

### The Slavery Reader

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## Review

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**Fought, Leigh** *Southern Womanhood and Slavery: A Biography of Louisa S. McCord, 1810-1879*. University of Missouri Press, \$32.50 ISBN 826214703

Traditional values:

A woman's defense of the Peculiar Institution

In this book that is part biography, part intellectual history, Leigh Fought, assistant editor of the Frederick Douglass Papers, provides an in-depth look at one of the most unusual Southern women of the antebellum period. As a subject of historical study, Louisa McCord deviates from the norm among slaveholding Southern women in that she left behind no diary and few letters that reveal little more than the basic contours of her personal life. The sources that do remain suggest a life very different from those of most plantation mistresses, whose mental and physical worlds remained confined largely within the boundaries of the private household.

As the daughter of the eminent politician and judge Langdon Cheves, McCord became exposed from an early age to political discussions of national events by some of the most powerful men of her time. In adulthood, McCord herself took part through her published writings in some of the most contentious intellectual debates of the day. Between 1848 and 1856, some thirteen essays and a play, *Caius Gracchus*, appeared in print, in which McCord articulated a defense of slavery as well as a conservative view of women's place in society. McCord's philosophies and her participation in public discourse itself, given her sex, reveal that slaveholding women could actively support their own relegation to the private sphere in principle, while at the same time contesting those limitations through their actions.

Fought focuses on this fundamental contradiction that McCord's life story embraces. An enthusiastic and unwavering proponent of the submission of women to their husbands, McCord put off marriage until the shockingly

advanced age of thirty. A firm believer that women's duty was rooted in the domestic realm, McCord continued to run her own plantation after she married and published essays on topics generally reserved for men.

To understand how McCord reconciled these puzzling contradictions in her own mind, Fought examines the poetry McCord produced in her mid-twenties. The psychological and literary analysis to which Fought subjects McCord's poems proves an innovative solution to the lack of personal sources and one that yields convincing results. Fought concludes that McCord struggled within herself to reconcile her belief that women must help maintain the social order by marrying and producing children and her personal desire to spend her time cultivating her own intellectual abilities. During her twenties, Fought hypothesizes, McCord convinced herself that she was fulfilling her duties as a woman by taking care of the home and younger children of her widowed father. Once those children had left the household, however, McCord felt she could no longer avoid the true destiny of every woman, which she believed was to become a wife and a mother. To carry her beliefs into practice, Louisa married David McCord and gave birth to three children in four years. Fought suggests on page 95, however, that when it came to having and raising children, the reality was not quite as satisfying as the theory for Louisa. Whether or not she intentionally stopped having children after the third one was born, her relatively small family allowed McCord the time to focus on her writing.

In these writings, McCord insisted on the superiority of a system of slavery to one of free labor. Her pro-slavery philosophy rested on theories of the racial superiority of whites and the need for a laboring class to allow for the creation of high culture. Like the men who also wrote defenses of the Southern slave system, McCord presented the unequal institution of slavery as a part of a natural order that also included the subordination of women to men.

Fought tries to situate McCord within a national context of elite white women instead of viewing her simply through a regional lens. Whether from the North or South, Fought argues, elite antebellum women like McCord had a personal stake in preserving the hierarchical status quo, which included the subordination of those of their sex to men. At the same time, such privileged women enjoyed access to education and leisure time that could encourage them to seek fulfillment through means that might challenge the social order from which they benefited.

Fought's biography constitutes an important contribution to the existing literature on Southern proslavery intellectuals as well as to the historiography on slaveholding women from the upper echelons of antebellum Southern society. Louisa McCord's carefully considered arguments in support of the slave system further bolster Elizabeth Fox-Genovese's contention that plantation mistresses actively formed a united front with their men to keep slavery in place. McCord's life also suggests, however, that even the most socially conservative women did not always accept their own proscribed position in society without experiencing an internal struggle. Though a staunch advocate of women's traditional duties, Louisa McCord's actions reveal a figure who could never quite allow herself to submit fully to the ideals she so revered in theory. The result was a woman who rose above the constraints of her time, while wanting desperately to be seen as bound by those constraints.

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