

Genteel Rebel: The Life of Mary Greenhow Lee

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Review

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Phipps, Sheila R. *Genteel Rebel: The Life of Mary Greenhow Lee*. Louisiana State University Press, \$59.95, hardcover \$21.95, softcover ISBN 0807128856, hardcover 0807129275, softcover

Socialite resistance:

A forgotten front in Winchester, Virginia

Genteel Rebel is another fine study of one of the women diarists of Winchester, Virginia, during the Civil War. Near the border of Maryland, the location of Winchester, as well as the town's transportation network made it coveted by both sides. Winchester changed hands thirteen times and served as headquarters to one occupying army or the other for the majority of the war. Because of the constancy of the war in these townspeople's lives, Winchester's men were much more likely to have joined one army or the other. The remaining men of conscription age were finally arrested by the Federal troops during one of its occupations in 1862. As a result, Winchester became a town of women in the middle of a war, and Mary Greenhow Lee at one point even suggested declaring ourselves a separate and independent sovereignty, and elect[ing] a Queen to reign over us. Yet, the constant stress of living literally in a battle zone also led to opportunities for the inhabitants to engage in activities that would strengthen their own army and weaken the enemy's. Therefore, the women of Winchester, Virginia, were given the opportunity to, and were the only ones left in their particular position who could, engage in wartime activities that could directly affect the outcome of battles and the war. Lee steadfastly supported the Confederate army with words and actions until the Union Major General Philip H. Sheridan felt compelled to banish Lee and her family from Winchester.

Because many women of Winchester left Civil War diaries (including a published diary of Confederate Cornelia McDonald and a frequently cited diary of Unionist Julia Chase), historians have quite successfully studied the unique position of Winchester in the Civil War. However, this work on Mary Greenhow

Lee is much more significant because Phipps' research and interpretation go well beyond examination of a woman's diary during the war. Through extensive archival research work, Phipps has found diaries and letters of Lee for some of the years before, during, and after the war, as well as voluminous other primary resources to fill out a true biography of this remarkable southern lady.

Mary Greenhow Lee was born in 1819 into an elite well-connected Virginia family. Phipps has scoured archives to provide information about Lee's family connections and even more importantly the effect such connections had on Lee. Early in life, Lee develops an acute consciousness of the people who are visitable, or part of her connexion, (although historians would use the term upper class, Lee never does). Women of the F.F.V. (first families of Virginia), a term that Lee uses frequently to describe herself, bore special responsibility for insuring the integrity of this social position. The Civil War, however, bends the class rules as Lee deems formerly unworthy families as visitable due to their support of the Confederacy. Occupying Union officers, no matter how well-connected or from what strata of society are not visitable, and Lee pointedly makes sure the Union soldiers know this by snubbing them on the streets, refusing to allow them to see her face, and turning her back on them. After years of refusing to admit Union soldiers into her home, when finally forced to quarter some officers, she pointedly insists on housing them in a wing so that she can still claim they never slept under her roof. It is her refusal to accept Union officers socially that Lee blames for her banishment, even though she had also run an illegal underground Confederate postal service, had stolen and hoarded supplies for the Confederate army, and even delivered important information about troop strength and movements. Lee referred to the latter work, along with caring for wounded Confederate soldiers, as her soldier work, but in her mind rated its significance as less than that of her female resistance to intermingling socially with the Union officers.

Phipps tries to answer the question why, in a town divided between Union and Confederate sentiment, Lee was so determined to support the Confederate cause. Unfortunately for historians, there is no diary and little correspondence in the crucial first year of secession and war to indicate Lee's feelings about these developments. By the time her diary begins in 1862, Lee had developed a sense of southern nationalism based upon the right of Virginia to secede and hatred of the Union for denying that right. Accepting this reasoning, Phipps argues that slavery, or any other reason, had nothing to do with Lee's desire to support the war. While this remains possible, the lack of evidence makes this section of her

argument weaker than the rest of Phipps' remarkable study.

Overall, Phipps's account of Mary Greenhow Lee is an imminently readable, extensively and carefully researched treatment of a fascinating and controversial woman who made an impact on the Civil War. Lee may never become as famous as her sister-in-law, Rose O'Neal Greenhow, but Phipps gives Lee proper credit for her efforts to give aid to the Confederates at the risk of her life and property as well as delving into the southern society that created a woman like Lee.

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