



Mary Chestnut and her literary friends
by Carol Eunice Bent MacKubbin

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in History
Montana State University

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Abstract:

Mary Chestnut is remembered for one inestimable book upon which historians and literary critics tend to place high value. Of the Southern writers of the war generation it was neither historian, nor novelist, but a diarist who wrote the story of the Confederate conflict in the form of a narrative, structured by the mental agility of a cultural and high-spirited intellectual. It is Mary Chestnut who writes of the intimacies in the lives of the great who powered the war as she jots down her day's happenings in an imaginative and "picturesque manner. The purpose of this thesis is to assay the literary merit of Mary Chestnut's Civil War and bring to recognition its scholarly erudition.

Mary Chestnut's instinct in calling to mind an appropriate allusion culled from her voracious reading and aided by a prodigious memory was, indeed, uncanny. This paper uses a selected number of those references to literature as the means to give preeminence to her literary stature.

Other than a wide range of literature and religious compendiums, Mary Chestnut read all and sundry military histories she could garner. She does not, however, allow her tale to tell only of the blood and thunder of war nor does she allow the fame of the dead to lie buried on the battlefield. From the high drama of the struggle to the simplest doings of the day, she sprinkles her narrative with references to fictional characters and incidents which result in unforgettable allusions for the reader.

In its literary aspect Mary Chestnut's Civil War is a revelation of a Southern woman's mind and heart; a record of her most private opinion about men and women who crossed her path in the rife days of the conflict. Some tidbit of triviality would remind Mary Chestnut of an anecdote which, in turn, becomes a full-blown allusion to anything from Dante's Inferno to the bawdy tales of Chaucer. In this lies the appreciation and charm of her intellectual prowess.

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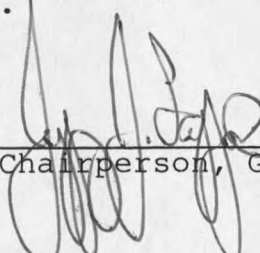
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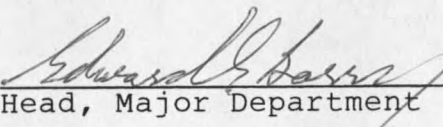
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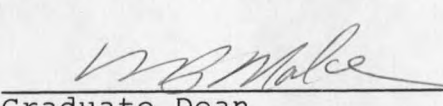
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PREFACE

The purpose of this paper is to bring to recognition the literary background with which Mary Chestnut interlards page after page of her Journal as she partakes in a wrestling match with history to accurately portray the characters who are acting out the Civil War drama scintillating around her.

The Chestnut Diary was first published in two fragmentary and scrambled editions in 1905 and 1949. Neither edition used the full content of Mary Chestnut's revised Journal. Both were clearly a diary and presented as such by their several editors under the title A Diary From Dixie. The first edition, containing less than half of the material available, was edited with a free and heavy hand in order to eliminate disparaging remarks and unflattering and too-true descriptions of people still living. The later edition embodied more than half again as much as the earlier one, but the editor gave no indication of his deletions or omissions nor his many alterations in dates or passages of dialogue turned into narrative. He revised wording, modernized grammar and punctuation while adding sentences at his own discretion. While he realized his goal of readability, it was at the expense of doubtful quality as an editorial contribution.

It is now accepted that the version known as A Diary From Dixie was written between 1881 and 1884. Of the original journal only seven volumes survive which record events as they actually occurred. These seven volumes contain a little more than 1,000 pages of varying sizes - large and small. The first five chronicle almost daily happenings which run consecutively from February 1861 through December 8, 1861; the remaining two run from early January 1865 through February 1865 and May through June 1865. It is not known how much Mary wrote as an eye witness, what periods she covered, how much of what she did write survived until her revision in the 80's, nor how much that survived Mary still survives.¹

With the recent publication of C. Vann Woodward's edition of the revised Journal as Mary Chestnut's Civil War we have the fruit of Mary Chestnut's labor in her book as she wrote it without so much as a comma replacing a dash of which she was inordinately fond. Although it gives the reader an excellent and full account of the author's life during the period of 1861-1865, it must be remembered, except for the seven volumes cited above, the revised Journal, nevertheless, is a product of an interval of twenty years: albeit a valiant attempt on the part of the author to recapture events unerringly.

Except for the manuscript portions, it is thus impossible for the reader of the complete edition to know what

opinions are a result of a possible change over so long a period of time or are the actual sentiments held during the war years. The manuscripts, therefore, of 1861 and four months of 1865 present a picture of Mary Chestnut before she had an opportunity to portray herself as she wished the public to see her.

It is right that profound respect and unbounded honor be given C. Vann Woodward for his monumental work on Mary Chestnut. Published in 1981 under the title Mary Chestnut's Civil War, Woodward records the manuscript journals verbatim, editing the whole of the revised version with hundreds of literary allusions and equal hundreds of notes to enlighten the reader as to who is who. He is owed unqualified gratitude for his exhaustive research. It is his version upon which this paper is based.

And so we have the "incomparable book" in which Mary Boykin Chestnut chronicles her experience of the Civil War. The situations and relationships which make up the substance of her days are told in an atmosphere of intimacy with the reader and in the emotional tone of a novel. Edmund Wilson upon reading A Diary From Dixie pronounced it: "An extraordinary document - in its informal department, a masterpiece . . . a work of art . . . much more imaginative and revealing than most of the fiction inspired by the war."²

In the sense and to the extent that Mary Chestnut's Civil War is an artistic medium, portraying the thoughts and

attitudes, the longings and sufferings of Mary Chestnut, it can be termed a spiritual autobiography: an embodiment of a moral, religious, cultured woman in conflict with herself and the world.

In view of many personal remarks it is only fair that I acknowledge my own inheritance to the Old South and the perspective that has influenced my choice of Mary Chestnut's Civil War about which to write. My mother was born in 1868 on her grandfather's plantation several miles from Savannah, Georgia. It had been ravaged by raids of Sherman's hordes but not totally destroyed. A few slaves remained - one of whom nursed my mother in infancy. Although my mother spent her adult life outside the South, my home was imbued with Southern ways and attitudes. To tease by humming the tune "Marching Through Georgia" was an act of impish impiety. My parents were not loathe to broach racism as opportunity afforded and looked upon slavery as an abomination without parallel, yet to them there was no inconsistency in glorifying the "cause" and bemoaning its loss. If victory had been attained the South would have dealt with slavery in its time and with magnanimity and honor.

ENDNOTES

PREFACE

¹Elizabeth Muhlenfeld, Mary Boykin Chestnut a Biography (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981), p. 101.

²Edmund Wilson, Patriotic Gore: Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War (New York: 1962), p. IX.

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Abstract

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CHAPTER 1

EXEGESIS

Oddities are the stuff of history. Poetry speaks in universals; history in particulars. When certain particulars make up the consummate history of a heritage of ancestral glory rich in the chaos of tradition, it tells a very lively story indeed. Thus does Mary Chestnut live and write the shadowed under-side of her tale, with no notion how the feudal world of the Old South might appear when clothed in light and exposed to view. Nor does she impress how different are the terms in which her own life was conceived and lived until assaulted by the ravages of war. But never, never, does she allow that lustrous abundance to echo back like the funeral knell of a happy past. Mary Chestnut writes of her oddities midst the clamor of cannon and the parade of her proud soldiers, answering the storm of passion which gave breadth to that moment of high drama in world history now known as the Civil War.

It is also in the none-such particulars as seen in various Southern traditions that we can recreate the ethics and behavior of the Old South of which so much is long lost in the mists of time and memory. And it is in the dusting of that time that we can resurrect and examine them in the light.

of the sanctity and dominance of the Southern home, the virtue of its womanhood and the honor of its gentlemen. It is in these peculiar traditions that the concept of the Old and the New lies.

It might be advisable to acknowledge here a disparity between them. The difference is far too complex to do other than recognize the fallacy of the legend of the classical Old South of stately mansions with white columns and Greek entablature; with slaves too numerous to mention, and a social life likened unto Old World splendor peopled by lovely ladies in farthingales and cavaliers in beplumed hats midst chivalry and noble deeds. And then its coming to an end by the Civil War and the rising of an industrialized and commercialized New South with "King Cotton" laid to rest. It was not thus. These legends bear little resemblance to reality. The Civil War and the thirty years of reconstruction did not culminate in a climatic upheaval where things that were, suddenly were not. There was the Old South and there followed in due time the New South, and legends should rest in peace along with "King Cotton".

Almost any conjuring of Southern images is bound to emphasize the ponderance of family and the unshakable faith in its essential goodness and stability. As a patriarchal institution it was more powerful than in other portions of the republic as it concentrated august authority in the hands of a single head of household. This posed a dilemma as it

entailed calamitous results when an individual was ineffective and devoid of the necessary prerequisites to battle the strain of duties involved. To compensate for the patriarch's frailties a scapegoat had to be found upon whom to transfer blame in order to prevent a diminution of the already diminutive image. Elizabeth Muhlenfeld, in her writing about the senior Chestnuts presiding over Mulberry, tells of a friend asking: "'Did you ever see a really respectable, responsible, revered and beloved head of a family who ever opened his mouth at home except to find fault?'" Muhlenfeld then details the revered and beloved head as

kind - and amiable when not crossed. Given to hospitality on a grand scale - jovial, genial, friendly, courtly in his politeness. An absolute tyrant as great as the Czar of Russia, the Kahn of Tartary - or the Sultan of Turkey. . . . He had firmly set opinions. He forbade any woman in the family to wear a red dress, refused to allow his horses to be drawn faster than a slow trot and would not tolerate the appearance of an onion - however well disguised - on his table!¹

No one equalled the paternalistic dominance of one George Reynolds of Pickens County, Alabama. Bertram Wyatt-Brown describes this illiterate farmer as holding sway over 234 descendants all living in Bostic Beat and all under his paternalistic rule in family matters and without danger of slippage in his local power.²

A very prevalent Southern custom was using a family surname to replace an ordinary Christian name. This was more unique in the South as it found little response in the North

where naming practices changed during the early years of the nineteenth century. The weight of tradition within a family not only bestowed ancestral and parental names upon sons but accompanied the bestowal with responsibility of the purloined name. Even more singular to the South was familial pride entailing the ritual of repeated recognition of family members - living or dead - upon every appropriate occasion. By a constant clothing with current interest a continuity of their past or present existence was assured. This fed the intense sense of lineage which - as if by magic - the remembrance of forbears mitigated the threat of family dissolution. But apart from lineage the use of a prominent name carried great profit and bore honor to whom it belonged. But it suffered woeful consequences if the borrower became a cropper - the one so honored was betrayed rather than benighted. A tale is told of a Southern judge who, in the discharge of his duties, was compelled to pass sentence of thirty-nine lashes on the bare back of a poor wretch, "and he is a man bearing my full name, Romulus Mitchell Saunders."³ On the whole, name patterns gave adherence to the patriarchal order that helped in keeping the family sacrosanct and reflected its strength across the whole spectrum of wealth and rank. The weighty responsibility of living up to one's family name spanned the social classes and gave unity to the region's wholeness.⁴

There was little equivocation in family discipline. It was rigid and merciless even after the children had left home and maintained separate establishments. In childhood and adolescence discipline was administered when warranted but it was peculiar in that it extended into adulthood in many families. Both Dr. and Mrs. Charles Colcock Jones of Liberty County, Georgia⁵ showed no hesitation in admonishing their grown children with dignity but with vehemence, whenever they felt correction was needed and quite frankly voiced opposing opinions in their marital matters. The father, Dr. Jones, gave no sufferance: "Do not fail etc."⁶ The mother was more diplomatic and paddled with a soft, willowy wand: "It is wise to indulge no prejudice."⁷ She likewise counseled to circumvent intimacies: "Be kind and civil to everyone but intimate with none because our best friends often become our greatest enemies."⁸ Mrs. Jones took umbrage with her son Charles Jr. upon his renting an apartment as a home for his bride. Indeed, she thought it "frivolous and worldly" in not immediately settling himself permanently in a house. But these exhortations were as sweet nothings when the parental letters attacked the evils of drinking and gambling. There was no moderation in their transports when such heinous sins were in question. The responding letters of the several children expressed a gratitude for their parents' opinion and showed a consciousness of responsibility in achieving the high ideals of their ancestors. It was

part and parcel of the enshrinement of their hearts and minds in the family enclave: molded as if by clay, with lives to be lived not as individuals with perhaps alien interests and temperaments but as subject puppets meeting the demands of family. Undeniably this had multivarious exceptions as there were retrobates, recreants, rogues and calumnious knaves a-plenty in the Old South who were beyond the pale of admonishment.

And as the past encompassed the present so familial considerations were dominant. The apogee of Southern plantation life was its family-centered hospitality. This was of several denominations. Sickness brought immediate arrival of any and all available family members - first cousin, second cousin-once removed, aunt or even uncle - first to receive the news came first, others followed - their stay endured the patient's progress to health.⁹ Then there was the obligating hospitality. Southerners were often desperately lonely due to scarcity of lending libraries and scant availability of books; added to this were the long distances between people of similar intellectual pursuits and interests. In such circumstances it can not be wondered even strangers seeking shelter for a night were welcome intruders at the family hearth. Plantation houses were commodious and well serviced with a plethora of household slaves. This may, in part, account for the laggard establishment of poor-houses and hospitals for the indigent and sick. Thus it was

forced upon a planter of means to share his good fortune with his less fortunate relations. His home became, in effect, their familial appanage by right. The length of stay depended more upon the state of the hapless relative's purse than the good will, good humor and generosity of the plantation patriarch. A week could extend into a month, a month into a year: thus a visit could become a visitation. Such were the demands of family and community. They were sacred to both.

In this region of rife evangelistical reform, it would be ironical if - perchance - a wayward escutcheon bore the inscription "Recollect, dear son, you have a name to preserve," rather than a "God to serve and a soul to save."

There were certain unavoidable imperatives necessary to a properly brought up Victorian lady. Barbara Welter in her article The Cult of True Womanhood describes the picture of a nineteenth century woman hostage in her home:

Attributes of true womanhood . . . could be divided into four cardinal virtues - piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. Put them all together and they spelled mother, daughter, sister, wife-woman. Without them, no matter whether there was fame, achievement or wealth, all was ashes; with them she was promised happiness and power.¹⁰

Welter describes some of these attributes. She names religion as the core of a woman's virtue. It gave dignity to her dependence. If piety were present a young man looking for a mate need not worry for if that were there, all else would follow. Religion was looked upon as a pacifier.

for the many undefined longings which swept the struggles of young girls. Moreover a woman could embrace it fully within her home without endangering the home's equanimity by remonstrances of father or husband. It did not take her from her proper sphere, and any duties incumbent upon church activities would not detract or deter from her domestic ones. Purity was as essential as piety and considered a moral requisite, as a "fallen woman" was a "fallen angel" and - in fact - no woman at all. As a Victorian lady she was thought to be weak and timid and in need of a protector. She was trained to revere her protector's wishes even though she might dispute his opinions. If a woman felt in her heart she was right, she could afford to be forgiving, even upon occasion slightly condescending. But Welter says she should be "always ready . . . to repress a harsh answer, to confess a fault, and to stop - right or wrong - in the midst of self defense in gentle submission."¹¹ Marriage, the Victorians believed, was the proper and only state of guarantee in which these virtues could grow and be nourished. In her home - as queen of her realm - she could quite properly attempt to reform her husband in small things, but if to no avail she should submit gracefully rather than to allow them to attain importance beyond their petty annoyances. And even though she was a hostage in her home, she was endowed with power and it behooved her to cherish and preserve it in balance with her virtue.

