Love and Duty: Confederate Widows and the Emotional Politics of Loss is a well-researched and evocative cultural history. Angela Esco Elder explores the depths of Confederate widows' sorrow and then analyzes how they used their status as war widows to advocate for themselves and their children. She emphasizes the diversity of widows' responses to their husbands' deaths as they struggled to reconstruct their lives and households while the war raged around them. Elder also unveils how intertwined widowhood and the Confederate state became as Confederate leaders used widows to legitimize the war. The popular trope of the suffering but selfless and loyal war widow, however, did not necessarily reflect the realities of women's lives. In her effort to bring more scholarly attention to Confederate widows, Elder builds her narrative on the foundations of Drew Gilpin Faust's This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War (2008) and Stephanie McCurry's Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Old South (2010), while also drawing on recent histories that explore emotional culture and expression in the American past.

Among the thousands of wartime widows within the Confederacy, Love and Duty focuses on elite white women in towns and rural areas but brings in the experiences of less privileged women as sources allow. To set the context for her discussion of widowhood, Elder reviews prewar courtship, marriage, and widowhood, often comparing prescriptive literature with lived experience. Few marriages met the standard of the increasingly popular companionate marriage ideal. Older, wealthy widows often chose not to remarry, preferring their independence and even achieving a degree of power within their families and communities. Most strikingly, young widows were rare before the Civil War; marriage and motherhood generally prevailed.

After everything changed in April 1861, married women and their husbands at the front exchanged letters that revealed couples' emotional bonds and deep fears of permanent separation in
this world. Elder argues that these letters contain an authenticity of expression that provides unique insight into wartime marriages as couples shared intimate feelings as well as pointed criticisms. Like other historians, Elder concludes that the war did not threaten the patriarchy in any substantive way. Women sought direction from their husbands about how to manage their homes and finances; many husbands dictated instructions, while some gave women the leeway to make decisions.

One of Elder’s key points in *Love and Duty* is that widowhood usually began during the war itself. Just as historians of emancipation have emphasized the significance of the wartime transition to freedom, Elder stresses the emotional and practical challenges of coping with widowhood amid the uncertainty and devastation of war: “Drained by food shortages, housework, marching armies, and fears for the future, Confederate wives often learned of their soldiering husbands’ deaths at a precarious time in their own lives, in a region torn apart by war and heavy with uncertainty” (p. 75). Elder argues that as women dealt with their trauma, they achieved a degree of power over how their fellow citizens would perceive and remember the Confederacy. Widows received mourning advice from their families, communities, and prescriptive literature, but they alone ultimately decided how to mourn and how to express their grief. Not all of them accepted their sacrifice for the Confederate cause docilely.

Elder’s case studies of grieving widows are particularly moving. Young Octavia “Tivie” Stephens of Florida, who lost her husband and mother within days of each other in 1864, managed to raise her young children alone but also “immersed herself in a cycle of everlasting mourning” that continued until she died in 1908 (p. 124). Another bereft young widow was poignantly described by Mary Boykin Chesnut as “a mass of black crape and a dead weight on my heart” (p. 102). Chesnut’s description reinforces Elder’s point of how closely Confederate supporters assessed (and could be affected by) widows’ behavior: “For a Confederate widow, her loss was hardly her own” (p. 108). Depressed, resilient, or flirtatious, widows received copious attention, which gave them social capital, not dissimilar from the power they had held during their courtship years.

To reconstruct their lives, widows used this social capital to appeal to family members, their husbands’ former business partners, and even government officials for financial support or jobs. Elder explores the complications that widows encountered in their dealings with family members (particularly their mothers-in-law) as they renegotiated these relationships in the wake of their husbands’ deaths. Elder shows that reconstructing lives often came with conflict and turmoil but surprisingly does not explore the effects of emancipation on widows’ households. In addition, she points out that the diversity of widows’ responses to the difficulties of creating new lives reflected their individual situations, as well as their unique personalities.

This diversity among widows carried over to their participation in Confederate memorialization after the war. Elder argues that many widows did not have the time, energy, resources, or inclination to support memorial activities during the postwar period. That said, she highlights the experiences of several elite widows of famous Confederate heroes who did play an active role in helping create the Lost Cause and became icons of the movement. One of these women, Emilie Todd Helm, sister of Mary Todd Lincoln and the wartime widow of General Benjamin Hardin Helm, became not only a beloved figure throughout the former Confederacy but also a symbol of national reconciliation.

*Love and Duty* ends with a consideration of two Confederate widows who became prominent cultural figures during the twentieth century: the fictional Scarlett O’Hara and the real-life Alberta S. Martin, “the Oldest Living Confederate Widow.” Like their wartime predecessors, both captured a
great deal of attention and performed for society as widows. Beyond that, they appear as caricatures compared to the devastated, multifaceted women brought back to life in Elder’s *Love and Duty: Confederate Widows and the Emotional Politics of Loss.*

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