The letters illuminate childhood in the mid nineteenth century, gender roles, and women’s education. They highlight family dynamics, focused chiefly on Chase’s aspirations and expectations for his daughters—in part because the great preponderance of letters reprinted here are ones written by him. He continually pushed them to strive for perfection in everything they undertook, and he assured them that only a sense of duty and his great love for them motivated him to point it out whenever he saw room for improvement. Some of the letters in which he defends himself make clear that his daughters found his criticisms excessive (pp. 248, 317).

The editors assert that, for all three Chases, “their identities within the family” were “not the same” as the identities they had as public figures. For this reason, they refer to Chase (except in the volume’s introduction) as “Father,” to match the identity he has in the letters (pp. xiv-xv). However logical a choice that may seem, it proves distracting to the reader. For instance, a letter by a physician treating Chase’s wife is cited as “Dr. Worcester to Father,” though presumably the doctor never addressed Chase that way (p. 66). This convention is maintained even for references to his public service, such as in notes explaining “Father’s” actions in the Senate and describing the reactions and relations of other leading public men to “Father” (e.g., p. 94).

If the Chases maintained private identities appreciably different from their public ones, they are revealed in these letters only to a rather limited extent—no doubt for reasons beyond the editors’ control. For some years covered in the volume, letters from one or another family member have not survived. Inevitably as well, much of the extant correspondence is structured around Chase’s political career and their lives in the public eye. Indeed, the girls’ years in boarding schools away from home—the very conditions that generated the early letters among them—appear due as much to his political career as to his status as a widower. Throughout his daughters’ lives, Chase exhorted them to strive for excellence and to cultivate Christian faith. But in 1853, when Kate was thirteen, he expressed his wish that she prepare herself for the duties that will soon be hers. “In a few years you will necessarily go into Society,” he wrote. “I desire that
you may be qualified to ornament any society in our own
country or elsewhere into which I may have occasion to
take you" (p. 136).

Kate did go into society; during the Civil War she
nearly eclipsed her father’s prominence in the public eye.
But these letters reveal much less about her than about
her father and sister. For one thing, there are far fewer
letters here by her than by the others. There is one she
wrote to her father at the age of six about the death of
her dog; a letter in 1860 to Nettie, in which she mentions
tutoring a servant; and one written by both sisters dur-
ing an 1862 visit to New York. The next letter by Kate,
written in July 1864, reports on the comings and goings
of those around her, and expresses almost no sentiments
whatsoever (p. 261). In part, this may reflect Kate’s per-
sonality. When she was eleven, Chase wrote to her about
the rather dry quality of her letters. “You, I think, are like
me. You set down only naked facts without any embe-
lishment whatever. I wish you could put a little more life
into your letters, but I cannot blame you much seeing
there is so little life in mine” (p. 91).

But it is also likely that the scandals and tragedies
Kate faced in adulthood have something to do with the
paucity of extant letters by her. The volume includes sev-
eral letters Chase wrote to her during a rough time in
her marriage, when her husband—U.S. senator and for-
mer Rhode Island governor William Sprague—had implic-
itly attacked her in his Senate speeches and moved one
of his mistresses into their Washington home. The ed-
itors provide background information and comment on
Chase’s advice to her during this time. But they offer
readers very little on why they included no letters at all
from Kate from this period—there are none to her father,
to her sister, or to her husband. Nor is there reference
to Kate’s troubles in the letters between Chase and Net-
tie. What is more, a letter from Chase to Kate in which
he began telling her about his attempt to talk to Sprague
cuts off mid-sentence, the rest of it apparently lost. So it
is that when affairs within the family are at their most
Shakespearean, these family letters still manage to keep
them hidden for the most part. One might wish the ed-
itors had supplied more explanation or commentary on
this point.

The best case for the volume’s offering a private, in-
sider view of the Chase family is what we learn of the
younger sister, Nettie. She may simply have been blessed
with a more carefree spirit. An early letter which she
“dictated” at age three certainly suggests as much, even
while it gives more of a sense of her personality than we
get of Kate’s from all her letters (see pp. 89-90). Nettie’s
own letters as well as those from her parents make it clear
that as a child she idolized her older sister. For his part,
Chase’s letters show that he appreciated each daughter’s
unique qualities. Evidently Nettie never courted a
public role, but might Kate have been more consciously
groomed for such? When Nettie was twenty, for in-
stance, Chase encouraged her to maintain her “simplic-
ity of tastes” (p. 355). One wonders if he ever suggested
the same to her sister, the fashionable, glamorous belle
of Civil War Washington.