Such were the requirements of the Victorian age and as such they are an appropriate example ascribable to the breeding of a Southern lady in antebellum years. Unmarried girls were a premium. A planter's daughter was taught the social graces of letter writing, conversation on a bland level, dancing, this and that of mites of music and a slight proficiency in reading - the more sophisticated trifled with French. In her father's house she learned the deportment of a courteous hostess as she helped in the duties attendant upon the charm and warmth of hospitality. She executed them with insouciant grace and made them the stuff of memories and dreams. Church attendance was indispensable in anticipation of piety. The father might twiddle twaddle round and around on the edges of a fancied faith but the female members were not so excused.

In this and all other areas submission was irrefragable as the dictates of her father were the dark undersongs of law. Submissiveness was perhaps the most natural virtue and the easiest exercised. A daughter was not supposed to be an achiever or doer; by training and temperament she was compliant and yielding to another's demands even though it made life a jejune thing for her if she were a rebel at heart.¹²

When a girl married she soon discovered her vow to obey became the essence of her existence. Her husband took the place of her father and instead of filial obedience she

became subject to marital obeisance which, in effect, only traded masters. Her husband assumed the patriarchal role and in all meanings became guide, counselor, and keeper of her property and fount of her virtue and happiness. The son, as husband, became the father; the daughter, as wife, became the mother. Conjugal bliss was not always the result of the union. But a husband was not at liberty to give license to his offended requirements. If he hurled invectives against his wife indiscriminately without sufficient reason it was a palpable affront to social custom and complicated his misfortune. If he willfully vented vigorous expression outside his home of trouble within, it rebounded to his own discredit. The husband bore sway over his wife's person and her conduct was his responsibility. He ruled by the laws of man accrued from that tradition. The wife ruled by personal persuasion, by a high inheritance of reason if she was so endowed and perhaps chastened by the melting influence of Christianity.¹³

As a background to the virtue of womanhood it must be accepted women themselves engendered the ideals by which men defined them. They found in marriage a fulfillment of the domestic propensities nurtured in their fathers' homes. It was in that their happiness lay and any importance as a person. Feminine dependency, however, was a woman's fate. If abused, it bred cynicism and misanthropy. The adult Southern male had been dressed from childhood in the precept of

rightful dominance regardless of his own native maunderings. A heavy consumption of alcohol and maltreatment by violence were the frequent tools of the ineffectual and pallid husband. It all added up to male superiority to overawe the female for whose virtue the male felt responsible. As a wife she might be forced to receive his alternating moods of love and bruising, nursing her hostility while duly chastened with ill-use but flushed resentment and biting bitterness in her spirit. Family pride and a sense of honor were powerful forces in women as in men and did much to alleviate the malefic effects of their inferior position: they were important attributes grafted upon conscience all through life. Sexual meanderings were forbidden not only for reasons of morality but for avoidance of embarrassing pregnancies. Young rogues, however, ranged the fields for the devil to pay and many a miscreant went unwhipped by justice. In an unmarried girl pregnancy forced either marriage or ruin and social ostracism followed in consequence. Hence young girls were admonished to hold their parentage in high esteem and savor their virginity in self-respect and pride, otherwise the consequences were pain of ruin in this world and damnation in the next.¹⁴

In the Southern adulation of women there was a dual vision of what a woman should be. It was presumed she was not only ethereal but capable of managing a household, producing half dozen bouncing babbling sons and a few docile

daughters while keeping everything in fine fettle in acquiescence to her husband. Her mental agility was allowed to sprout political awareness but it was forbidden her to enter into discussion abroad for fear of making a spectacle of herself. The heritage of ages vowed inequality by the laws of nature in the male and female sex. This carried no more doubt than the laws of gravity which only a fool, a madman, an odious drunk or one bent on suicide would question. A woman's moral purity was stressed rather than acceptance of temptations alike unto man's. She could indulge herself to the boundaries of her natural blandishments but she became an issue with over-indulgence. As a mother she was the mortal arbiter of bravery. In the Civil War it was the mother who gave all her sons to fill an honorable grave in common rather than one turn his back in cowardice. Her only reward in the long gloom was the noble sacrifice signifying the glorification of motherhood in her abject submission to male will.

A Southern woman was expected to be more than a mere ornament after marriage. There were dire duties commensurate with her husband's prestige and ponderance in the community. She was burdened with satisfying them without reproach. Nothing aroused such a brouhaha in a Southern enclave as an insult hurled at a female member or her name besmirched with innuendoes. It was framed by tradition that a man's integrity lay in a woman's unsullied name. An

attack upon it was a breach not to be tolerated while failure to right the wrong was begird with the weight of ignominy and shame. Yet this exigency seems paradoxical as men gave unto themselves carte blanche to play the field for all its frivolity while confining their women to a chaste bower. "The double standard" was anything but a myth. The sexes inhabited different worlds and lived different lives: the one in the home, the other as lord of creation: the one ensconced in security, safe and sure against the enmity of social purity, the other abroad in a man's universe where the apostate was equipped with justification for the whoopla whither his unction and zeal carried him.¹⁵

And so the stereotyping of Southern womanhood in its piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity had an important function. The hymns of praise to womanly virtue livened the jeremiads so often heard although many thought them a dash of the literal and a dollop of words. But they did level the negative features into an acceptable mix that gave women their warmth and affection toward the men in their lives which made up a great part of the charisma and gentleness with which they were graced.

It is in W. J. Cash's Mind of the South that a succinct and wholly encompassing picture can be found of a Southern gentleman. In writing of the manner of plantation planters he allowed a slight comparison to colonial aristocrats: at

its best the manner was much more simple; less formal with the homespun of the frontier showing through. Cash describes the aura in graphic words:

Yet it did capture much of the beautiful courtesy and dignity and gesturing grace of its exemplar - did body forth, in measure, the same sense of pageantry . . . and seem, as it were, to move with stately tread and in rustling robes, to the sound of far-away trumpets forever heralding the charge. In its highest and most favorable aspect, in sum, it was a manner not unworthy of aristocracy.¹⁶

This pictures the ideal Southern gentleman, but too often it was a fine garment worn on the outside covering up the lack of proper substance on the inside. Too often it was not his essential warrant of honor but a shroud for his shaky sense of inadequacy and the source of condescension and violence. With his gasconade he was overbearing and brutal to a stranger or a person not accepting his claims of superiority. At the same time he might be relatively kind to his family and admiring retainers. Cash proceeds to relate a story told of a Mississippi planter:

Instant in resentment and bitter in his animosity yet magnanimous to forgive where reparation had been made . . . and he bore himself with a sort of antique courtesy and knightly hostility, in which self-respect mingled with respect for his foe, except when contempt was mixed with hatred and then no words can convey any sense of the intensity of his scorn. . . . Sent to jail for fighting in the courthouse, he made the walls of the prison resound with unaccustomed shouts of merriment and revelry. . . . Starting to fight a duel, he laid down his hand at poker, to resume it with a smile when he returned.¹⁷

The Mississippi planter's attachment to his friends was a consuming passion, and desertion in times of trouble was unthinkable. His friends' altercations were his own and he would fight at the drop of a hat for any deep personal affront hurled at them. He would go surety for a friend's indebtedness and stand as a second in a dueling match if he himself were not the first.

This is perhaps overdrawn and too idealist a yardstick with which to measure a Southern gentleman. Yet it is to a limited extent the essence of the iron man of the frontier, the wild boisterousness of the backlands man, the rash, raw devil-may-care variety huddled together to produce the sweepingly splendid fellow upon whose shoulders sat quite commodiously all the qualifications of honor.

Many historians contend it was the primal order of the Old South as exemplified in our Mississippi planter which became gentility in the early ante-bellum years and from which the term gentleman came into meaning. Time has leveled legends and dismantled fiction from fact and clothes the meaning in the reality of its ingredients as applied to Southern men today. But it is that primal Old South honor that gave a fillip to the quick dander of a Southern gentleman's trigger and made him grow tall in thunder.

In Southern Honor Bertram Wyatt-Brown gives a vivid précis of the formulation of conduct which makes honor of

immortalizing valor in personal bravery, particularly in relation to familial and community enemies. The impulse was born as a means of survival and before the Civil War it was the prevalent sentiment in secession and paramount in the War itself. Duty in family protection and a vibrant capacity for hatred were integral parts of a man's prowess. Lee himself in the last days before secession wrote, "and there is no sacrifice I am not ready to make . . . save that of honor."¹⁸ Lee's particular doubts about slavery could not absolve him from the demands imposed by the tradition of honor. A kinswoman of Mary Chestnut in 1865 asked a friend: "'Are you like Aunt Mary? Would you be happier if all the men in the family were killed?'"¹⁹ We can almost hear the haunting reply - as if she had repeated it to herself many times to better believe. "'Yes, if their life disgraced them. There are worse things than death'."²⁰ It was not gentlemanly masquerade on the part of Southern men nor was it braggadocio and role playing. It was fiery nationalism born of honor.

Wyatt-Brown further characterizes honor in stating a Southern gentleman identified his honor by the opinion he exerted from others as to his worth and by the defense of his integrity and his double-edged reaction to women - fear and hate. He wraps these components with the value of physical appearance and staunchness of will. Opprobrium carried special weight in the Old South in the presence of

bodily defects much as there was in being bereft of kin and property. Staunchness of will was a necessary constituent in overcoming smallness of stature and frail health but it could not disabuse the high regard in which a tall and well-built man was held. They were considered the signs of merit and superior breeding. The fear and hatred of women entertained by ante-bellum man came from the universal acceptance that women were dangerous. This was bare-boned reality.

Women could present men with illegitimate children and thereby cast doubt upon the legitimacy of the whole line thereafter. A woman's unfaithfulness profaned father, husband, brother; as a natural consequence hatred followed as retribution was required.²¹ Mary Chestnut once remarked: "It is the habit of men to fancy that in some inscrutable way their wives are the cause of all the evil in their lives."²²

Honor was the sum of its parts as it could not always be molded to fit requirements of the immediate circumstances. It was absolute and indivisible. The law was not. Honor brought out the worst as well as the best on whom it was conferred while the law was kept malleable and personal - more to accommodate the needs of the community and responsive to local opinion. Honor was inextricably tied to slavery as its ethics required the unfeigned willingness of slaves to bestow it on all whites. If respect was merely pretended insolence would follow the pretense and the essence

of honor would be dissolved. Any infraction in respect and prestige violated man's discretionary right to rule over a black and when impinged upon it endangered the whole racial system. Not only did the lack of respect bear a serious challenge but a squeamish slaveholder so savorless as to be unable to make his will felt, was held in low esteem. Gross inhumanitarism, likewise, signified a character weakness. A master might feel inadequate as a leader of his work force and have no recourse to salvage his honor so implicitly fastened to fustial talk and behavior other than by corporal punishment.²³ But it was not only upon the black man that physical force was used. It flourished at all levels of society. This came from a necessity of all classes to maintain their social status - thereby creating a certain stability which was the balance wheel of race and rank. To perpetrate violence was an accepted appliance to ensure the safety and sanctity of a man's family from calumny and harm. It preserved his property and most assuredly fed his self-respect. Older men settled their differences with more dignity and aplomb and less bluster, but the young jackanapes embraced dueling as its appeal lay in public approval which gave flowering to their vanity.

Duels invariably occurred because one antagonist discredited and maligned the manliness of the other by verbal assault, using such terms as liar, coward, poseur, poltroon, or sullied sister, mother, cousin, or family repute in

general. Duels were inseparable from community opinion of the individual although they were universally acknowledged to be a vindication of a man's honor. A duel rewarded the survivor in being proclaimed a hero, but it also celebrated the fallen who touched public sympathy in a spirit of pity and admiration, discounting the fact he might have been a scoundrel beset with scandals of the first magnitude.²⁴

There is no doubt that the rites of affirmation were prevalent in Southern society and taken with extreme seriousness. They infiltrated many areas of daily life but were confined to those within the circle of honor. This, by reason of race, excluded slaves in the American South. Such rites were also denied free blacks, while many of the poor whites were likewise outside the pale of oath-taking - and many were the consequences of exclusion. An oral pledge from a gentleman was considered as good as an oath signed and sealed in blood and decorated with ribbons and bows. Southern men frequently gave surety for gaming debts by the shake of a hand which was tantamount to a signed swearing.

Such were the accoutrements of honor in a Southern gentleman. In him we see individualism eventuating in violence mainly from his sense of pride. And yet - and yet - those very accoutrements were the vestments in which the Confederate soldier was clothed and which reckoned him without peer as a mighty fighting force - soldier, farmer, gentleman of honor: each bound to each in common memories -

memories sealed with the great seal of tears, and hunger, and pain, and soaked with the blood of their dead.

Thus Mary Chestnut gathers together the none-such particulars of a life wrapped in all the luxuries of many generations of wealth. Although she embraced the required aspects of the romantic Southern legend, the patriarchal authority with its traditional trappings failed to mold her into any conventional pattern. A reader of her Journal, therefore, may be well justified in feeling that the embellishments of the "stately tread and rustling robes" of the legendary ladies in farthingales and cavaliers in beplumed hats are not alien to Mary's tastes. Indeed, she finds it hard to deny the joy of life's small adornments. A simple gift from a friend of fresh asparagus and ripe apricots in thick cream is without parallel.

The preposterous human conditions under which Mary Chestnut lived, give to her Journal the most spontaneous and intimate expression of a compelling and indomitable spirit that would bear pain without a murmur, but would not submit to be bored.

It is that very spirit which is a product of a long line of the Old South's tradition of the home with its sanctity, the virtue of its women and the honor of its men. It is that which is bigger than life for Mary. She finds its fulfillment in her rapacious reading and the exercise of a remarkable memory in bringing to mind the boundless literary

allusions with which the limns her day's happenings. And so many of those literary allusions embody aspects of that society to which Mary was born and bred and are part and parcel of her very being. This is the glory of Mary Chestnut's Civil War.

ENDNOTES

EXEGESIS

¹Elizabeth Muhlenfeld, Mary Boykin Chestnut A Biography (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981) p. 47.

²Bertram Wyatt-Brown, Southern Honor (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982) p. 123.

³Ibid., pp. 120-121.

⁴Ibid., p. 125-130. Information on this paragraph can be found in substance on these pages.

⁵Robert Myers, ed. The Children of Pride (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972).

⁶Ibid., p. 503.

⁷Ibid., p. 347.

⁸Ibid., p. 348.

⁹Ibid., p. 390.

¹⁰Barbara Walter, "A Woman in the 19th C." American Quarterly, Vol. XVIII (1966) p. 152.

