

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Mary Boykin Chesnut (1823-1886)

From *Diary during the War*

The wife of James Chesnut, who was a U.S. Senator from South Carolina and later an aide to Jefferson Davis and a brigadier general in the Confederate Army, Mary Boykin Chesnut was ideally situated to keep a diary of life among the leaders of the South. Moreover, she was well-educated, loved novels (especially Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*), loved society, and had a very independent mind.

She also liked to write, and she recognized the historical significance of her experience and its literary potential—traits which were, paradoxically, both advantages and disadvantages, both supportive and contradictory. As her modern editor C. Vann Woodward has shown, what earlier editors had assumed was a “diary” in the conventional sense of a notebook made up of daily, sequential rewriting having been done between 1861 and 1865. Yet the polished version still 1861, to July, 1865, except for a break from August, 1862, to October, 1863, with the whole comprising a total of over twenty-five hundred pages. The break was caused by her having destroyed the notes for that period because of a raid on Richmond in 1863, but the gap was filled in by a 200-page narrative, done from memory, which was presented as if done in October, 1863.

For a full discussion of this complex compositional history, readers should see Woodward's long introduction to Mary Chesnut's *Civil War*. Her diary/autobiography also deserves reading in its entirety, both for its record of the war and for its reflection of her alert and caustic personality. Fortunately, however, even short excerpts of her book are very rich and suggestive. Her stories are usually brief, her wit sharp. Good stories and well-turned phrases were the delight of society—they were what made life in Charleston or Richmond so much more pleasant than life on a plantation or in a small town, and they were also what made memories of 1861-65 so important to preserve and distill after defeat. Chesnut's husband's words at the end of the diary, “Camden for life,” suggest what punishment it was for her to be away from society and its gossip.

For more on Chesnut's life, see Elizabeth Muhlenfeld, *Mary Boykin Chesnut: A Biography* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1981). The excerpts below are from daily entries as these are given in C. Vann Woodward, ed., *Mary Chesnut's Civil War* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1981). All footnotes and bracketed editorial material are from that edition.

Reading

A Diary from Dixie, as Written by Mary Boykin Chesnut
<http://docsouth.unc.edu/southlit/chesnut/menu.html>