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Julia A. Stern. *Mary Chesnut's Civil War Epic.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010. xv + 330 pp. $45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-77328-5.

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Mapping an Unfinished Masterpiece: *Mary Chesnut's Civil War Epic*

Of the multitude of wartime diaries and memoirs published by Southern women in the decades following the American Civil War, South Carolinian Mary Chesnut's trenchant observations about her experiences navigating within the inner circle of the Confederate cabinet remain the most intriguing for general readers and scholars alike. As a woman who both benefited from but disdained the peculiar institution which made her privileged life possible and who possessed a keen awareness of the historical significance of the events she saw unfolding before her, Chesnut's insights into life in the war-torn South continue to provide contemporary readers with a rich window into the tumultuous period in which two very different visions of America fought for supremacy, as well as with a fascinating portrait of one perceptive observer who watched the contradictory world around her come to a painful, if not inevitable, end. Deemed "a masterpiece" in 1962 by an admiring Edmund Wilson, who recognized the literary qualities of Chesnut's work and applauded her "uncanny" ability to develop the events she described "as if she were molding a novel," and eventually presented to the American public, in 1981, in a Pulitzer Prize-winning edition meticulously compiled by the late historian C. Vann Woodward, Chesnut's diary continues to stand as one of the most definitive and compelling accounts of the war from the Southern perspective.[1] Though both Wilson and Woodward acknowledged the literary qualities inherent in Chesnut's work, which she repeatedly revised throughout the 1870s and 1880s into the significantly more developed narrative of her experiences that would eventually be published in 1905 as *A Diary from Dixie,* neither scholar attempted to trace the path between what amounts to Chesnut's rough draft–her 1860s diary entries–and the still-unfinished but dramatically more polished and artful text that would eventually be published by her first editors two decades after her death.

Enter Julia Stern. In a work whose scholarly goals seem almost as ambitious as the literary aspirations she ascribes to her nineteenth-century subject, Stern sheds some long-overdue critical light on Chesnut's attitudes about the dramatic events that were taking place around her, her relationships with some of the key figures who pass through the pages of her diary, and, most significantly, the multitude of influences that enabled Chesnut to transform her hurried wartime sketches into what Stern considers to be "a consciously crafted work of art" that should be recognized as one of the epic masterpieces of nineteenth-century American literature (p. 2). Readers unfamiliar with Chesnut's life and work would be well served by reading the introductory essays of Vann Woodward's edition of her diary, as well as by familiarizing themselves with Chesnut's text itself as a precursor to Stern's often denser and more circuitous analysis. However, Stern, who is a respected professor of English and American Studies at Northwestern University, does a masterful job of comparing Chesnut's wartime journal entries with their more developed counterparts of the 1880s and of exploring many of the themes that surface throughout Chesnut's text, offering insightful rationales for the editorial decision making Chesnut employed as she worked to craft her disparate entries into a more cohesive whole. In her analysis of the childless Chesnut's issues with infertility, Stern underscores Chesnut's lifelong sensitivity about her inability to bear a child in an era in which a woman's worth was so often measured

by her dedication to home and family, while also illuminating an irony that would not be lost on any woman attempting to juggle the obligations of work and family, in Chesnut's era or our own: that is, that Chesnut would likely never have found the time to write and revise her epic narrative if she had had the children for which she so longed. Though she would eventually develop a habit of "borrowing" the children of others in order to experience motherhood vicariously, Chesnut's freedom from the responsibilities of childcare that dominated the lives of most women of her era provided her with the necessary time–however truncated it was by her frequent illnesses and the social schedule and hospital work with which she engaged throughout the war, and by the day-to-day responsibilities she later shouldered as the head of her financially struggling postwar household–to record her observations about the events, both personal and political, that were taking place around her and then to refashion them, in the years that followed, "with an eye toward creating a more ambitious account" of the war that Stern believes represents a "coherent aesthetic achievement" (pp. 3, 5).

Readers may remain skeptical of Stern's claims that Chesnut's unfinished diary is an American literary masterwork, but her discussion of Chesnut's refashioning of the "anecdotal 'scraps' " of her diary entries into the more developed "miniatures" that ultimately became the building blocks upon which Chesnut's revised text evolved (pp. 17-18) is a fascinating one that underscores the practical nature of Chesnut's approach to her writing, as well as the breadth and impact of her voluminous reading, which Stern explores in considerable depth in the fifth chapter of her study. Her exploration of the impact that Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1852 bestseller *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had on Chesnut's own ambition to write is especially interesting, as it charts not only Chesnut's fierce disdain for Stowe's depiction of the slaveholding South and her use of sentimentalism to sway her audience but also the power that Stowe's text had to fire Chesnut's own authorial ambitions, ultimately serving, in Stern's estimation, as "the incubus that drove Chesnut's ambition" to craft a literary masterpiece of her own (p. 15). Stern's portraits of Chesnut's relationships with her in-laws, Mary Cox Chesnut and James Chesnut Sr., are also deeply compelling and provide the reader with a window into the attitudes and behaviors of two long-lived members of the South's plantation elite as well as a portrait of a marriage that lasted over sixty years in an era marked by early mortality and eventually overshadowed by the staggering death toll of the war itself. Stern's descriptions of the lifelong biases against slavery held by Chesnut's Philadelphia-born mother-in-law are particularly intriguing and serve to illustrate the uneasiness about slavery that Chesnut herself believed marked the attitudes of most plantation mistresses, as well as their "willful blindness" regarding the midnight trips to the slave quarters that were too often made by many of their husbands, which resulted in the miscegenation that Chesnut felt represented "all that was most evil" about slavery, "in its debasement of white mistresses and black bondswomen alike" (p. 84). Though Stern maintains that Chesnut herself "never transcended the racist attitudes of the elite Southern society in which she had been raised" (p. 133) and that her racism deepened in the years following the war thanks to the poverty against which she, and other members of the "once aristocratic" planter class, struggled (p. 9), her perceptions of slavery as "an economic and political institution with pernicious domestic consequences" and "her awareness that lack of learning and indigence were not 'natural' or 'African' traits, but [traits that] had been produced in blacks by the brutal practices of slaveholders across centuries" made Chesnut, in Stern's view, "a most unusual Confederate matron" (pp. 133-134).

Despite the impressive amount of research that is evident throughout her work and Stern's obvious admiration for and knowledge of her subject, her study makes for somewhat challenging reading at times, particularly in its opening chapters. Her failure to provide her readers with a nuanced portrait of the Chesnut marriage, which she acknowledges in her introduction as having been the subject of intense scrutiny by other scholars and the reason for her decision to "steer away" from a more developed exploration of the "occasionally tempestuous state" of Chesnut's relationship with her more "stoic and reticent mate" (p. 12), seems an unfortunate omission, particularly given her fascinating portraits of Chesnut's relationship with her spouse's elderly parents and the fact that the positions James Chesnut Jr. held within the Confederate cabinet were largely responsible for providing his wife with her privileged window into the historic events she documented in her diary. Despite these concerns, however, Stern's scholarly exploration of Chesnut's "messy, marvelous" unfinished masterpiece (p. 50) represents a significant and much-needed contribution to the existing body of knowledge about Chesnut's life, attitudes, and creative processes and will serve as a valuable guide to readers who are interested in exploring Chesnut's diary and the remarkable woman who wrote it more closely.

Note

[1]. Edmund Wilson, "Three Confederate Ladies: Kate Stone, Sarah Morgan, Mary Chesnut," in *Patriotic Gore: Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1962; 1987), 258-298; quotation on 279-280; C. Vann Woodward, ed., *Mary Chesnut's Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981).

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