

Mary Chesnut's Civil War Epic

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Review

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Stern, Julia A. *Mary Chesnut's Civil War Epic*. University of Chicago Press, \$45.00 ISBN 978-0-226-77328-5

The Literary Value of Mary Chestnut

Julia Stern does not treat Mary Chesnut's Civil War narrative as a documentary record of the conflict. Instead she sees it as a "consciously crafted work of art" that is "committed less to historical precision than to the accurate representation of how life *felt* to those living in the center of Rebel headquarters in the years 1861 to 1865" (2,5). The purpose of her 1880s revision of the 1860s diary was to make from it a work of literature, an epic account of the South's struggle and defeat in the Civil War, "an encyclopedic narrative, featuring her culture in formation: its divinities and theological figures; Northern and Southern politicians; domestic workers slave and free, black, white, and Irish; oral traditions . . . ; two trips to the underworld; and her own deconstruction of the epic universe" of her world (265).

One of the challenges Stern confronts in her book is the fact that there is no definitive version of Chesnut's unfinished work. (Even its genre is in question—diary, journal, memoir, fictional narrative?) Stern reviews the different editions of the work in her introduction. Heavily edited and abridged in 1905 by Isabella Martin and Myrta Lockett Avary, and published as *A Diary from Dixie: The Civil War's most celebrated journal, written 1861-1865 by the wife of James Chesnut, Jr., an aide to President Jefferson Davis and brigadier-general in the Confederate Army*, the narrative was heavily edited again, with significant portions restored, by Ben Ames Williams in his 1949 edition with a shortened title, *A Diary from Dixie*. Even C. Vann Woodward's 1981 *Mary Chesnut's Civil War* is a version—the most complete and authoritative one so far, but still not the complete version because Chesnut left her work unfinished when she died, not the necessarily authentic and reliable version because there are sometimes different versions of individual scenes or

episodes, and on occasion Woodward includes in his edition material from the 1860s diary that Chesnut left out as she revised.

One question that arises concerns just what Chesnut text Stern has in mind. She carefully distinguishes between the 1860s diary and its 1880s revision. Her frequent references to the "1860s diary" and "1880s narrative" and to Chesnut the diarist and her "1880s persona" are scrupulous but can also be tedious. She persistently works to show that in revising the 1860s diary twenty years and more after its composition, Chesnut was transforming the original work from a daily record of thoughts and observations to a self-conscious literary work, informed by her own experience of defeat. Yet Stern also includes, where it serves her, quotations from letters, an unpublished novel, and other documents. The work analyzed here is really the mind of Mary Boykin Chesnut herself.

Stern's study works best if read after a reading of the Chesnut diary, as edited by Woodward. It is not an introduction to Chesnut or her work. Instead it argues the author's contention that the unfinished narrative of the 1880s is a great work of literature conceived and written in the epic mode, "one of the greatest epics in American letters, a work never read in its own century" (2). This Stern undertakes to do by chapters that examine how Chesnut embedded the essential elements of epic in her narrative, how she constructs a detailed and intricate account of the Civil War world through attention to food, language, literature, odors (both foul and sweet), social mores, and especially to slavery.

Stern suggests that Chesnut was especially scornful of Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Although the 1860s diary mentions Stowe only once, the 1880s narrative mentions her seven times. Many Southerners shared Chesnut's dislike for the northern novelist, but Stern suggests that one reason among many for Chesnut's attitude may have been her own jealousy of the fame and fortune the northern author enjoyed for writing her book about slavery in the South without having much exposure to slavery or the South. Chesnut resented the sentimentality to which she felt Stowe resorted in her depiction of slavery and human character—Chesnut preferred realism and candor, though Stern notes that her reverential treatment of Jefferson Davis and his wife Varina (Chesnut's friend) exhibits its own sentimentality. In fact, Stern suggests that Stowe's sentimental characterizations directly influenced Chesnut's portrayal of the Davis family.

Chesnut's attitudes towards slavery in general, and her own family slaves in particular, are a central subject of this book, especially in the later chapters, where Stern argues with growing force that Chesnut's changing relationship with slaves marked her dawning awareness of how defeat in the war would inalterably change her world. Stern argues, sometimes with success and sometimes not, that this awareness informed every aspect of Chesnut's life, especially as she described it in the 1880s narrative. Chesnut believed in theory that slavery was bad and that it placed blacks in a forced position of ignorance. Yet she could never overcome her deep-seated conviction that blacks were not the equals of whites. In the 1860s diary Chesnut makes clear her disdain and dislike for the sexual exploitation of slaves by white males, but she has excised such references from the 1880s narrative.

Fear of slave insurrection, of the social upheaval that would result from the emancipation of the slaves, Stern finds especially important to Chesnut. Stern identifies two events from Chesnut's life that helped focus her attitude towards the general Southern fear of revolt by slaves: an abortive slave rebellion in 1816 in Camden, SC, in which a slave from the Chesnut family played an important role (he warned against the slaves who planned to revolt), and the 1861 killing of Chesnut's elderly aunt by her own slaves. These episodes form the centerpiece of Stern's discussion of this issue.

The virtue of this study lies in its careful, exacting attention to the details of Chesnut's narrative. Stern sees Chesnut as a masterful agent of the miniature, arguing that in a few sentences, or in a short paragraph, she provides incisive commentaries that expand to illuminate her Civil War experience. Stern reads vigorously and sometimes with too much effort. What seems obvious to her, on occasions, may not seem so obvious to the reader. Although the connections she seeks to draw between the Chesnut text(s) and the world surrounding her are not always convincing, her analysis of the historical and cultural contexts in which Chesnut wrote, both in her 1860s diaries and in her 1880s narrative, are illuminating and worthy. One comes away from her study with a heightened appreciation for the rich density of detail and insight in Chesnut's Civil War narrative.

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