¹¹Ibid., p. 161.

¹²Bertram Wyatt-Brown, pp. 226-243.

¹³Ibid., pp. 282; 283.

¹⁴Ibid., pp. 278-283.

¹⁵Ibid., pp. 293-297.

¹⁶W. J. Cash, The Mind of the South (New York: Vintage Books, 1941) p. 71.

¹⁷Ibid., pp. 73, 74.

¹⁸Bertram Wyatt-Brown, p. 109.

¹⁹C. Vann Woodward, ed. Mary Chestnut's Civil War (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981) p. 580. [Hereinafter cited as Journal.]

²⁰Ibid., p. 581.

²¹Bertram Wyatt-Brown, pp. 362-400. Information on this paragraph can be found in substance in the 14th Chapter pp. above.

²²Journal, p. 809.

²³Bertram Wyatt-Brown, p. 374.

²⁴Ibid., pp. 355-359.

CHAPTER 2

A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF MARY BOYKIN CHESTNUT

The world is a comedy to those who think
And a tragedy for those who feel.

Horace Walpole

It was a warm day in mid-February 1861. Mary Boykin Chestnut was sitting in a hotel room in Montgomery, Alabama, savoring the dank and dismal happenings of the past few weeks. Abraham Lincoln was inaugurated, Sumter was reinforced. The newly formed Confederate States of America was writing its constitution and Jeff Davis was provisional president. If war comes he will have his troubles. The proud, rash, devil-may-care sons of the Confederacy will go rolling into battle enamoured of the spectacular and magnificent in native splendor.

And thus Mary Chestnut sits bending her spirit to the melancholy memories of the bits of life that have dazzled her heart but which would soon be forfeited in the "pomp and circumstance of glorious war." She laments the lack of having kept a journal of her Washington experience during the two years her husband was United States senator from South Carolina. He was the first senator to resign upon Lincoln's election and was then in Montgomery as a delegate to the

Provisional Congress. Mary had accompanied him hither and would follow him to Richmond, the capitol seat of the new Confederacy. There she will amend the lack of recording history as it unfolds around her and as she adds fillip to the spicy gossip of the bright-plumed birds who will be perching - as is their custom - in her salon. She will begin her tale of these halcyon days in an elegant red leather notebook with gilt edges; she will end some forty-odd notebooks later in the dark of the moon of war on the back pages of an old recipe book.¹

Mary writes her Journal for none but her own eyes to see - in fits and starts - like a spider spinning its own entrails. She tries to leave herself out and focus instead on the world around her. She does illuminate her world for the twentieth century reader and her native wit and humor illuminates her work. "What nonsense I write here . . . this journal intends to be entirely objective."² It is delightfully objective when she tells of the agility of old Mr. So and So in dropping a dozen years by his new wig even though it was a bit askew and showed his shiny dome. But it did help him get another wife - but awfully ugly. So Mary goes on in her "objective way."

But in this crude and unfinished book we can hear the pulsating tumult of the guns of war that give to Mary's being larger energies that alleviate the frequent attacks of fever and the great black holes of depression consequent

upon them. As her spirits revive she uses her haberdashery of charm to elicit each moment of high drama of every tale brought to her fireside, to gather people and endow events with the gloom of the chaos of a society in its life and death struggle. This is the Journal Mary Chestnut started on that warm day in mid-February, in Montgomery, and will end after Lee's surrender when Mary and her husband James must cross the Wateree River that flows through the Chestnut plantation, but have not the silver coin with which to pay the ferry man.

Statesburg, South Carolina, was a small community within a mile or two of the old town of Camden itself, about thirty miles northeast of Columbia. It was in Statesburg at the plantation home of her mother's parents that Mary Boykin Chestnut was born, March 11, 1823. It was also near Camden at the plantation home of the Chestnuts that she went as a bride of seventeen, and it was there she remained, except for the war years, the greater part of her adult life. She loved city life and rebelled against country confinement although she spent her childhood among a plethora of young relatives. Her mother was one of thirteen children of the well-to-do Boykin family. She was likewise seventeen when she married Stephen Decatur Miller; thus she gave Mary cousins, nieces, even aunts and uncles not much older than herself. They all belonged to the "old tribe" whose forebears came from Virginia two decades before the Revolution. Mary

was bred with a feeling of intimacy of history. It garnered her senses kept rife by the fabric of legends of family and community heroes and their dare-devil doings. It followed quite naturally for Mary to resolve the individualism of her ancestors in those frontier days into the intense nationalism she came to feel when "her country," as she called South Carolina, was close to invasion.³

As Mary frolicked through girlhood she was given an education proper and appropriate for one of the Southern aristocracy. She was a student for several years in a French boarding school in Charleston. There Mary learned to speak and read French fluently while acquiring a bowing acquaintance with German. She accepted, mid the reserved acquiescence of an adolescent, the rules of conduct - including conversation - with young men. And one of these young men in the not too distant future would capture Mary's heart and take her home to Mulberry as his bride. And thus Mary - only recently in long skirts with heavy hoops and frills - became wife to a husband eight years her senior and heir to one of the most beautiful and wealthy plantations in the South. Unable to have children she found little with which to accommodate herself to an alien life. Mulberry was "magnificent, elegant, luxurious" - it was a garden of Eden in full bloom of all that the unlimited wealth of a century could accumulate, yet Mary felt estranged from all that which her heart craved: the fun and frivolity of boundless

youth. Intelligent, well educated, of old family rank, able to occasion love from whoever pleased her and charm wherever she chose response, she was, as years wore on, most miserably bored at Mulberry.

In March of 1861 there came a surcease of those unhappy years on the plantation. James was commissioned to serve in the wings at the command of President Davis. Thus Mary Chestnut betook her wit, style and loving husband to Charleston, still later to Richmond where she spent the larger portion of the war years. It is here in Richmond where Mary's Journal really begins as she holds sway in the domain of the powerful and mighty. In the very heart of a slave society, in a deeply religious community attended by all the quiddities of an elite, traditional social system, Mary reigns as an independent minded intellectual chafing in durance vile of the patriarchal order to which destiny has chained her. But her vindication of a woman's rightful recognition as other than a slave requires a denial of female subjection as the male plays out his role. In a dozen ways she shows the plight of women under that male dominance: they are deprived of their liberty, their property, their civil rights, and the equal protection under the law, humiliated and reduced to abject dependency. There is no slave like a wife, she declares. "It is no wonder our women . . . took to patent medicine and hypochondria."⁴ She goes on to say the women's subordination accounts for the celebrated personality

of Southern womanhood - whimpering, whining, sighing gently at the end of every sentence. If so, it could be because "we are afraid to raise our voices above a mendicant moan."⁵ She ends her tirade by declaring woman is more the victim than the beneficiary of the Old Southern order which is the core of her inheritance and which requires her obeisance.

Although bound as she was by Southern shackles on women, Mary Chestnut does not feel liberty is the root of the South's patriotism. It is the personal and community independence, the individualism spilling over from frontier days. This equates into nationism and nationalism into civil war. Mary was beginning to transform her deep loyalty of the new Confederacy. Her fidelity will play a large part in the influence of her intense and dynamic defense of Jeff Davis and her subsequent villification upon every occasion of the glacial and garlicky gossip of many of the war leaders and Confederate legislators. She registers disgust at the constant jockeying of positions and bemoans in her Journal:

What a pity - the men have brought old hatreds and grudges - & spites from the old union. Already we see they will willingly injure our cause to hurt Jeff Davis . . . we sit still and wait the chapter of accidents. . . . They are inscrutable in their ways and past finding out.⁶

As conflict comes she longs for the redemption from war of her native land, from all the blood it commands to flow, from the inefficiency of the Southern military whose prattlings are like those of landscape gardeners who might hope by

frantic effort to keep Alaska from bumping into Asia, while "the faces of the dead grow as black as charcoal on the battlefield and shine in the sun."⁷

With a high inheritance of reason Mary holds slavery to be a "monstrous system & [a] wrong & [an] iniquity."⁸ She, nevertheless, makes a ponderable attempt to be patriotic and remains loyal to the established Confederate cause acknowledging the South's right to secession. There is no reason to suspect Mary is a newcomer to abolition. She still feels the horror of seeing a young slave girl of her approximate age being sold in a public market in Camden. In a letter to her husband in 1842 when she was nineteen, she wrote fervid anti-slavery sentiments - in a letter a few years later she wrote him: "I am not the hearty lover of slavery this latitude requires."⁹ Before the first gun was fired she writes: "I wonder if it would be a sin to think slavery a curse to any land - Sumner said not one word of this hated institution which is not true."¹⁰ Upon going home to Mulberry for a short time in November 1861 she appreciates the luxuries of clean white sheets and breakfast in bed after having lived in hotel accommodations. She goes so far as to imply she could tolerate life there with little penalty if they could shake off the black incubus. Mary "would almost be willing to allow them [the Yankees] the credit of their philanthropy." She even adds: "that is where the shoe pinches."¹¹ Mary knows the minds of her countrymen. She

is increasingly disturbed by the willingness of otherwise honorable, Christian men to own slaves. She is horrified at the proclaimed belief of many owners that they are under the direct will of God to care for His innocent and naive children. In fact they felt a divine responsibility to do so. They were not burdened when their churches counseled them to show ineffable love in the mystery of that responsibility.

To anyone who knew Mary Chestnut, her abolitionist sentiments might have seemed hypocritical in view of the fact she loved to be cuddled and catered to, and basked in the creature comforts of being every bit a lady. She is quite free in degrading blacks - on the whole - as dirty, slovenly and lazy, although she excuses laziness but adds ill-smelling. She puts Mulberry slaves in a category apart from others as was the fashion on all plantations. Beyond denying blacks to be property, the single most important reason for her strong feelings was the effect of the slavery system upon the morality of Southern men. She is vehement in her disgust of them satisfying their sexual propensities in using the looseness of female slaves available at a moment's notice and at the beck of a finger. Mary feels the lower the mistress the more degraded the moral merit of the scavenger. It appears from references in her Journal she does not suspect James of misconduct with Mulberry slaves but she has little doubt that the real culprit is her father-in-law,

James Chestnut, Sr. There is a run of mulatto ragamuffins who bear striking resemblance to the grand master of the plantation. Mary writes: "Merciful God! forgive me if I fail - can I respect what is not respectable, can I honor what is dishonorable - Rachell - & her brood - make this place a horrid nightmare to me."¹² And the irony is

every lady tells who is the father of all the mulatto children in everybody's household, but those in her own she seems to think drop from the clouds, or pretends to think. . . . Thank God for my countrywomen - alas for the men!¹³

Mary seems to have been the central figure in any group but she considered it a parlor game of chess in which she was a prime mover of the pieces. Often the game was seeking her influence by the numbing mutterings of flatterers. "I wonder if in the thousand compliments I hear there is one grain of truth."¹⁴ - yet she had a strong attraction for men who delighted in her witty tongue and agility in mental gymnastics. She thought herself middle-aged (38 in 1861) and plain looking which contributed, no doubt, to a haughty and arrogant manner that resulted from being bored with the mundane of social chit-chat. Having no children she could not discourse on child training; having no home of her own she could not expound on the trials of management. James took her to task occasionally when she fidgeted and flustered to the point of rudeness. Mary confesses: "I had grown insufferable with my arrogance....Why was I born so frightfully ambitious."¹⁵

But it was those very ambitions so often unfulfilled that impelled Mary to find a release in her avid reading. Although her consumption of books became monumental as she grew older, her devotion to literature really began during her school years. Her tastes included French and German literature but her special love was "British letters, lore and history." Her literary hero was William Makepiece Thackeray. She felt quite at home with the Southern writers but held them in less esteem although she did count various Southern poets as intellectual conferees. She had a speaking knowledge with New England writers, but during the war years they had to be put on ice and shelved as "damn Yankees." Before the war Mary had subscribed to every available British periodical and journalistic pamphlet and kept a "list of books wanted" - one of which in October 1861 included four histories of England. She read several local papers in addition to the Richmond and Charleston newspapers every day as well as a surprising number of New York dailies even in war time.¹⁶ Not unnaturally as she travels along in her journey of writing, we come upon many references ranging from the Psalms, the Lamentations of Job, to Shakespeare, Molière, The Arabian Nights in French, Goethe in German, and the letters of Pascal and the sonnets of Byron. Thus she sprinkles the text of her Journal with literary allusions pulled from a remarkable memory while scribbling of the

encroachment of the war and the day-by-day happenings of the sovereignty of the great.

It can be said of Mary Chestnut's Journal in the sense of its being a diary that which Irving Stone says in Men to Match My Mountains, "Biography is not always a sweet tune even when played by master musicians." One is justly skeptical of a biographer's attempt of balanced appraisal and physiological insight of his subject. Though the biographer may not invent anything he may alter everything with a result that beclouds our eyes in half-truths. So much that Mary Chestnut writes of herself are "domestic privacies" that take the form of disembodied ideas and happenings as they scamper through the pages of her Journal in the relentless quest to portray her days in truth. But from the jungle paths we can cull her yearnings for the future that in time became remembrances of the past and all of which clothe the essence of the living Mary Chestnut.

The "frivle, fravle of finery" found scrambling through Mary Chestnut's Civil War and which add luster to her tall tale can not dull the baggage of the South's defeated ambitions with which her Journal is heavily burdened. Nor can it dull the presentiment Mary Chestnut felt as she sat in her hotel room on that warm mid-February day in 1861: a presentiment that their lives might be washed away in a tide of blood with nothing to show they were ever on earth. And sitting many miles away was the other half of Mary's

equation, whom she thought of as the lordly tyrant whose grip would never let them go even though he could say as Mary does:

"And if I laugh at any mortal thing it is that I may not weep."

Mary Boykin Chestnut 1863

"Don't you see if I did not laugh I would have to weep."

Abraham Lincoln 1863

And would not they both say as Camus says in Resistance, Rebellion, Death: "And after the tumult there would be an end to the inclination toward slavery as an ingredient of virtue."

ENDNOTES

A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF MARY BOYKIN CHESTNUT

¹Information on this paragraph can be found, in substance, in Elizabeth Muhlenfeld.

²Journal, p. 23.

³Journal. Information on this and above paragraph can be found in C. Vann Woodward's Introduction.

⁴Ibid., p. LI.

⁵Ibid., p. 735.

⁶Ibid., p. 7.

⁷Ibid., p. 114.

⁸Ibid., p. 29.

⁹Ibid., p. 59.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 29.

¹¹Ibid., p. 738.

¹²Ibid., pp. 71, 72.

¹³Ibid., pp. 29, 31.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 19.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 258.

¹⁶Ibid., p. XLVII.

CHAPTER 3

MARY CHESTNUT AND SHAKESPEARE

There is much to know, little time to live and one
does not live if one does not know. Man without
news, a dark world.

