



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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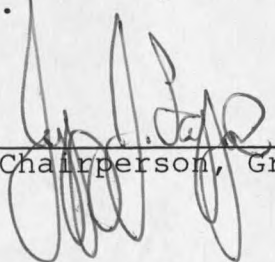
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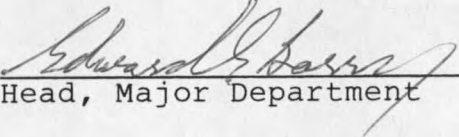
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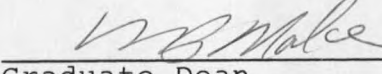
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## PREFACE

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.<sup>1</sup>

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."<sup>2</sup>

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

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

<sup>2</sup>Edmund 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!<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup>

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."<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>

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, Georgia<sup>5</sup> 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."<sup>6</sup> The mother was more diplomatic and paddled with a soft, willowy wand: "It is wise to indulge no prejudice."<sup>7</sup> 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."<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> 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 evangelical 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.<sup>10</sup>

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."<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup>

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.<sup>13</sup>

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.<sup>14</sup>

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.<sup>15</sup>

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.<sup>16</sup>

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.<sup>17</sup>

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."<sup>18</sup> 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?'"<sup>19</sup> 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'."<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup> 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."<sup>22</sup>

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.<sup>23</sup> 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.<sup>24</sup>

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

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

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

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., pp. 120-121.

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

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

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 503.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 347.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 348.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 390.

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

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 161.

<sup>12</sup>Bertram Wyatt-Brown, pp. 226-243.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., pp. 282; 283.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., pp. 278-283.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., pp. 293-297.

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

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., pp. 73, 74.

<sup>18</sup>Bertram Wyatt-Brown, p. 109.

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

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 581.

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

<sup>22</sup>Journal, p. 809.

<sup>23</sup>Bertram Wyatt-Brown, p. 374.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 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.<sup>1</sup>

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."<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>

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."<sup>4</sup> 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."<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup>

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."<sup>7</sup>

With a high inheritance of reason Mary holds slavery to be a "monstrous system & [a] wrong & [an] iniquity."<sup>8</sup> 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."<sup>9</sup> 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."<sup>10</sup> 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."<sup>11</sup> 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."<sup>12</sup> 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!<sup>13</sup>

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."<sup>14</sup> - 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."<sup>15</sup>

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.<sup>16</sup> 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

<sup>1</sup>Information on this paragraph can be found, in substance, in Elizabeth Muhlenfeld.

<sup>2</sup>Journal, p. 23.

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

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. LI.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 735.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 114.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 59.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 738.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., pp. 71, 72.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., pp. 29, 31.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 258.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>

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.<sup>4</sup>

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.<sup>5</sup>

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.<sup>6</sup>

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.<sup>7</sup>

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."<sup>8</sup>

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."<sup>9</sup> 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."<sup>10</sup> 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."<sup>11</sup> 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."<sup>12</sup> 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."<sup>13</sup> 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.'"<sup>14</sup> 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."<sup>15</sup> 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:"<sup>16</sup>

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.<sup>17</sup>

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.

































































































































