

Civil War Wives: The Lives and Times of Angelina Grimké Weld, Varina Howell Davis, and Julia Dent Grant

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Review

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Berkin, Carol *Civil War Wives: The Lives and Times of Angelina Grimké Weld, Varina Howell Davis, and Julia Dent Grant*. Alfred A. Knopf, \$28.95 ISBN 9781400044467

The Divergent Paths of Three Southern Women

Upon first glance, one would be forgiven for wondering what abolitionist Angelina Grimké Weld, Confederate first lady Varina Howell Davis, and first lady Julia Dent Grant all had in common, and what they could bring to a biographical study on marriage during the Civil War era. Carol Berkin's desire to explore the lives of women with "access to the seats of power but no power themselves," led her to this interesting but unusual trio (xii). Despite their contrasting personalities and intellects, Weld, Davis, and Grant shared similar childhoods and life experiences: all were born into slaveholding families, married men who profoundly shaped the political and military landscape of nineteenth-century America, and were exposed to the most controversial figures and leaders of their times. Their biographies, Berkin contends, highlight the uneasy relationship between power, marriage, and the cult of true womanhood, which "set the terms against which Angelina, Varina, and Julia struggled or to which they succumbed" (313).

Using diaries, correspondence, speeches, essays, and memoirs, *Civil War Wives* brings together the three short and largely separate biographies of Weld, Davis, and Grant. Berkin commences by examining the life and marriage of Angelina Grimké Weld; a southern born abolitionist and "member of a marginalized counterculture" (312). Born in 1805, Angelina was the fourteenth and last child of Mary Smith Grimké and John Faucheraud Grimké, a South Carolina planter, lawyer, politician, and judge. Like her older sister, Sarah, Angelina's religious conviction informed her contribution to the abolitionist movement. Abandoning her Episcopalian upbringing to join the Presbyterian Church, years of self reflection prompted Angelina to join her Quaker sister in

Philadelphia. In 1830, she gained admission to the Society of Friends, and by 1832, joined the Female Anti-Slavery Society. Grimké's letter to William Lloyd Garrison—praising him for his commitment to nonviolence and outlining her own contribution to the cause—was published in *The Liberator* in 1835, and before the year was out, she had become a central figure in the antislavery movement. Angelina embarked on several lecture tours of the northeast before publishing an *Appeal to Christian Women of the South* in 1836.

Berkin argues that Grimké was an “anomalous figure” : “a spinster with an independent income, a genteel woman with a public reputation, a daughter of a slave owner and an advocate of abolition, a Quaker who questioned the morality of her congregation, a gifted writer and thinker without formal education” (30). Angelina's accomplishments as a writer and orator earned her the respect of many abolitionists, including Theodore Dwight Weld. After mentoring Angelina as an apostle of the American Anti-Slavery Association, Weld and Grimké fell into an uneasy courtship that culminated in marriage. Armed with a prenuptial agreement that ensured Angelina's full control over her own wealth after marriage, she plunged headlong into domesticity, determined, as Berkin notes, “to demonstrate to the world that a woman could have private happiness and public service” (74). Lacking the domestic knowhow necessary to manage a household, Angelina retreated from the public stage and struggled to make her marriage “as conventional as her single life had been radical” (77). Grimké Weld had proven that she could operate in both the public and private realms, but not at the same time. Her commitment to the domestic ideal, Berkin concludes, ultimately became “an act of penance rather than of defiance” (84).

Angelia Grimké Weld was not the only southern woman who struggled to accommodate the cult of true womanhood. Varina Howell Davis, Berkin argues, “wrestled with the social expectations that demanded the bending of a woman's will to her husband's and the suppression of her independent spirit and her intellect” (219). Born in 1826 in Natchez, Mississippi, Varina was the daughter of Margaret Kempe Howell and William Howell. Years of private tutoring and a brief stint at a young ladies academy in Philadelphia prepared Varina for her life as a belle, and an invitation to visit her father's long time friend, Joseph Davis, presented her with an opportunity to put her training to use. Davis's Hurricane plantation attracted many elite visitors, but it was Joseph's widowed brother, Jefferson, who caught Varina's eye during her stay in December 1843. The couple soon fell in love and married on February 26, 1845. After honeymooning in New Orleans, Varina and Jefferson settled at Brierfield plantation, located on

the stretch of land along the Mississippi River known as Davis Bend.