Gracian 1601-1658

In the first half of the nineteenth century the South was, comparatively speaking, a more important book market than in the same portion of the twentieth. In those years the percentage of college bred men and women was higher in the South than anywhere in the North.¹ On the surface it suggests a remarkable degree of learning. Such a claim, however, deserves but little credence as the majority of southern colleges were mere academies and all together should not be mentioned in the same breath with a half dozen Yankee universities. This is not the case with the University of Georgia in its early history, but as it gradually relegated its intellectual pursuits to a lower status it became a fashionable club for dueling, drinking, and gambling. Beyond these considerations the South far overran the American average for (white) illiteracy. Not only the great part of the masses, but a considerable number of planters could neither read nor write and harbored the Bible as the only

book in the house.² Certainly there were men in the Old South of wide and sound learning, of first rate education and curiosity for new ideas dressed up in the trappings of a cultural atmosphere. But in the aggregate there were hardly more than necessary to prove exceptions to the rule.

Outstanding among these exceptions were James Chestnut and his son, James Jr., and their plantation mansion on the Wateree River not far from Charleston, South Carolina. Both father and son were Princeton graduates and Mulberry was famed for its library. It was to Mulberry James took his young bride and it was there she found 1500 calf bound books which had been collected in the eighteenth century. It was there Mary developed her taste for "British letters, lore, and history" as well as classical and contemporary French literature. Her days were filled with the splendid agony of delicious choices. Few, if any, literary men or women of considerable stature living in the first sixty years of the nineteenth century, escaped her notice. They did not, however, confine her reading, as it may well be her savor was set in a most catholic manner by those delicious choices found at Mulberry.

Mary Chestnut had spent but comparatively few years far from her home near Camden. Other than a trip abroad shortly after her marriage, with two years in Washington when her husband was senator from South Carolina and later traveling with him during the war years, she had lived her entire life

in her native state. She overcame this provinciality by her reading, which was inexhaustible in its intent and passionate in its interests. Mary writes in her Journal that her husband admonished her to leave even necessary food behind as she fled on the last train from Richmond in advance of Grant's hordes, but she did find room in her light baggage for Shakespeare, Molière, Sir Thomas Browne, Arabian Nights in French, Pascal's Lettres and some folk songs. Somewhere along the way to Charlotte, Mary's first stop ahead of Sherman, she must have acquired a copy of St. Augustine, Thomas A. Kempis and Fenelou, a French bishop of the seventeenth century. They may only have been borrowed during the flight as they are not mentioned when she is settled later in Lincolntown, North Carolina. Mary refers, again, to her treasure stealthily stowed in her baggage upon leaving Richmond. She enumerates them, calls them her library as she woefully admits they reside on the floor, as the only table in the room is used for tea. These are the only references in her Journal to the books from which we might presume she was never far separated.³

It is not profitable to speculate to any depth as to the agility of Mary's memory in her myriad allusions to literature. Only those that could come in review are contained in the two portions of her complete Journal written as a diary upon the close of the day's happenings. Many of those are quoted freely, regardless of the translation of

Shakespeare's Old English or the edition of the Bible in her possession. Although she does not speak of the Bible as part of her library, Mary must have had one close at hand. She paraphrases when her memory apparently seems weak, but she is never so far astray as to muddle the meaning nor abuse the original.

Any attempt to analyse Mary Chestnut's reasons for some of those choices at Mulberry and later in life is a risky enterprise. Lacking evidence, surmises must not be considered inerrant and need be placed in the misty gray region of maybe yes or maybe no. It is probable Mary read certain books to strengthen her thinking and justify her opinions and equally probable to gain a wider perspective and to better understand the whys and wherefores of the ways of those who were wrecking such havoc upon "her country" during and after the war. There is, perhaps, a third dimension to Mary's choices. It could be Mary found in fiction a fulfillment of her own purposes, and even beyond that a vicarious satisfaction in seeing how sweet a thing life can be. There were arid areas through which Mary suffered and the glamour and romance of other lives - albeit make-believe - became her own and brought the warmth of sunshine to make her life more tolerable.

It may be other than a coincidence that, save the Bible, we find Mary Chestnut, throughout her Journal, bringing to her mind more allusions to Shakespeare than to any other

among the myriad works to which she refers. Its effect is such that one seeks a reason. It may be a countervailing force for the restless contemplation of war's havoc, and a mitigating touch in her agonized distress to accept the realities of war with its attendant compulsion motivating all life around her. And that force remains dominant for it is at war's end that we find Mary installed in her one room in Lincolntown, contemplating her library. She picks up her volume of Shakespeare and says to a visiting friend:

Lear I read last. The tragedy of the world - it entered into my heart to understand it first now. . . . It is the laying bare of the seamy side - going behind the pretty curtain of propriety we hold up. Poor humanity stripped makes us shiver. He [Shakespeare] preceded Thackeray in that tearing off of shams.⁴

Mary equates her turmoil with that of which Shakespeare writes: the thunder of battle and greed of the great wrecking all hope of salvation in the ultimate design of victory.

It is in the early days of Mary Chestnut's Journal keeping that she first seeks recourse to the "great bard." She is sitting idly in her room on the top floor of Mulberry looking out upon the spacious lawn lined with majestic oaks, and in the silence of such beauty she wonders if it can be the same world she was in but a few days before in Charleston when Sumter was first fired upon. She picks up her photograph album to better arrange it. One picture brings to her mind a comparison between the plight of Romeo's

official, Mercutio, and that of a Southern gentleman, Beaufort Watts.

Like the hole in Mercutio it was not as deep as a well or as wide as a barn door but it did for Beaufort Watts until it was found.⁵

Mary is using Shakespeare's tragedy Romeo and Juliet to comment upon the pitiful story of an honorable Southern man - "a gentle-man to the tips of his fingers - chivalry incarnate and yet such was his fate." There had been placed in Watt's custody a large amount of money in bank notes belonging to the state. It was his responsibility to transport it from one bank to another some distance away. In so doing he was forced to spend the night on the road in a wayside Inn. In the morning the money was gone. Its disappearance lay heavily on Beaufort Watts with resultant damage to the high esteem in which he had been held. His suffering was great, but without redress until the money was found years later upon the Inn being torn down: found in a rat's hole. Mary likens the hole and the undoing of Watts to a hole received by Mercutio in a fight with Tybalt in defense of Romeo.

Aye, aye, a scratch, a scratch - narry 'tis enough
 No, 'tis not so deep as a well nor as wide
 as a church door, but 'tis enough, 'twill serve.
 Ask for me tomorrow and you shall find me a grave.⁶

In reminiscing of Beaufort Watts in her Journal Mary recalls the realities of domestic strife and troubles. She sighs as she ends her tale, choosing to remember him

shining in the sun - and with his plumed hat [he] reins up his steed and bows as low as ever. Now I will bid farewell for awhile, as Othello did, to all the pomp and circumstance of glorious war.⁷

Othello, upon learning of Desdemona's possible infidelity, accepts the necessity of dealing with her dishonor and the incumbent sadness if finding her false to his love. He must however, first bid farewell to "the tranquil mind . . . the plumed troop and . . . the neighing steed. . . . Farewell content, the spirit-stirring drum . . . the royal banner [and the] pride, pomp and circumstance of glorious war."⁸

Mary Chestnut is much distressed at the general hostility which seems to be directed toward Jefferson Davis. Louis Wigfall, a former senator from Texas, is the most obnoxious assailant, yet very wise in the need of holding the Confederacy together. Mary ruminates in her Journal of the few friends and many foes of President Davis and fears Wigfall's appearance in Richmond as a source of trouble. "Wigfall, fresh from the army and 'bearded like the pard', stroked his beard and said nothing." She notes: "He has too much common sense not to see how quarreling among ourselves must end."⁹ Mary is referring to Shakespeare's seven ages of a man as he plays his many parts through life. "All the world's a stage and all the men and women merely players. . . ." The fourth age: "Then a soldier full of strange oaths and bearded like a pard."¹⁰ Pard is an old English name for a leopard. Jacque's speech - a bit of philosophizing - is one of the better-known Shakespearean soliloquies

but should not be taken too seriously. As Mary is conscious of Wigfall's army experience she fears his hot temper may cause him to suddenly attack Jeff Davis with words as he did the enemy with arms at Manassas.

Manassas brings to Mary's mind the son of a friend who was a union man in South Carolina's nullification row, but whom she proudly greets now as a captain who "wishes to flesh his maiden sword on the battlefields of Virginia."¹¹ The reference to Henry IV is clear. Prince of Wales, Prince Hal, greets his brother John, Lord of Lancaster: "Come, Brother John, full bravely hast thou fleshed thy maiden sword."¹² Falstaff has thrown down at their feet the body of Hotspur, son to the Duke of Northumberland, who is kicking up a disturbance in Henry V's realm. It is John's first battle and his older brother is complimenting him for having fought bravely in his initial action.

Shakespeare had an extraordinary knowledge of soldiers. He knew their thinking and behavior. He knew soldiering and could express the heroics of battle in heroic language. Mary becomes military minded in the early months of the conflict, particularly after Manassas and Sumter where she heard the firing of cannons and saw the "Death March" daily pass her door. She easily brings to remembrance many passages in Shakespeare's plays relative to the blood and thunder of wars.

Mary plays out her own seven acts on the universal stage and is her best critic: "I sometimes feel I am so vain, so conceited - think myself so clever and my neighbors such geese that pride comes before a fall. I pray I may be spared."¹³ She was neither a mocking nor a weeping philosopher but like Shakespeare viewed the world and his wife with zest and aplomb. Her personal code forbade whimpering but she allows herself an occasional unholy shriek. In a conversation with a friend on Southern women the two agree they dislike "their languor and easy going ways, low voices, laziness, etc., etc., [which] would have them like the morning Hamlet saw his ghost: 'with an eager and nipping air.'"¹⁴ Mary is referring to Hamlet who, with his friend Horatio, and Marcellus, an officer, are on a platform on the battlements. Horatio remarks the season is approaching in which spirits walk: the ghost of Hamlet's father is about to appear and disclose the truth of the murder and the required revenge. Hamlet says: "The air bites shrewdly. It is very cold, Horatio; It is a nipping and an eager air."¹⁵ Mary and her friend find their compatriots lacking in vehemence and grandeur of an independent mind and spirit, without zeal to be individuals endowed with accomplishments that would defraud their status of subservience. With any essence of energy and dash they would nip at the heels of the patriarchal order under which they live. It will take a similar nip

for Hamlet to do what he must in retaliation of his father's murder.

After Mary recovers from a recurring heart attack she feels very mortal and brisk in taking offense at Jerome Napoleon's criticism of the appearance of Confederate troops: "and he did not like Beauregard at all." Mary gladly gives "Bogar up to him" [General Beauregard], but she will not suffer his faulting her soldiers whom she has seen individually and collectively in Charleston and Richmond. She admits that looks are deceiving and not everything. She then quotes sixteen lines from Henry V: "Hear what King Harry says of his fine fellows the night before Agincourt:"¹⁶

Why should they mock poor fellows thus!
The man that once did the lion's skin
While that beast lived - was
Killed with hunting him.
And many of our bodies no doubt
Find native graves - upon which I trust
Shall witness live in brass of this day's work . . .
Tell the constable we are warriors of the working
day;
Our gayness and our guilt are all besmirched,
With rainy marching in the painful field.
There is not a piece of feather in our host.
Good argument, I hope that we shall not fly.
And time has worn us into slaverly:
But in the mass our hearts are in trim,
And my poor soldiers tell me, yet ere night
They'll be in festive robes.¹⁷

Mary vindicates her soldiers in those festive robes: "Men of Manassas changing their soiled clothes for the enemy's purple and fine linen on the battlefield.

We are sons of men
 Who conquered on Cressy's plains
 And what our fathers did
 Their sons can do again.¹⁸

She then adds: "Now I feel better - Napoleon, Prince, to the contrary notwithstanding. War 'That makes such a waste to brief mortality'":

For God doth know how many now in health
 Shall drop their blood in approbation,
 Of what your reverence shall incite us to.
 Therefore take heed how you impawn our person,
 How you wake in the sleeping sword of war.
 We charge you in the name of God - take heed!¹⁹

Henry V is often spoken of as Shakespeare's ideal king.

This assumption may be due to Shakespeare's making him so perfect in his royal role - a king without spot or blemish of mortal kind. In the quotation immediately above Henry is warning the Archbishop of Canterbury to beware of awaking the "sleeping sword of war." The Archbishop is pressuring Henry to assert his right to the throne of France through the female line: to defy the Law of Salic which the French kings allege to be a bar against the claim of the English kings. In camp the night before the combat, a French herald comes to assure Henry of his defeat and advise him to make terms rather than allow the bodies of his wretched army to lie and fester on the battlefield. In his famous Agincourt speech Henry defends his "poor soldiers." Mary feels such words of wisdom which Henry addresses to the Archbishop are as much too late for any good as the collection of money that is being taken to send for the body of a friend's poor

son "now that he is dead." He died of neglected typhoid fever - not wounds of battle. Mary is indignant that money was not sent in time that his life might be saved. "In the name of God - take heed."²⁰

It was the last days of October, 1861. General Magruder was fighting somewhere around Yorktown and two young naval officers were brushing near New Orleans. She thought these dashing devil-may-care sailors would do something heroic if opportunity afforded. Mary refers again to Henry V:

Send danger from the East unto the West,
So honour cross it from the North to South!
And let him grapple!

Ah, the blood more stirs
To rouse a lion than to start a hare.²¹

Mary quotes Hotspur who has been taking his uncle, the Duke of Worcester, to account for his part in the murder of Richard II and the crowning of Henry IV King of England. Hotspur admonishes the Duke: "You are fooled, discarded, and shook off by him for whom these shames ye underwent." The Duke accepts the rebuke and tells of "matter deep and dangerous . . . full of peril and adventurous spirit." Hotspur agrees they must do battle with the King and is proud to have a lion rather than a hare to fight. Mary then adds from Macbeth:

Better be with the dead
Whom we to gain our place have sent to peace,
Than on the torture of the mind to lie.

Macbeth with the help of Lady Macbeth has plotted the murder of Duncan, the King of Scotland and has had himself crowned. Lady Macbeth realizes the dangers of the plot: "'Tis safer to be that which we destroy, than be destruction swell in doubtful joy." Macbeth replies, "We have scotched the snake not killed him." He is referring to Banquo, a fellow general of Macbeth's in Duncan's army. Neither Macbeth nor Lady Macbeth trust Banquo not to undo them if to his advantage.²²

Mary feels her days so rife with man's destruction that she instinctively turns to others to better express the depths of emotion. It is as if she shrinks from such a responsibility. "So the poets say what we feel - do much clearer than we could say it ourselves."²³ Magruder is having a good fight around Cornwallis's Yorktown and the two dashing officers undoubtedly faced a lion rather than a hare. Rumor has it that there was a good fight with the Yankees and a splendid victory - allowing for all the usual exaggeration. Mary concludes her day's entry with yet more Shakespeare: "'Would it were bed-time, Hal! and all were well.'"²⁴ The Prince of Wales [Hal] and Falstaff are about to go our arrayed against the Percys of Northumberland. The Prince bids Falstaff say his prayers and his farewell. He reminds him he owes God a death for killing Hotspur. Mary is aware of the battle her countrymen are fighting and very sensitive to the inefficiencies and blunders that wreck such havoc on her soul. Because her husband is frequently a liaison

officer for President Davis she is privy to much of the war's prosecution in the various areas. She tries to charge the desperation of the Southern cause to the jealousies and bungling of its leaders. Mary longs for a soldier who will lead to victory, and wishes she were a man. The first witch who determines Macbeth's fate comes to her mind:

Though our bark cannot be lost
Yet it shall be tempest tossed.²⁵

The first witch upon meeting Macbeth in the woods foretells his becoming King but without heirs.