It is perhaps not surprising then that the most inter-
esting letters refer to the tumultuous politics of the era.
In May 1865, Chase toured the defeated Confederacy, in
the hope of collecting information which he might use
to influence President Johnson’s Reconstruction policies.
He brought Nettie with him. He wrote in detail of his
travels to Kate, and asked that she keep the letters so they
might function for him as a diary of his trip (p. 271). Sim-
ilarly, after the 1864 letter mentioned above, the next let-
ters from Kate came in July 1868 from New York, where
she tried to manage her father’s prospects as a presiden-
tial candidate at the Democratic National Convention.

The volume is well organized. The letters are grouped
in chapters corresponding to major shifts in the Chases’
lives. Each chapter begins with a chronology, which is
useful. Overall, the notes are helpful, but also quirky
and idiosyncratic in some marked respects. One is rep-
etition. Kate’s grandmother is identified half a dozen
times. Another is attention to detail. The editors reg-
ularly note where the writer unconsciously repeated a
word (such as writing ‘the’ twice in succession), even
when this occurred at the end of one sheet and the be-
inning of another—a common practice at the time. But
elsewhere, arguably crucial relevant information is omit-
ted. For instance, we learn in a note on page 258 that
William Pitt Fessenden succeeded Chase as treasury sec-
tary. But on page 268 a note identifies Hugh McCulloch
as treasury secretary, and the explanation of that succes-
sion does not appear until page 286. More substantively,
a letter from Chase to Kate from September 1863 hints at
some appearance of scandal involving her and some of
his staff. “Please remember how terribly annoyed I must
be by having your name being brought into any public
charges against employees in the Department,” he wrote.
“Your explanation relieves me greatly and will enable me,
I hope, to get your name out of the paper altogether” (p.
225). But there is no note offering explanation, elabora-
tion, or references to further reading. If the reason for
the lack of explanation is that nothing further about the
incident survives among Chase’s or Kate’s papers, one would like to know.

A number of interesting illustrations appear in the middle of the volume. There are photographs—of the three as a family, of Kate, and of the two sisters—as well as photographs and drawings of some of the visits they made to soldiers during the war. The editors included images of letters from each of the correspondents. These support and document the editors’ attention throughout to conventions of letter writing. Indeed, their descriptions of such elements as habits of writing, and materials including monogrammed stationery, lend considerable interest to the volume. Notes for the transcriptions of those letters describe the monograms, but curiously neglect to remind the reader that images of those very letters have been included among the illustrations.

One aspect of the Chase family’s private life on which this volume sheds intriguing, though scant, light concerns their relationships with their household staff. In 1860, after Chase had been reelected to the U.S. Senate, Kate wrote to Nettie of teaching their young German servant boy to read English. The servants in their home in Columbus, Ohio, at that time also included a woman from Ireland and two women from Wales. The Chase family employed African Americans as well, in varying capacities. Chase supported black Americans’ equal rights for much of his political career. Still, like many anti-slavery whites, he also occasionally used racialist language; for instance, on his tour of the Confederate states in early 1865, he wrote to Kate in praise of the discipline he observed in a school, noting that at a word from their teacher, “every little darkey was on his feet in an instant” (p. 273). Nonetheless, in letters about the household staff, Chase seems to understand that his power and authority are not absolute, and that he must negotiate with his servants in order to preserve domestic harmony. When he moved to a large farm north of the capitol in the 1870s, he delegated to black men on his staff much of its management, including an extensive new gasworks (pp. 380, 423). When Chase died, black men were among his pall-bearers, and included some who had worked for him in his early days in Ohio (p. 25).

Overall the letters serve also to humanize somewhat and soften the stern, forbidding public image of Salmon Chase himself. In the summer of 1863, he wrote to Nettie that the company he most preferred at the moment was that of the family dog—an early version of the adage about what to do if you want a friend in Washington (p. 221).

Nearly a dozen years earlier, one of Kate’s teachers had reported to Chase that she had shown improvement. To his daughter, Senator Chase wrote, “Dear Kate, this is very pleasant news to me. I would rather hear it, than be made president” (p. 113). It is no small measure of this volume’s success that by its end, the reader can believe it.

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