Varina's intellect and assertiveness, Berkin argues, framed both her marriage and her later roles as Confederate first lady and guardian of the Lost Cause. While the new Mrs Davis—with all “her willfulness, her stubbornness, and ... her unfeminine insistence on independent judgment”—struggled to fashion her identity as a wife and an adult, Jefferson resolutely worked on turning Varina into a “dutiful wife” (129). The result was a marriage troubled by an uncomfortable pattern of resistance and submission, where Varina was forced to relinquish her assertiveness in the name of domestic peace. While she brought too much independence to the tight strictures that governed her marriage, Varina also found herself unable to accommodate the inner circle of women who dominated capital city society, and later, the Confederacy. Neither “rich enough nor feminine enough to meet their standards,” Berkin contends that the first lady failed to gain the approval of her peers or the public, and was labeled haughty, coarse, and unpolished (143). It was only in the wake of Confederate defeat and Jefferson's imprisonment that Varina's ingenuity and determination were regarded as latent resources. In her campaign to free her husband and memorialize his contribution to the Lost Cause, Varina successfully petitioned “the newspaper editor, the lawyer, and the politician.” “The independence that came with this role resonated to her earliest inclinations,” Berkin writes. “The reliance on her own judgment after so many years of deferring to her husband was surely sometimes satisfying” (179).

Berkin concludes her study with Julia Dent Grant; a woman who “enjoyed the laurels of victory” because of her ability to embrace the cult of true womanhood. Born in 1826, Julia was the fifth child of Ellen Bray Wrenshall Dent and Missouri planter Frederick Dent. Privy to a pampered southern girlhood, Julia met the quiet and socially retiring Ulysses S. Grant when he accompanied his friend, James Longstreet, on a visit to White Haven. “He was a young man who did not dance and decidedly did not flirt,” Berkin writes, but he won Julia's heart (227). After a long distance courtship, and several attempts by Colonel Dent to dissuade his daughter of her choice, the couple married in 1846. Julia, unlike Angelina or Varina, cheerfully wrapped herself in the cloak of domesticity. While she dabbled in cooking and cleaning with varying degrees of success, and failed dismally at managing the household budget, Ulysses “neither punished nor demanded mastery.” “Julia was never challenged,” adds Berkin, “her failures become foibles, and she could remain content with herself” (238). Julia's “true north” was her role as a wife and a mother, and she viewed

everything, including the Civil War, through this domestic lens. As North and South answered their respective call to arms, southern-born Julia threw her support behind her husband and his military contribution to the Union. There was no political soul searching involved. As with all Julia's life choices, wifely support and domestic commitment framed her response. Grant "did not want her to share the burdens of war; he wanted her to provide relief from them" (263). In contrast to Varina Howell Davis, Julia's mastery over the cult of true womanhood allowed her to bask in the laurels of victory, the "admiration of the wealthy, and the gratitude of the ordinary citizens" (275). Through the passage of war, victory, and Grant's presidential terms, Berkin concludes that Julia "sat calmly in the maelstrom of history, a model of genteel domesticity—and a reminder of the rewards of the unexamined life" (221).

Civil War Wives is a well-written, highly accessible exploration of marriage and the cult of true womanhood as it played out in the lives of three southern women. Berkin's fascinating case studies sit separately; the dynamics of each biography and each marriage is examined on its own terms, with only brief points of comparative analysis. Berkin reminds us that the domestic ideal cast its net wide, and the cult of true womanhood was "rarely fully realized in any woman's life and was often honored in the breach" (313). By resting her book upon this breach, Berkin has further revealed the complex interplay between ideal, expectation, duty, and reality as it played out in the lives of southern women of the Civil War era.

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