Mary's bark does remain steadfast; although it sinks upon occasions it always recovers the surface again. She laments she knows how it feels to die:

I have felt it again and again. For instance, someone calls out, 'Albert Sydney Johnston is killed.' My heart stands still. I feel no more. I am for so many seconds, so many minutes - I know not how long - I am utterly without sensation of any kind - dead. And then there is that great throb, that keen agony of physical pain - the works are wound up again.²⁶

In the entry of June 12, 1862, Mary is with a number of friends who seem to be despoiling for the pleasure of finding virtue and vice comingled in the best of men. They laud Seward for muzzling the northern press and New England's Butler - known to the South as "Beast Butler" - for giving an order to his soldiers which would shame a "Massachusetts Comanche." Someone praises the man who killed Phil Barton Keys, the son of the author of the Star Spangled Banner. That was a virtuous deed - he should kill the man who

seduced his wife but his vice was taking his wife back after her profligacy. The ladies carry on until they come to Washington, which brings them to Hamilton and Burr. They opine that it was right that Hamilton die because of his ungentlemanly accusation of his mistress. Yet Mary argues Hamilton was a gentleman more than most men this side of the water. The villification of some and support by others leads Mary to Hamlet. "Listen to him," she says: "This is his opinion of mankind at large and himself in particular. Given with much violence to Ophelia."²⁷

I am indifferent honest, And yet I
could accuse me of such things -
that it were better my mother had
not borne me. I am very proud, revengful,
ambitious, etc. What should such
fellows as I do, crawling between earth
and heaven. We are arrant knaves all,
believe not of us Shut the door on
him [Ophelia's father, Polonius] that
he may play the fool nowhere but in
his own house. "Eh!" [Exclamation by
Mary] I'll give this plague for thy
dowry. Be thou as chaste as ice,
pure as snow. Thou shall not escape
calumny.²⁸

Hamlet, suspicious of Ophelia's possible infidelity, tells her he loved her once but no more, and bidding her farewell condemns her to a nunnery and "quickly too." Mary sums up her feelings in one wild outburst of rage to those around her:

For shame - faint heart. Our people are brave, our
cause just, our spirit and our patient endurance
beyond reproach, but I'll tell you what we wanted
was a republic, strong, young vigorous. What we
did was to give [up] and we put in power, whenever

we could, effete incapables. Worn-out old U.S.A. public servants.²⁹

Mary is conscious of the smallness of things. She found in Shakespeare an awareness of the sordidness and deception of life. He aims straight at the heart - tragedy or comedy - no dressing up of his characters in pharisaical robes, no muddling of right or wrong. This is likewise true of Mary Chestnut as she tells a tale in which she derides the hypocrisy of a small town. Two young sisters have been seen sitting by the village pump eating apples on Christmas Day. People are horrified and even the soul of the town's clergyman is filled with "horror not unspeakable" as he chastens them severely the following Sunday. During the service Mary finds it hard to keep a straight face at such preposterous nonsense. She thinks of Iago allowing Othello to find Desdemona's handkerchief in Cassio's hand. It is proof to Othello of his wife's infidelity. Iago ironically calls his discovery "trifles light as air."³⁰ It is also Mary's opinion of the apple episode, though in a lighter vein.³¹

The incident must reside deep in Mary's memory as she quotes the next line of Iago's soliloquy in an incident occurring more than eighteen months later. It is quite apropos to a conversation she has with a friend as a gay and debonair couple dash by on horseback. The couple had been confirmed the previous Sunday and the lady had been confined

but a month before. There is wonder that she is riding so soon. The friend asks: "After confinement - or confirmation?" Mary replies: "'Confirmation strong as holy writ.'³² When I saw him go up to the altar, I thought a new leaf was to be turned."³³ Mary slightly misquotes Iago here and takes great liberty in the allusion. Iago realizes Desdemona's handkerchief was Othello's first gift to her and therefore prized by both. It was in itself a trifle, but "trifles light as air" are to the jealous "confirmations strong as proofs of Holy Writ." Iago adds a mere subtle touch to Desdemona's infidelity by playing on the handkerchief as a gift of scant esteem.

Mary's thoughts are increasingly concerned with military matters as the war wearily winds on. She finds in Shakespeare many literary comparisons which are appropriate to odd and sundry daily crises that arouse her ire. She thinks of Much Ado About Nothing when two dozen citizens of Clarendon District in South Carolina protest to the Executive Council questioning the wisdom and fairness of impressing slaves to work on the fortifications. The council favors such a move as it eliminates the calling of men over 40 years for the reserve corps. They gave their sons cheerfully, but giving up "sacred property" in the shape of Negroes is another matter.³⁴ Mary excoriates the two dozen citizens - many of them friends - and their excuses, "but like Dogberry . . . [they] will go far to be believed."³⁵

Dogberry, the chief constable in Shakespeare's Much Ado About Nothing, takes the precaution of obtaining the signatures of the magnates that their edicts might be believed. In Mary's opinion those who oppose the Council's resolution will go to any extreme to make their excuses stick that they might stay at home and see the war out.

But it is to Shakespeare's Henrys that Mary Chestnut has recourse for allusions to the endless war-related happenings that find their way daily into her Journal. Upon reading a local newspaper she sees an item which reminds her of her friend General John Bell (Sam) Hood who lost a leg in the battle of Gettysburg. It wasn't until January, 1864, that Mary saw him again.

In the Examiner [a Richmond Daily] an account of Hood on horseback for the first time. 'Young Harry with his beaver up.' He rode erect and everybody took off their hats and cheered.³⁶

In Shakespeare's Henry IV, young Harry, the Prince of Wales, is riding forth with his father, the King, to meet near Shrewsbury Henry's rebellious subjects, the Percys of Northumberland. To the Percy camp news is brought that the King is coming with "young Harry with his beaver on."³⁷ Hood has his beaver (visor of the helmet) "up" to better see and be seen. Young Harry has his "on" to keep the March sun from shining in his eyes as he goes into battle.

Mary hears through the grapevine - which is really her closest friend Varina Davis - that General Lee has no

patience with officers bearing personal complaints against fellow officers. President Davis has less than Lee. This bit of gossip reminds Mary of the "Dead March" at the funeral of Henry V, which ceremony was attended by the several dukes of the realm, one of which is the Regent of France, Duke of Bedford and uncle to the King. A messenger comes to him with news of the loss of several towns, "but Paris and Rouen are spared." Bedford asks from what cause and is told: "No treachery, but want of men and money. Amongst the soldiers this is muttered:

That here you maintain several factions,
While a battle should be dispatched and fought,
You are disputing of your generals.
One would have lingering wars, with little cost,
Another could fly swift with wings;
A third man thinks without expense at all,
By guileful words peace may be obtained.³⁸

General Joe Johnston is apparently accused by another general of the surrender of Vicksburg and its Confederate garrison in 1863.³⁹ So the factions contend to Mary's total dissolution while the war rages on.

Nothing could be more pertinent to express Mary's sadness of heart than the above quotation. She is suffocated by the quarreling and petty jealousies which consume so much energy. There is little left with which to route the enemy. The officers are so busy fighting each other their petty powers are woefully dissipated as they find themselves with squandered strength, unfit for the battlefield. The Confederate Congress exhausts itself vituperating Jeff Davis:

to hamper, harass, thwart him seem their whole duty. Mary excoriates it also: "Never mind the Yankees until they have exterminated the Council." She holds in slight contempt a great many of the Confederate generals. She thinks them second rate, inefficient and of little value for the job at hand.⁴⁰

It is February, 1865. The war is drawing to a close. Mary realizes her days are past, that her purposes are broken off, even the thoughts of her heart. She quotes four lines from Horace:

Be fair, or foul - or rain or shine,
The joys I have possessed in spite of fate are mine,
Not Jove himself upon the past has power,
What has been - has been - and I have had my hour.

Then she quotes: "Time and the hour run through the roughest day."⁴¹ It is the end of all that has been Mary's life - it was the beginning of a new world for Macbeth. He will kill Duncan and become King of Scotland and the tragedies of his life will be born.

Mary quips that Shakespeare who knew so much about human nature must have been a great lover although she disapproves of his leaving his wife his second-best bedstead. To have spelled it out in his will did indeed hurt her sensibilities. Mary feels he couldn't have known women as he portrays them unless he had loved many. That may be the reason he could speak for her in her exultation and depression and clothe her thoughts with his universality of

humanity. Shakespeare had marked instincts about love, marriage, men and women relationships. But he had no particular system of rules, religion, conduct or morality. Similarly, Mary preferred no rigid code or sanction. She embraced those rules of conduct which seemed to work best in the long run. But she could look into Shakespeare's plays and see herself; beyond that she saw the people she knew and dressed as only he could dress them. He took the experiences of life's delight and wove them into the lives of his characters, parlaying them from his internal consciousness. Beauty to him was romance in full bloom.

Mary Chestnut understood this. It spelled saneness of life's ways. She does the same thing with her "borrowed children": her "sweet Williams" as she calls them. Of varying ages of adolescence, they are the five children of her devoted sister Kate, who is married to James' nephew, David Williams. The children spend months at a time at Mulberry, individually or collectively, under Mary's tutelage and guidance and she is, to them, a great source of mystery and grandeur. She accouters them with much of her elegance of mind and manner and puts them proudly on display to act out the various parts as the drama of their own lives unfolds. As Shakespeare so dressed his characters, Mary clothed her "Sweet Williams" with the many things of which she had tasted and which were to her, a delight and joy forever.

In the blue-black melancholy of the later war years, Mary Boykin Chestnut, in company with Shakespeare, carried a lonely and heroic fatalism in the depths of her heart. After her return to Mulberry, at war's end, she writes of the night with the moonlight cold and ghastly and the whip-poorwills and the screech owls alone disturbing the silence. She cries aloud at all that is past and gone. Her dreams are of the "Dear March" of muffled drum and empty saddle and led war horse. She thanks God that it is past and done. She is glad her seediness is witnessed by only the trees and the barren sand.⁴²

ENDNOTES

MARY CHESTNUT AND SHAKESPEARE

¹This information can be found in Jay B. Hubbell's The South in American Literature 1607-1900. (Duke University Press: Durham, N.C., 1954.)

²W.J. Cash, pp. 94-95. (Further information given on previous Endnotes.)

³Elizabeth Muhlenfeld, p. 138. (Further information given on previous Endnotes.)

⁴C. Vann Woodward, ed., p. 761.

⁵Journal, p. 52.

⁶Romeo and Juliet, Act 3, Scene 1.

⁷Journal, p. 53.

⁸Othello, Act 3, Scene 3.

⁹Journal, p. 139.

¹⁰As You Like It, Act 2, Scene 1.

¹¹Journal, p. 139.

¹²Henry IV, Part I, Act 5, Scene 7.

¹³Journal, p. 192.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 164.

¹⁵Hamlet, Act 1, Scene 4.

¹⁶Journal, p. 192.

¹⁷Henry V, Act 4, Scene 3.

¹⁸Journal, p. 193.

¹⁹Henry V, Act 1, Scene 2.

- ²⁰Journal, p. 193.
- ²¹Henry IV, Part I, Act 1, Scene 3.
- ²²Macbeth, Act 3, Scene 2, all quotations in this paragraph.
- ²³Journal, p. 222.
- ²⁴Henry IV, Part I, Act 5, Scene 1.
- ²⁵Journal, p. 224.
- ²⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 377-378.
- ²⁷*Ibid.*, p. 381.
- ²⁸Hamlet, Act 3, Scene 3.
- ²⁹Journal, p. 381.
- ³⁰Othello, Act 3, Scene 3.
- ³¹Journal, p. 282.
- ³²Othello, Act 3, Scene 3 and same quotation later.
- ³³Journal, p. 449.
- ³⁴*Ibid.*, p. 398.
- ³⁵Much Ado About Nothing, Act 3, Scene 3.
- ³⁶Journal, p. 544.
- ³⁷Henry IV, Part I, Act 4, Scene 1.
- ³⁸Henry VI, Part I, Act 1, Scene 1.
- ³⁹Journal, p. 588, n. 4.
- ⁴⁰Journal, p. 731.
- ⁴¹Macbeth, Act 1, Scene 3.
- ⁴²Elizabeth Muhlenfeld, p. 133.

CHAPTER 4

MARY CHESTNUT AND THE BIBLE

If one gazes into the abyss, the abyss
will begin to gaze into thee.

Neitzsche

Mary Chestnut was an Episcopalian, as were most of the Southern aristocracy; an offering left them after the Revolution. She was not evangelistical but certainly evangelical. Prior to the Civil War there was a burgeoning revival of religious persuasion, but there is no reason to believe Mary did any proselytizing. Religious revivals in the first half of the nineteenth century achieved their greatest success in the personal and extravagant south. Hedonism and Puritanism were integral parts of that naive capacity for unreality which was a salient characteristic of Southerners.¹ Mary was not a Calvinist in the strict doctrinal sense but she most assuredly read the Bible extensively, evidenced by her agility in jumping from Genesis to Revelations with the greatest of ease.

The Bible may well have had a greater influence than any of her other reading - if so, it is understandable, particularly in episodes of recurrent illnesses and depression of spirit. It brought her strength to help bury her

relatives and friends who had so recently supped at her table. Although childless herself, she suffers intense agony as she hears the muffled beat of the drummers as they pass her way. She bids farewell to yet another mother's son. She tries desperately to make her spirit that of the Beatitudes and her life unto the Sermon on the Mount. She laments with Job in not knowing sin until it is upon her, then flays her soul until nature revolts and she is stricken with a fever.

Mary interlards her Journal throughout with scriptural references; often one comes to her mind when she is relating a happenstance of a jocular vein. She alludes in her first few pages to the wedding of a cousin who is having trouble with the clouds of drapery and veils which make up her bridal gown. With quiet dignity the bride unhooks the tag end of her costume which requires to be detached from man or woman of her guests. She leaves a gossamer tid-bit with each, proceeding on her way with only a slight diminution of her apparel. Her occupation being to take care of her finery, Mary says: "like the unkind Jew of the parable I passed by on the other side."² In the Scriptures Luke relates the story of Jesus telling a questioning lawyer who his neighbor is whom he is required to love in order to inherit eternal life. Jesus says it is a man who, travelling from Jerusalem to Jerico, fell among thieves who, stripping him of his raiment, left him lying by the wayside half dead.

