to men. However, McCord's belief in the importance of hierarchy to the social system led her to defend women's inferior status in society. To do so, McCord focused on women's inferior physical strength in comparison to men and stressed the need for women to accept their position of inferiority as a way of maintaining the social order and preserving society. After all, women's inferiority guaranteed them the protection of white men. Fought also draws attention to McCord's inability to embrace fully the concept of female inferiority. In her writings, McCord stressed women's difference from men and their need to fulfill different and complementary roles. In addition, even while touting the need for women to fill a specific place in the social hierarchy, McCord herself stepped outside of a woman's proper boundaries, both by publishing intellectual pieces and by publishing her work in journals for men. Most of her essays were published anonymously, leaving her readers to assume that a man had written them.

The death of her husband followed by her father's deteriorating health brought McCord's writing career to a sudden end. She brought her father to live with her and served as his caretaker until his death a year and a half later. Over that period, she had to deal with the deaths of two of her brothers as well. In all of these situations, Fought argues, McCord demonstrated her dedication to upholding the patriarchal system of the South. She subsumed her personal needs in favor of those of her father. After her father's death, McCord worked to memorialize her father, commissioning a statue of him for the South Carolina State House.

The Civil War changed Louisa McCord's life. An ardent supporter of secession, she took on many tasks in support of the Confederacy. As Fought notes, "the war [infused] her feminine role as mother and caretaker with patriotic fervor," justifying her roles in the public sphere as necessary during wartime (p. 149). Her son, Cheves, joined the Confederate Army, as did two of her brothers. For her part, Louisa formed a soldiers' aid society and outfitted her son's entire regiment. Furthermore, she used her plantation to provide food for her family as well as for the hospital at South Carolina College, where she served as hospital matron. The deaths of McCord's son, one of her brothers, and several of her nephews gave her reason to question the sacrifices war required of her. However, she continued to support the Confederacy until its military surrender. Defeat depressed McCord because, as Fought asserts, "with the end of the war and the emancipation of the slaves, every idea upon which Louisa had based her life and her sacrifices no longer held

meaning" (p. 149).

Few personal documents of Louisa McCord's survived the Civil War–her slaveholding records were destroyed and she did not leave behind a personal diary. Consequently, Fought must reconstruct much of McCord's life from other people's private papers and memoirs. Louisa "does not speak in her own voice until midway through this biography" (p. 9) and then it is through her published work. Instead, Fought uses general ideas about nineteenth-century life to project the situations and ideas experienced by McCord. Fought skillfully interweaves the narrative of McCord's life with the larger American story, demonstrating how the times as well as her family life shaped McCord.

The contradictions within McCord's body of work combined with the lack of personal documents make it difficult to get a clear view of her. Although Fought deftly intertwines the contradictions of nineteenth-century Southern society with those of the life of a female intellectual, gaps remain. The psychological interpretation that Fought offers cannot give a complete picture of McCord's life. Questions abound about McCord's private life, including those swirling around her relationships with her husband and her slaves as well as her views on God and religion (p. 9). Fought works to overcome the dearth of sources to present a complex interpretation of McCord's life, "attempt[ing] to explain McCord herself, to understand the ways in which McCord came to the conclusions expressed in her essays" (p. 5). However, it is impossible to get into her mind. Fought reconstructs McCord's private life without details from McCord herself, leaving the reader to wonder what McCord herself actually thought and knowing that scholars cannot accurately discover such details. Over a century later, scholars can only know what Louisa McCord wanted the public to know; she, like other published writers, created a persona for herself.

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