

### Live Your Own Life: The Family Papers of Mary Bayard Clarke, 1854-1886

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## Review

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**Crow, Terrell Armistead, Editor and Barden, Mary Moulton Editor.** *Live Your Own Life: The Family Papers of Mary Bayard Clarke, 1854-1886.* University of South Carolina Press, \$49.95 ISBN 1570034729

Literary lady

Collection traces southern woman's professional journey

**Live Your Own Life: The Family Papers of Mary Bayard Clarke, 1854-1886** is a welcome addition to the University of South Carolina's acclaimed series, *Women's Diaries and Letters of the South*. Edited by Terrell Armistead Crow and Mary Moulton Barden (the great-granddaughter of Clarke), this book brings together correspondence and documents held in private collections and repositories to tell the remarkable story of Mary Bayard Clarke: an elite white woman who used her literary talents to forge her own distinct place in the post war South.

Born in 1827, Mary was the daughter of Catherine Ann Johnson Devereux and Thomas Pollock Devereux, one of the largest slaveholders in North Carolina. Educated by a Northern tutor, Mary made her debut into Raleigh society as a polished and accomplished southern belle, who soon stole the heart of lawyer and Mexican War hero William J. Clarke. The couple was married in 1848 and had four children: Frank, William, Mary and Thomas. William believed that his fortune lay in business and politics, and his love for speculative ventures cost his family dearly. After visiting Cuba in 1855 with hopes of becoming a consul, William decided instead to move his family to San Antonio, Texas, where he established a law practice and pursued a disastrous term as president of the San Antonio and Mexican Gulf Railway. Always convinced that success was imminent, William went on long trips to New York to secure investments for the railway, leaving Mary and the children to eke out a precarious existence on the frontier. After teaching at a local school, Mary took up her pen in a desperate effort to make ends meet. She had published her first

book of poetry in 1854 under the pseudonym Tenella, and a literary aspiration born out of the need to foster gentility was, in the wild prairies of Texas, nurtured out of necessity.

Writing and publishing sustained Mary through the long years in Texas, through the heartache and hardship of Civil War, and the vast political, social, and economic changes wrought by Reconstruction. Throughout her career, she published books, reviews, poetry, and articles in both southern and northern periodicals, and later, wrote journalistic pieces on the changing role of women in the South. While cultivating the disapproval of her sisters - who believed that elite women had no place in the male dominated world of publishing - Mary enjoyed William's support, who knew all too well of the importance of her financial contributions to his irregular, and at times nonexistent, income. Mary Clarke's writing endeavors also nurtured her identity as an elite southern woman in a world where most physical representations of gentility had become casualties of war.

Corresponding with publishers, writers, and friends such as Mary Custis Lee, Mary preserved her elite sense of self by developing an identity separate from her roles as wife, mother, and mistress. In the end, her membership to the literary world became the one constant and rewarding thing in a life marked by post war poverty and family conflict. The correspondence and documents included in **Live Your Own Life** provide many new insights on the effects of the Civil War on marriage, and the extent to which the war can be regarded as a watershed for southern women. Crow and Barden have skillfully selected an interesting array of letters, primarily written to and by Mary Bayard Clarke. These include letters to family and friends written during the Clarkes' trip to Cuba, correspondence to publishers, William's Civil War letters from the battlefield, and Mary's fascinating correspondence with her adult children. Mary Clarke's poems, articles, and reviews are dispersed throughout the book, giving the letters context and depth, and providing readers with a glimpse into her remarkable ability as a writer.

The great strength of this book lies in the correspondence between Mary and William, whose marriage was a highly unconventional one. William's encouragement of and pride in his wife's literary career, along with his desire to accommodate Mary's fierce independence, did not sit well with the Devereux family and friends, who scorned William for his financial incompetence and his inability to provide a stable home environment for his wife and children. After a

string of failed business ventures, the Civil War provided William with his best opportunity to redeem himself. Abandoning his beleaguered law practice in San Antonio, William rushed to North Carolina with the hope that his war record would secure him a prestigious senior appointment in the Confederate military. Unfortunately, it never eventuated. A war wound, a stint at Fort Delaware, and the bitterness of defeat broke William completely, and after a scandalous association with the Republican Party, he slowly succumbed to alcoholism — a condition that Mary referred to as irritability.

The letters between the couple provide an intimate and revealing portrait of the effects of war and defeat on the Clarke marriage. The more William drank, the more Mary was left to live her own life, grounding her identity not on the popular domestic ideal, but within the rewarding and sustaining world she had made for herself as a writer. Mary took assignments in New York and visited her children in an attempt to gain brief respites from her husband and his failures. The scope of the papers allows us to see the demise of the marriage from a familial perspective that includes not only Mary and William, but also their children and Mary's extended kin. Clearly, this is a great strength of the book: by presenting relationships from a variety of angles provides a rare glimpse into the dynamics of one southern family as they struggled to make their way in the post war world.

The interplay between the published documents and private family letters is another notable strength of the book, allowing comparison between Mary's private thoughts and the public rhetoric of her published work. The book skillfully documents the development of Mary's career - from her travel letters while in Cuba, to her Civil War poetry (which she published to raise money for the cause), to her increasing awareness of the importance of employment opportunities for southern women. This facet of the book is central to the ongoing debate as to whether the Civil War was, indeed, a watershed for women. The financial hardships endured by the Clarke family after the war certainly confirmed Mary's belief that southern women required a new type of education that would allow them to be self-supporting. A young lady can drop her business knowledge, if necessary, as easy as she does her music, after marriage, she declared, and be none the less womanly for having the ability to take care of herself should it ever become necessary for her to do so. Yet even as Mary championed the cause for women's employment, she diligently searched for a suitable husband for her young widowed daughter. The tensions between Mary's ideal for women, and the reality of her life in post war North Carolina, offer

valuable insights into wider questions about the effects of the war on southern women.

There are, however, some major structural weaknesses. While the book contains a comprehensive appendix and index, and has been meticulously referenced, the editors' decision to present the correspondence in a continuous block - without chapters or breaks of any kind - make the book seem far longer than it actually is. The letters have definite breaks of their own - Cuba, Texas, Civil War, etc. - and could have been divided into chapters, which may have provided a greater sense of the changes and challenges that confronted Mary and her family. The book also lacks narration between letters, forcing the reader to regularly consult the index and introduction in order to keep up. Some letters are well introduced, but most are not, ultimately creating huge gaps that are not adequately bridged by the supporting notes. For example, on page 174, William is at home convalescing from a war wound, and by page 176, he is in prison at Fort Delaware. The editors offer no explanation of William's capture by Union troops except in a reference on page 178, which clearly should have formed part of the main text. The absence of such narration throughout most of the book detracts from these otherwise intriguing and insightful documents, which will be read and enjoyed by scholars and students alike.

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