A priest and a Levite came upon him and "passed by on the other side."³

Mary quotes again from Luke. He is recording the story of Elizabeth and Jacharias: Elizabeth's barrenness and the angel of the Lord appearing before Jacharias announcing Elizabeth's conception to come and the birth of a son to be named John. Elizabeth lauds her praise to God for "taking away her reproach among men."⁴ Mary overhears a condemnation of a friend's childlessness and in scorning them for their contempt of a barren home, informs the uninformed revilers that although the friend is now, indeed, childless she has buried three offspring. She writes in her Journal: "I took away her reproach among women."⁵ The same quotation is found in the story of Rachel and Leah to which Mary refers later in her phillipic against the master of Mulberry: "flocks and herds and slaves - and wife Leah does not suffice . . . Rachel must be added."⁶ Here Mary is inveighing against her father-in-law whom she strongly suspects of siring mulatto children by a house slave to whom Mary gives the name Rachel. The Biblical Rachel waits many years for a son while her sister Leah bears six sons and a daughter to Jacob. At last "God hath taken away my reproach."⁷ She conceives and bears Joseph who becomes the savior of his people. Mary skips over the romantic side of the Rachel and Leah tale. It's a little different picture than old Colonel Chestnuts's to whom she'll allow no romance. To be sure,

Leah was Jacob's first wife, but Rachel was his love for whom he had to labor yet another seven years.

It is March 31, 1861. "There stands Fort Sumter . . . and thereby hangs peace or war." A few days before the first cannon was fired Mary and her confreres of war "are as gay and madly jolly, as the sailors who break into the strong room when the ship is going down." Their attempt at revelry betrays "'of the fullness of the heart the mouth speaketh.'"⁸ Mary and her friends in their blightful gaiety are indulging in behavior as ironic as did the sailors, for their hearts are in doeful dumps as they are well aware their "ship of state" is in a most perilous position. If Sumter falls and war comes, a debonair spirit cannot mask the truth as the heart knows it. Mary places her quotation in the Psalms but it is the rebuke of Christ to the Pharisees in his parable of the good tree bringing forth good fruit and the evil tree evil, "For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh."⁹

On the eighteenth of July a battle was fought a few miles northeast of Manassas Junction: it became for the south the famous "Manassas." It was a minor victory but very encouraging to the Confederates as rumor took several hundred prisoners, cannon aplenty, swords and sleeve buttons. Mary had been ill and distressed in mind and spirit but she garners her resources and "I arose, as the Scripture says and washed my face and anointed my head and went down

stairs."¹⁰ David had fasted and prayed during the illness of his son but upon his death "he arose from the earth, and washed, and anointed himself and changed his apparel and came into the house of the Lord and worshipped."¹¹ There was no need for further supplication. While the child lived he did not know the purpose of God, but God has spoken. Mary is familiar with the trials and tribulations of David's misfortunes. It would take little effort to equate them with the death and devastation she knows war will bring. She holds her horror, at the behest of her husband, at the people who are lashing themselves in a great fury over the prisoners captured in the engagement a few days previous. They begrudge the necessity of feeding them. Some hard-hearted soldiers who had taken a few prisoners shout: "shoot that congressman, hang that parson - give the Negro a good thrashing and a good master." Decency and propriety must be upheld. It is a civilized war being fought in a civilized country. Mary will have it no other way. She accuses those people who "want to gather a crop of fame when they have hardly begun to sow the seed. . . . Hold on - wait - 'In patience possess your souls.'"¹² So few can see the dark clouds as they begin to gather over the beauty of so recently a happy and peaceful garden of paradise. Luke reports Jesus telling his disciples to beware of the scribes who walk in long robes and have the highest seats in the synagogues and the chief rooms at feasts, and who, for a show, make long

prayers. He foretells wars and earthquakes and famine and the whole land laid desolate before the Son of Man comes in redemption. Jesus then admonishes his disciples: "in your patience possess ye your souls."¹³

It is well into the war; the last days of August, 1861. Men and women are standing straight and tall; the older men to order things around - the sons of the women to follow the orders. The agony of bidding adieu is hardest for the sailors and their officers. The United States Navy was their creed, their love and their religion. They lived it and now they must fight it and, worse, wish it ill luck. Mary knows many of them and feels deep compassion at their buried allegiance: "They are like the people St. Paul cited who were sown asunder."¹⁴ St. Paul is extorting the people to endure chastening while he delves back into Jewish history to remind them of the fruits of faith in the fathers of old times. "They were stoned, they were sown asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword: they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, tormented. . . ."¹⁵ Mary could not have found a more ravaging reference.

The tragedy will be played out as she knows it to be the fate of the South. As of now the streets of Richmond are gay with soldiers right smartly dressed in spanking new uniforms with swords at their sides and the world a big adventure. Mary revels in the noise of the city but knows war and fighting in earnest will take away the joy and

beauty of the show. She laments that "The president is ill and our affairs are in the hands of noodles,"¹⁶ meanwhile looking in every mail for news that England will become their comfortable ally, or that peace will come. She knows the wolf is at the door as his howl grows louder. In the depth of her despondence Mary thinks of David's agony in fleeing Jerusalem ahead of Absalom's hordes. Absalom, his son, had been leading a revolt for sometime against his father, usurping authority rightfully David's as king of Jerusalem. Absalom sat at the city's gate dispensing judgment and inciting the people to riot as they brought forth their complaints. Mary quotes David as crying:

Lord, how they have incensed that trouble me?
Many are they that rise up against me! I will
not be afraid for the thousand of the people that
have set themselves against me round about. Up,
Lord, and help me!¹⁷

She then muses to herself: "Sunday - and a beautiful night. I looked down from my windows high. And the south wind blows softly."¹⁸ And England remains neutral and the North take their forts and are for the moment satisfied. In the same way that England spurned both sides, Mary is reminded of a woman who, upon seeing her husband fight a bear, said it was the first fight she ever saw for which she did not care who was whipped. If Mary does not cry she must laugh.

Mary has looked long enough at the tragic side of the coin. Upon a visit to Mulberry she gazes at the obverse, the happy side: her mother-in-law - that optimist of all

time. It could be said of her as it is said of the three monkeys at the portal gate at Nikko - the famous temple complex a few miles distant from Tokyo: "Hear no evil, speak no evil, see no evil." Mrs. Chestnut's mind is free from all untoward thought and allows no unfavorable gossip brought into her presence, be it true or false. Mary gives up in her attempts at verification of some of her indictments as Mrs. Chestnut only replies: "Maybe after all she's [the indicted one] not really bad, only to be pitied."¹⁹ That brings Mary to the Beatitudes which Jesus teaches his disciples is the way of life. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."²⁰ If happiness is commensurate with pureness of mind and heart Mary deems her mother-in-law the happiest of all women.

Neither side of the coin of life as Mary now is living it holds much joy except as fleeting fantasy might bring it. For her the clouds are getting heavier and lower, taking up too much room in the heavens. Mary says the enemy grins at them, "'How they laugh at our calamity. And mock when our fear cometh'" We jeered so when they ran at Manassas."²¹ The South is beginning to feel the pinch in recruiting as the best fighting material went off at the first beat of the drums. It is becoming hard and it is only the middle of November, 1861. The war, as we know now, was in its infancy; yet at the time many were consoled by thinking peace was at hand. The North recognizes the South's weaknesses.

Much of the North's maneuverings is to starve them out if they can't win by other means. Mary comes to wonder if it isn't time the South heeds some warnings Solomon delivers to the simple who love simplicity, to the scorers who delight in their scorning and to fools who hate knowledge. She admits acquaintance with some to whom Solomon is cautioning that mercy is not always ready at hand. It is withdrawn if not heeded.

But you have set at naught all my counsel and would have none of my reproof; I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when your fear cometh.²²

Solomon was held in great awe, for his judgements were righteous altogether. After his romantic decision between the two women with but one son, he lists his multitude of princes and the extent of his kingdom: the eating and drinking and making merry of all Israel and Judah over which he reigned even unto the borders of Egypt. They brought presents and served Solomon all the days of his life - "every man under his vine and under his fig tree."²³ She ends her soliloquy by wishing they could shake off the black incubus; all would be well then and she could sit pondering the majesty of the mighty oaks she sees outside her perch on the third floor. Mulberry wouldn't be so boring then.

While longing to sit under her own vine and fig tree, Mary can not disabuse her mind of things spiritual. It is Sunday. "Did not go to church. See what Bishop Hall says:

'Lord what am I? A worm - dust - vapor - nothing.
 What is my life? A dream - a daily dying.
 What is my flesh? My soul's measly clothing.
 What is my time? A minute ever flying.
 My time, my flesh, my life and I?
 What are we Lord, but vanity.'²⁴

If all is vanity, the dissension among the Confederate leaders is rather empty. Mary is increasingly concerned with their everlasting bickering and inefficiency. As the war progresses she refers to it more frequently as the dissipation of energies which brings negative results becomes more apparent. She knows "The Almighty hath choice of rods to whip - and will not be satisfied with one trial." On another occasion Mary paints a very interesting metaphor. Portraying the Confederacy as the Israelites and the Yankees as the Amalekites she says once Israel's thirst is slacked God has ready the Amalekites to assault them. The Israelites are constantly quarreling with their leader without cause. Mary likens President Davis to Moses. "God is just. They who would be contending with their best friends should have enemies . . . with whom to contend."²⁵ Mary does not believe a genuine follower of Christ can be a soldier. It's a trade that calls for all He forbids. "The Christ's religion eliminates war and slavery." What are they doing? From whence comes war and fightings? From the rich man of whom James writes:

'Go to, you rich man, weep, howl for your
 miseries are come upon ye.'
 'Behold the hire of the laborer, etc. etc. . etc.'
 'Ye have lived in pleasure. etc., etc.'²⁶

Thus Mary ponders upon much that troubles her for which she has no answers.

Mary acknowledges she has hitherto felt her life bereft of glamour and devoid of pleasure. She begins to tremble, to shiver; could she and her husband be the rich who are threatened with howling and the laborers, without hire, their slaves? They had certainly lived in luxury. Could James be saying their slaves had reaped their fields and cried unto the Lord whose cries "entered into the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth?" His final villification: "Ye have lived in pleasure on the earth and been wanton; you have nourished your hearts, as in a day of slaughter."²⁷ To James, and to the Lord of Sabaoth, Mary directs her plea asking forgiveness, and seeks strength from that Lord to sustain her vows of repentance and reformation. A few weeks hence it is again a Sunday - "a pleasant Sabbath day." Mary is reading the story of Gideon's light with the Midians as found in the seventh and eighth chapters of Judges. Gideon is telling "the timorous to depart - of the thirty thousand, twenty thousand left silently in the night. . . ." And the tribe of Ephraim who did not fight the Amalekites (Midians) "found it easy and pleasant to fight their brethren of Massass afterwards for the spoils."²⁸ To Mary, Gideon's battle symbolizes Manassas: to her nothing will equal her soldiers putting the Yankees on the run - those "fighting - dashing fellows - bronzed, weather-beaten, and the more

wounded the better." But she bewails the tribe of officers contending for the trophies of glory.

Mary is not only affronted by the army, she has but slight regard for the state convention and executive council of which her husband James is a member. Although the council is due to die a natural death in three month's time, the convention is convened to preside over its demise at once. This is the result of the "tempest of terror" the council caused by voting to send laggards to the front for conscription and organizing the reserves. More horrendous than that, the council wanted to take the Negroes from the fields and put them to work on coastal fortifications where there would be a chance of escape. A special committee is formed to try the council for its life but Mary avers: "Like Balaam who was called to curse, it blessed instead."²⁹ In the end the committee eulogized the council as a body, its work, and its members individually. The quotation refers to Balah, King of Moab, who sent for Balaam to curse the children of Israel as they came out of Egypt to find settlement in the land of their fathers. Balaam is reputed to be able to curse or bless at discretion, but this time is prevented by an angel of the Lord from issuing the requested curse and instead bestows a blessing on the Israelities as God had promised them.

While bickerings prevail among the leaders, the woman's side of the war is under control. The fussing ladies are

dispersed and

Joe Johnston (who planted his horsetails in front of the cave of Abdullam like the great bashaw that he is and invited all those whose ambition was dissatisfied to come and dwell there) has gone west.³⁰

Vann Woodward's comments on this passage are worth citing:

I Samuel 22:1-2 tells how David, with the idea of becoming king of Israel in mind, escapes to 'the cave of Abdullam . . . and everyone that was in distress . . . in debt, and . . . discontented, gathered themselves unto him. . . .

Vann Woodward argues, the "horsetails" and "great bashaw" are allusions to a play on George Coleman, the younger, Blue Beard.

Mary discovers another scandal of a lighter vein. She reflects upon the story of a father who forbade his daughter's marriage. Chance observation causes a change of mind. The father saw the forbidden suitor sitting by a window with his back to the piazza where he, (the father), was strolling. In the twilight from his vantage point, the father watched his daughter stealthily approach and, raising the red hair from the stout, freckled neck, daintily plant a kiss thereupon. If things have gone that far, thinks the father, there is no turning back and it's time they got married. Therefore he reverses his verdict to one of blessing and joy. Mary repeats another choice tidbit: that of a widow who, in public, brushed with her eyelashes her cousins' cheek. Mary exclaims: "And they talk of American prudery! No superstitions now - no witches to bewilder men to their

ruin - no devils now cast out of Magdalene!"³¹ The reference bears on Mark's relation after Christ's Resurrection: "He appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had cast seven devils." Or as Luke records it, Christ appeared first to "certain women which had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities. Mary called Magdalene out of whom went seven devils."³² Using the same reference, Mary thinks some devils ought to be exorcised from those who rumor that General Whiting is in disgrace with his superior, General Beauregard. His sword has been taken from him. Mary finds this impossible to believe as General Whiting was the brains of Fort Sumter - Beauregard only the head. "'Lucifer, Son of the Morning! How art thou fallen!"³³ Mary mourns "that they should say such a thing!"³⁴ as she reflects upon the destruction of Babylon and the restoration of the children of Israel to their native land after the long years of their dispersion. The staff of the wicked and the sceptre of the rulers are broken, the golden city ceases and Lucifer, Son of the Morning, has been cut down. Lucifer is symbolic of the pomp of Babylon and the grave that opens up to receive him. Mary regards those who, in their self righteousness, start false rumors, as the Lucifers who will themselves come to no good end.

The war is drawing to a close: the war that "is only a pleasurable excitement" to those who dwell in the comfortable cities - tranquil in no personal fear, building up

shameful fortunes at the expense of their government. Such are Mary's thoughts as she excoriates the gentry who do not go into the ranks but leave the fighting to a handful of officers who are their sons. Mary hears good news is coming. She says the horseman had better hurry up as time is short. It is middle November, 1864. The South has lost almost all its men and has no money. Its best and bravest are under the sod, and there the war stands; its houses burnt, or about to be, over its head. It looks as if they had taught the Yankees how to fight since Manassas and the Yankees don't have the decency to wait until the rebels can ready themselves again. The South frequently awaits the Yankees' pleasure. "If only we had freed the negroes first and put them in the army" Mary notes: "that would have trumped their trick." Mary muses and asks herself, "when are we to have peace? 'When the wicked cease trembling and the weary are at rest.'"³⁵ Here Mary quotes Job who wished he had never been born, so multitudinous are his troubles. To him, never to have seen the light of day is the only condition of peace. "There [an unborn state] are the small and the great and the servant is free from his master.'" It is also "'there the weary be at rest.'"³⁶ Job is a very special counselor to Mary. She feels bereft and forsaken as did Job and hopes her end will be blessed as was Job's with the compassion and mercies of the Lord who gave to him more plentifully than before his chastisement.

It is late February, 1865. Mary is in the company of friends who are reminiscing: "if so and so had only." General Robert E. Lee has been given command of the entire Confederate armies. The London Times ridicules the South for even thinking it would be recognized if it abolished slavery. Mary is hard on England as all hope of its taking sides with the Confederacy has long since fled. She hears the rumor to the effect that Prince Albert can be thanked for keeping the Emperor, Napoleon III, from moving against them. In February, 1865, Lincoln offered some concessions but they didn't suit President Davis as independence was not granted. Mary tells of the "Laodicean commissioners" who go from the South to see Lincoln but are received with taunts and derision.³⁷ Her reference is to Revelation 3: 15-16 where St. John speaks to the several churches and says of the one at Laodicea:

I know thy works, that thou art neither cold or hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold or hot: I will spew thee out of my mouth.³⁸

The commissioners are sent back home without a decision since they had no instructions from President Davis. They were indeed lukewarm.

On a lovely Sunday, after a nice walk from church, Mary is at her Journal. The preacher took the text for his sermon from Exodus 12. "'Set thy mark upon our house and give order to the destroyer not to hurt us.'"³⁹ Mary adds:

"tolerably pitiful that." She knows the South has not the God of the Israelites in whose special providence they reside. She knows the mark upon their houses gives license for Sherman's hordes to plunder and pillage and take by rapine all they could carry away - the work of the conqueror. Has God turned his back on them as he did the Egyptians in killing all the first born of man and beast but passing over the lintels of the children of Israel?⁴⁰ "Heaven is helping us weep. Rain, rain, rain - in sympathy with our calamities. It has rained for six months."⁴¹ And she quotes from Job: "'My days are past - my purposes broken off - even the thoughts of my heart'"⁴² It is at the deepest depth of Job's misery. For Mary all hope of happiness on this earth is gone also.

The end is at hand. And Mary Chestnut laughs that she does not cry. She tells of her escape to a safe place where she might lay her head for a spell. She was the last refugee fleeing Columbia who was permitted to enter the train by the car door. The women from then on could only be smuggled in by the windows because the government had taken over all transportation. Stout women stuck and had to be pushed, pulled, and hauled in by main force. One lady was found almost too much for the size of the windows - it was a critical moment when she was half in and half out and it looked as if she might have to be transported that way. In the evening came the camp songs of those who had in the day

surrendered. Mary allows their voices would have warmed the hearts of an Iclander.

The leading voice was powerful, mellow, clear, distinct, pathetic, sweet. . . . So I sat down, as women have done before when they 'hung up their harps by strange dreams' and I wept. Then I wiped mine eyes as I heard cavalry dashing by . . .

And from my window high -
I looked out on the sky -

There they go, the gay and gallant few - doomed,
the last gathering of the flower of Southern youth,
to be killed - to death or worse. Prison. They
continue to prance by. Lightly and jauntily the
caracole.⁴³

And so Mary marches on, with as airy a tread as the "gallant few": she knows the fullness of time has come.

It is an acceptable premise that Mary Chestnut read the Bible for comfort and encouragement in times of mental and spiritual crisis. Her Journal allows us to glimpse the ease and facility with which she used the Old and New Testaments. In the Old she finds the sadness of things material, in the New the hope of things spiritual: in both the exhortations which helps her to look into the abyss of her life to see the arrogant and proud spirit so displeasing in her finer moments.

ENDNOTES

MARY CHESTNUT AND THE BIBLE

Biblical references are from what is commonly called the King James Version.

¹This information can be found in Donald G. Matthews, Religion of the Old South (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977).

²Journal, p. 27.

³Luke 10:31.

⁴Ibid., 1:25.

⁵Journal, p. 28.

⁶Ibid., p. 31.

⁷Genesis 30:23.

⁸Journal, p. 40 and both preceding quotations.

⁹Matthew 12:34.

¹⁰Journal, p. 103.

¹¹II Samuel 12:30.

¹²Journal, p. 145 and above quotation.

¹³Luke 21:19.

¹⁴Journal, p. 177.

¹⁵Hebrews 11:37.

¹⁶Journal, p. 183.

¹⁷Psalms III, verses 1, 6, 7.

¹⁸Journal, p. 184.

- ¹⁹ Ibid., p. 200.
- ²⁰ Matthew 5:8.
- ²¹ Journal, p. 236.
- ²² Proverbs 1:25-26.
- ²³ Journal, p. 238.
- ²⁴ Ibid., p. 23. C. Vann Woodward says it is the first stanza in "Anthem I" in Joseph Hall, "Anthems for the Cathedral Exeter." The Shaking of the Olive Tree, (1660).
- ²⁵ Ibid., p. 252.
- ²⁶ Ibid., p. 261 and above quotation.
- ²⁷ James 5:1, 4, 5.
- ²⁸ Journal, p. 278.
- ²⁹ Numbers 22-24.
- ³⁰ Journal, p. 437, n. 4.
- ³¹ Ibid., p. 472.
- ³² Mark 16:9; Luke 8:2.
- ³³ Isaiah 14:12 and Journal, p. 630.
- ³⁴ Journal, p. 603.
- ³⁵ Ibid., p. 678 and above quotation.
- ³⁶ Job 3:17.
- ³⁷ Journal, p. 710.
- ³⁸ Revelation 3:15-16.
- ³⁹ Journal, p. 722.
- ⁴⁰ Exodus 12.
- ⁴¹ Journal, p. 722.
- ⁴² Job 17:11.
- ⁴³ Journal, p. 768, includes allusion to Psalm 137.

CHAPTER 5

MARY CHESTNUT AND HER ENGLISH FRIENDS

There is virtue in the gaze of a great man

Chateaubriand upon meeting
George Washington

The two previous chapters have shown Shakespeare and those who wrote the Bible gazing into life and telling of the jealousies and hates, of wars and murders and the infidelities of lovers askew. Shakespeare writes of kings and thrones and the absurd scrapes of the heart, of things celestial and things mundane. The men of the Bible reveal the life that is called blessed which gives substance to the present and hope for the future. And in the tales of the one Mary Chestnut sees the beastliness and the ways of man and gets a good sound peek at the world. In the other she finds the strength to live out each day in a semblance of humility, with which she so frequently finds herself at odds.

Mary Chestnut does not limit her reading to Shakespeare and the Bible. She encompasses a broad range of English literature. Other than Shakespeare, her favorites seem to be Dickens, Trollope, Eliot, Thackeray, and Scott.

Interspersed with these are histories and letters. Literature appears to be her natural dwelling place when her emotions, particularly sentimental and romantic ones, are in question. She readily acknowledges: "How much I owe to the pleasure of life to these reviled writers of fiction."¹ Novels in that era were consigned to desuetude as morally unfit. Mary could never dispel the horror she felt in her mother-in-law's action of locking up innocuous treasures but being thankful they were not burned.

In mid-February, 1861, Mary returns home from a visit to her sister in Florida. On the train she hears that South Carolina has seceded. Events since 1860 have crowded in so, it will take careful recalling to ever display them distinctly. She deplores the delights being exhausted: "the garden of paradise part of my life." Although only thirty-eight, she feels the past holds all the happiness she will ever know. Mary has been reading Lady Sale's account of the ill fated British attempt to conquer Afghanistan, upon which journey Lady Sale accompanied her husband. In A Journal of the Disaster of Afghanistan (1841-1842) Lady Sale epitomized her social acceptance of hardship. Mary well knows what such hardship will mean if war comes. She knows "slavery will go, and joy go with it."²

Mary Chestnut's first look at war was philosophical and it came from Emerson. In The Uses of Great Men, to which she refers several times, Emerson paraphrases a description

from the Earl of Clarendon's History of two men who took part in the rebellion and civil war in England (1702-1704). Mary wants the men who are destined to fight and hopefully save "her country" to be young and vigorous. She constructs her men from material which Emerson, in paraphrasing, clothes his two men to make them fit to fight. Mary uses these men as her yardstick and it becomes an interface of the diversities of war. Mary returns repeatedly to the Emerson standard as she feels there are some officers who are lazy, indolent, and will fight only when time is propitious for success. She does not apply her condemnation to all officers, and grants "what has been - may not be again." So it need not be a purely ideal type. "We have to meet tremendous odds by pluck, activity, zeal, dash, endurance of the toughest military instinct."³ She quotes Emerson:

We keep each other in countenance and exasperate by emulation the frenzy of the time. The shield against a stinging conscience is the universal practice of our contemporaries.⁴

Mary replies: "Aye-Aye-Sir." Emerson helped Mary see slavery as an abominable thing, an inequity, and she accepts his opprobrium of its pervasive degradation.

It may be assumed that Mary Chestnut found in some measure a vicarious enjoyment in reading fictional romance. "What a blessed thing - humbug - domestic felicity is. At best marriage is a compromise." Mary is asked if she believes that two married people ever lived together without

finding each other out. She answers:

Unless they are dolts - they know to a tittle -
But you see - if they have common sense, they make
believe and get - so so - like the Marchioness's
orange peel wine in [Dickens'] Old Curiosity Shop,
you know. . . .⁵

Here, she refers to the poor, abused, half-starved girl, the "small servant" to Samson Brass, who is befriended by Dick Swiveller. Mary is not a conjuror of marital bliss; she is too much a realist for that. "It is only in books that people fall in love with their wives."⁶ Does she say this thinking of her own marriage? James is cool and reserved; Mary is volatile and passionate. She loves the splash and glitter of city life, with its attendant limelight shining upon her. James, with a planter's disposition, finds himself in constant conflicts of interest with his wife. Mary, quite naturally, might dream of a substitute sweeter to her tastes without insult to her high moral canons. In her reading she lives the varied lives she wishes for herself while heeding the vicarious pleasure they brought.

Mary read everything of Sir Walter Scott she could lay her hands on. She speaks of arguing with her husband whether The Bride of Lammermoor is a tragedy. James sees it as an example of the type of chivalry he has been trained to espouse. He speaks of Edgar, Master of Ravenswood, mounted in full regalia, who upon seeing the lover who supplanted him and his brother who insulted him, raises his hat in mute salutation and steadily looking them both in the eye,

proudly passes by. Mary thinks such a code of chivalry beautiful to gaze upon but hard to live with. There is so much of the gallant in Scott, so much of when "Knighthood was in Flower," that she questions its benefit at this time in the South's history. Too many vapid vagaries of manners give the lie to the chaos into which they are being catapulted. Mary sees her father-in-law, Colonel Chestnut, as Scott would paint him: old world gentility and courtliness, partly patriarch, partly signeur, but always lord of all he surveys, a tyrant in fact but not in nature. Mary mourns the leprosy of time, the eating away of energy in empty content of living. To those at Mulberry the war has been far off. They have seen no ragged, dirty, sick and miserable soldiers lying in the hospital. But the threat that someone might walk away with the family silver is very real indeed; silver that is older than anyone at Mulberry, having been brought by Mary's mother-in-law from her home in pre-revolutionary Philadelphia.⁷ Mary is reminded of the old Jews saving the corn from the freshet while Noah was building the Ark. She jumps in one leap from the Ark to Trafalgar.

If I had been a man in this great revolution - I should either have been killed at once or made a name and done some good for my country. Lord Nelson's motto would be mine - Victory or Westminster Abbey.

She then quotes from the poem Hudebras:

He that hangs or beats out brains,
The devil is in him if he feigns.

Straying slightly from Scott, she warns: "Woe to those who began this war - if they were not in bitter earnest."⁸

Mary writes at high speed, usually late at night, but often as she waits for a friend looking for accompaniment on an afternoon's carriage ride. Never thinking that which she wrote would ever see the light of day, she gives it little consideration beyond what it means to her. She is glad her thoughts will not have to be paraded before a jury of her peers.

The rush of associations in Mary's mind runs so fast the result, at times, is somewhat disjointed. She has just heard of the fate of a friend's son. She remarks that:

I know nothing in history more touching than Wade Hampton's situation at the supremest moment of his misery - when he sent one son to save the other and saw them both fall. And he did not know for some moments whether both were not killed.⁹

The news brings to Mary's mind Scott's tale of the courtly acquittal of Torquil's sacrifice. Mary disdainfully says: "I have no patience with old Torquil - ever - when he sees his son's fate and calls so cheerily 'Another for Hector.'" In Scott's St. Valentines Day or The Fair Maid of Perth Torquil watches his eight sons die in battle defending the clan's chieftain, Hector. Torquil asks: "For what were they born? save to die? for their country. Nobody laments the loss of an arrow if it hits the mark."¹⁰ A refrain from Scott's The Monastery, a Romance beats in Mary's brain as she repeats the first word of every other line. "'March -

March' and if I laugh at any mortal thing it is that I may not weep."¹¹ She is in a sad and spiritless mood and croons to herself a twelve verse fragment from a traditional Scott ballad ending with:

Booted and bridled and gallant rade he -
Hame came the gude horse, but never came he.

St. Valentines Day and The Monastery are sober reality to Mary. They speak of an age long past deep in blood, as Mary's days now seem to be. She asks:

Why does the stately Muse of History that delights in describing the valours of heroes and the granduer of conquest leave out these scenes so brutal, mean, degrading that - by far form the greater part of the drama of war?¹²

Mary's readings undoubtedly played a large part in her self-condemnation upon receiving news of the death in battle of a very close and dear friend. "The redemption of our native land from the rule of the foreigner [Yankee]. I have shared in such an attempt." Mary is not happy in her patriotism. She then quotes a long paragraph spoken by a character in a George Bulwer-Lytton novel about the reality of war.

'Recalling all the ties it dissolves . . . all the the victims it creates. I question whether one man, really honest, pure, and humane, who has gone through such an ordeal could ever hazard it again.
. . . .'

It is a many sided thing, and Mary wants to have knowledge of all sides, yet it hurts at the thought of shame.

Let Roman come again, or Saxon-Norm
or the Dane,
In all the bonds we ever bore, we sighed
and wept
We never blushed before.

Early in the conflict Mary had a desire to read a first hand account of prior recollections and rebellions to see how they turned out. She read The Rise of the Dutch Republic and History of the United Netherlands. She procured Sir Edward Creasy's Decisive Battles and William Howard Russel's account of the British handling of the Indian Mutiny. Mary refers to Decisive Battles throughout her Journal. She may well have sought it to fortify her belief that the Confederacy must be united in pursuance of the war and that hostility and wide-spread criticism of Jeff Davis only impedes its prosecution. She says:

Alexander the Great, the successful leader, had a small number of troops - invading hordes are what we have to dread. . . . Have we not swamps, forests, rivers, mountains, every natural barrier. . . . The Carthaginians begged for peace because they were a luxurious people and could not endure the hardship of war. Though the enemy suffered as sharply as they did.

Mary bewails the South's fate as she sees the need to exculpate the Confederate president and relieve the cancer of internal conflict eating away his authority. "Factions among themselves, the rock on which we split . . . Now for the great soul who is to arouse and lead us - why tarry his footsteps?"¹⁴

While reading in a park on a beautiful day, Mary Chestnut compares the calm and serenity she feels to the terrible

devastation Thackeray has Henry Esmond describe after Waterloo: "'Our troops entering the enemies' country and putting all around them to fire and sword.'" She lays down her book and muses to herself: "Our Lee . . . forbids ruthless rapine." To have a better knowledge of a campaign, Mary reads the memoirs of several British generals of the American Revolution: Sir Banastre Tarleton, William Moultrie, Sir Francis Rawdon. She admires their modesty and good taste as much as their courage and cleverness. She harshly rebukes "Our people [who] send forth their own reported prowess. 'I did this - I did that.' I know they did it but I hang my head."¹⁵ Mary is consumed by an avid interest in history mainly inspired by the Civil War and her attempt to equate her hatred of slavery with the patriotism that love of the South calls forth. Soon she develops a concern in rebellions of all types, any struggle perpetrated by the denial of community independence. She had lived on a Revolutionary battlefield near Camden, South Carolina and had read Carlyle regarding war. She agrees with him: "A few able editors hung might save us yet."¹⁶ Mary, as was Carlyle, is assailing the press for exposing the weaknesses and misfits of leaders. Mary could not have affected Carlyle but he surely affected her thinking as the complaint is dominant in her Journal.

Mary bemoans what she calls ideas preserved in alcohol.

If 'in vino veritas', God help us. After all it was not, could not be, unadulterated truth - it was truth, alcoholized. I care no more for alcoholized wisdom than I do for the chattering of blackbirds.

She was hard on the poor blackbirds, but they were made so, she says, "but not the great statesmen and soldiers who deliberately drink down their . . . wisdom and with light hearts become mere gabbling geese." She brings to mind several verses from Charles Lamb in The Last Essays of Elia - Popular Fallacies which she paraphrases, and then proceeds to slightly misquote five lines from Robert Burns' Tam o'-Shanter, three lines from Measure for Measure, ending with two lines from King John. She must have been in a philosophical mood as two days later on October 22, 1861, she again turns to Shakespeare and writes of Hotspur in Henry IV, of Macbeth, and Falstaff to relieve her spirits "tormented by the wild schemes, mad talk, exaggerated statements, our might and the enemies' weakness."¹⁷ She ends her reflections with the quotation cited above. "'Would it were bed time, Hal! and all were well.'"

Mary likens herself to Nicholas Nickleby in the assumption that when a horse comes post-haste it brings good news. But this time she is mistaken: the galloping mare bears the message that the defense of Port Royal has been unsuccessful. The Confederates have lost sixty-six men in the fracas. At the market-place Mary meets a friend who confirms

the bad news but does not effect his light and airy spirits.

He held us there, not like the Ancient Mariner -
for he lacks the glittering eye - but literally
he lay hold of the carriage door and stood between
the wheels thereof.¹⁸

In the same frame of mind Mary criticizes most vociferously persons pleading slight indisposition in order to avoid patriotic duty. She contrasts such a person to Cromwell's Latin secretary who, when the task of answering the King's defense was given him by public authority, did not hesitate to reply although he was in ill health and lacked the sight of one eye. Nor was he deterred by his physician openly predicting the loss of the other if he undertook the endeavor: "He did not long balance whether duty should be preferred to . . . sight."¹⁹ Mary looks for some startling shock to waken her compatriots to greater action. She then paraphrases six lines from Samuel Coleridge:

Yet even this - the cold beneficence
Seizes my praises, when I reflect on those,
The sluggards pity - vision weaving tribe,
Who sign for wretchedness - yet shun the wretched
Nursing some in delicious solitude
Their slothful loves and dainty sympathies.²⁰

She decries "the amount of virulent nonsense I have had to hear and bear today." Part of that nonsense was due to what Mary describes as "no lack of nursing, no lack of women's tears but an awful lack of proper change of clothing."²¹ When someone suggests they try raising their spirits by the Jeremy Taylor (seventeenth century divine) method,

Mary's day is completely undone: "Fancy being happier because you know other people are more miserable."²²

In November, 1861, Mary read a recently published novel by Dickens, Pictures from Italy. "Pleasant company in my airy retreat -," she muses while on a visit to Mulberry. She continues:

Last January I sent for all the English reviews. Blackwood's, etc. etc. - Atlantic, Harpers, Cornhill, etc. Threw away my subscription money. Everything stopped at Fort Sumter. How I miss that way of looking out into the world! The war has cost me that. How much more.

On the 29th of the same month she inserts in her Journal the following: "Hymn at church:

'Save us Lord, or we perish
When through the torn sail the tempest
is howling;
When o'er the dark wave the dread lighting
is gleaming.'

I could have rested my head on that cushion and sobbed and shrieked like a new convert at a revival camp meeting." She continues: "But not an eyelash moved. So much for civilized self control."²³ She will not repine nor be an ill foreboder. "That is, if I were 21 and five feet nine, I'd go and be a sodjer." So Mary quips as she bids her husband farewell. Duty calls him and he must leave for the front. Although she is ill she does not tell him for he would not have gone with an easy conscience if he had left her in bed. She keeps up the game to the last - "sung out to him from the piazza as he drove off:

All ladies beware of the gay young knight
Who loves - and who rides away.

She ventures that Voltaire puts it better. "'Fasten a feather in his cap and march him away to glory.' Something in the human heart the devil can't satisfy, grumbles Mephistopheles to Faust." Mary has certainly covered a lot of literary ground while watching her husband drive off to war: from Judges to John Dryden, Voltaire to Faust, concluding with Trollope's Castle Richmond. She admits: "In this one thing Trollope manages his elderly lady in love better than Thackeray in Esmond."²⁴

Mary acknowledges Thackeray as her favorite writer. She enjoys his heavy plots: cross currents meeting in a great cataclysm as he sustains his lightning - striking evil and saving the good and making of its thunder a tumultuous eruption. Who but Thackeray would allow Becky Sharpe to ply her wiles to the end with only the usual diminution due to old age? And to even accouter her with a certain amount of respectability through her very respectable husband? Mary sees many of her friends as "Beckies" and hopes, in moments of forbearance toward them that their end will reap a measure of happiness as did Becky Sharpe. Thackeray is within the realm of Mary's reality. She was not a dreamer as Scott demanded of his readers. As Thackeray stripped human nature bare, so did Trollope. Mary understands them both and relates easily with their characters. She sees

herself and her friends in Anthony Trollope. They are people she knows. She is quite conversant with their politics, religion, and social customs and can predict their behavior with fine timing. Mary speaks of reading The Small House of Allington - "Lady Dumbello. You I understand."

Although Lady Dumbello uses a short-hand of conversation and bears a frugal mind, her mere presence exudes charm. Mary is well acquainted with her.

Mary Chestnut demanded fiction to be true to life. She read Trollope as a means by which to mirror her friends and, to an extent, herself. She read Dickens to know why her friends behaved as they did. Dickens was Mary's philosophical confrere and her peer in heeding human comedy. Mary was a shrewd and original observer of society: a mixture of introspection, gossip, intuition, a catching of the moment, particularly the man-woman part of it. Flirtations, philanderings, courtships, marriages - solid and shaky - these all passed in review and were tickled with her witty tongue. Mary's one escapade, of which she admits, is with a rash, head-long, devil-may-care ex-governor of South Carolina who made an ardent admirer but who lied with élan and aplomb. Mary never believed a thing he said so he did her no harm. She had resource to Dickens to find out how to deal with such diversity in her friends.

Mary felt a distinct kinship with George Eliot. The pseudonym of a male name was quite appropriate and enhanced,

Mary's rebellion toward patriarchal dominance. Eliot justified Mary's kicking against the pricks of traditional society and flicking her heels in defiance. She knew Eliot had been reared in a strict evangelical atmosphere, from which later came the revulsion and consequent liaison with G.H. Lewes. Mary relates her shock upon learning of the "happy state of high intellectual intercourse and happy contented immorality." But it did not affect her acceptance of what George Eliot's books meant to her. Eliot's early novels from which Mary quotes - Adam Bede, The Mill on the Floss, and Silas Marner - based on recollections of early life in Warwickshire, take Mary back to her own youth in Statesburg. Romola was written after a trip to Italy and shows a didactic impulse. It came out serially in the Cornhill Magazine (1862-1863), copies of which Mary is somehow able to get her hands on. As a consequence, she is inspired to read a full life of Savanarola, and decides it means more to her than Romola. She says she forgot a great deal of Savanarola after reading the book but he remained such a live person to her she procured Vilare's famous biography and became "absorbed in it up to my eyes."²⁵

Mary sees a lot of herself in Maggie Tulliver in The Mill on the Floss. Maggie, in her ardent and imaginative nature, bored with the mundane and led into situations unacceptable to conventional measures, is confronted with disapproval of those nearest her. Mary experiences an exact

duplication of censure. Her husband's family found it hard to appreciate the independence of mind and spirit. Mary also sees some of her young friends in Adam Bede: intense love not understood and turned down for a lesser one of more respectability. She sees her good friend General "Sam" Hood in his love for Buck Preston, both of whom loved, wept, and went their separate ways, never to know happiness again. "Sam the simplest, most transparent soul I have met yet in this great revolution," blushes like a girl yet sits before Mary's fire and stares in remembrance of all he's seen. He sees Willie Preston (Buck's brother) with his heart shot away. He feels the panic at Nashville and its shame, the dreadful fight on the battlefield at Franklin. And that agony of face comes again and again. Can Life be sweet ever more for one who has seen such agony?²⁶

Mary often reads the same book twice to verify her first judgement, or to later compare it with a book by the same author she has subsequently read. She says she is reading "Adam Bede again to measure its distance up or down to Romola."²⁷ She also wants to feel again Eliot's support for Hetty Sorrell and the saving of her soul: Hetty who is convicted of murdering her illegitimate child. She compares the myriad troubles of Jefferson Davis to Silas Marner: condemned by false rumor, and exonerated too late to be rectified. Mary took Silas Marner at one draught. "I did not stop until I had swallowed the last drop."²⁸

Every day is replete with the ups and downs of false rumor becoming true, and true ones, in time, proving false.

One day Mary sits within earshot of the Mulberry chapel.

As I sat wondering what next," she relates: "they [the Mulberry Negroes] broke out into one of those soul stirring negro camp-meeting hymns. To me this is the saddest of all earthly music - weird and depressing beyond my powers to describe.²⁹

Mary is moved to insert in her Journal the following lines from Chaucer:

The wrestling of the world asketh a fall;
Here is no home: here is a wilderness.
Forth Pilgrim! forth! Oh! beast out of thy stall!
Look upon high - And thank thy God for all.

And at the end Mary Chestnut wanted only pleasant and kindly stories to read. "We are so harrowed by real life. Slavery is gone and joy go with it."

Make no deep scrutiny
Into our mutiny.³⁰

Who stilleth the ranging of the seas, the noise
of the waves and the madness of people.

Psalm 65:7

ENDNOTES

MARY CHESTNUT AND HER ENGLISH FRIENDS

- ¹Journal, p. 10.
- ²Ibid., p. 3.
- ³Ibid., p. 6.
- ⁴Ibid., p. 7.
- ⁵Ibid., p. 173.
- ⁶Ibid., p. 169.
- ⁷Ibid., p. 297.
- ⁸Ibid., p. 217 and above quotation.
- ⁹Ibid., p. 666 and note by C. Vann Woodward.
- ¹⁰Ibid., p. 701.
- ¹¹Ibid., p. 705.
- ¹²Ibid., p. 446. Source unknown for above two lines of verse.
- ¹³Ibid., p. 422 and note by C. Vann Woodward, also above quotations. Source unknown for five lines of verse.
- ¹⁴Ibid., p. 314. All quotations in this paragraph.
- ¹⁵Ibid., p. 194 and note by C. Vann Woodward.
- ¹⁶Ibid., p. 219.
- ¹⁷Ibid., pp. 220-223.
- ¹⁸Ibid., p. 228.
- ¹⁹Ibid., p. 276, includes the full tale and note by C. Vann Woodward.

²⁰Ibid., p. 276.

²¹Ibid., p. 217.

²²Ibid., p. 185.

²³Ibid., p. 242. All quotations in above paragraph.

²⁴Ibid., p. 278. All quotations in above paragraph after endnote #23.

²⁵Ibid., p. 501.

²⁶Journal, quotation and substance concerning General Hood - pp. 708-709.

²⁷Ibid., p. 579.

²⁸Ibid., p. 527.

²⁹Ibid., p. 214.

³⁰Ibid., p. 836.

CHAPTER 6

SYNTHESIS

It can be said that Mary Chestnut's literary knowledge was indeed great and wondrous worthy to be praised.

This paper has used but a few allusions to the limitless range of literature as found in Mary Chestnut's Civil War. The might of Mary's lifetime of reading cannot be tempered by an admixture of criticism of her intellectual integrity. When under the winds of doctrine or storms of passion she might misquote or quote too freely, she does not distort the essence to the abomination of the reader. And in her Journal that which might be hindsight or forethought is, nevertheless, her true original impression. Comparisons of the several versions reveal the author's trustworthiness in having set down the substance of the actual facts.

Although an expanded, changed and thoroughly restructured version of the original Journal, Mary Chestnut's Civil War is a masterpiece, written by a Southern lady of an essentially secular mind in the midst of a deeply religious community. It is a record of an anti-slavery sentiment bred in the very heart of a slave society: of a Victorian aristocrat who knows the traditional requisites, yet upon occasion

indulges in glorious outbursts of feminism. The reader may consume the whole aura of Mary Chestnut's war years and in a few episodes glimpse the tragic years of reconstruction.

After the war Mary despaired of ever having enough cash to indulge her appetite for books and periodicals as she had before. She, therefore, organized a book cooperative whose members contributed what money they could which enabled them to subscribe to all the leading British and French journals plus the Saturday Review and Harpers Monthly Magazine. They bought the current best sellers in addition to works of literature and history. In this manner Mary and her friends grew accustomed to trade books - a habit they continued after the demise of the so-called book club. They enjoyed literary discussions and exchange of opinions even though it entailed writing lengthy missives which accompanied the books as they traveled their course.

In a letter to his mother Proust wrote: "Illness is the most heeded of doctors; to goodness and wisdom we only make promises, we obey pain."

After drinking in the full bitterness while sitting among the ashes of defeat, the Old South heeded the pain and began the slow recovery from her illness of battle and the slower forgiveness of the ponderable effort to blot out the remembrance of her people from the earth. The Old South with its trappings of unique particulars of ethics and

behavior has gradually become the New South nestling much of its former self with the mighty roar of the changing waters of war. And in the safe, sober, second thoughts of the cool wise morning of reconstruction it has been forced, in its survival, to shed much of that "beautiful courtesy and dignity and gesturing grace" that the pageantry of the Old has been carried on the wings of the wind into the New as we know it today.

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