

Kate Chase and William Sprague: Politics and Gender in a Civil War Marriage

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Recommended Citation

Simpson, Brooks D. (2004) "Kate Chase and William Sprague: Politics and Gender in a Civil War Marriage," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 6 : Iss. 4 .

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol6/iss4/16>

Review

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Fall 2004

Perry, Mark *Grant and Twain: The Story of a Friendship that Changed America*. Random House, \$24.95 ISBN 679642730

Conquers on the Mississippi

New York Times bestsellers

At a time when presidential memoirs and presidential legacies dominate newscasts, talk shows, and what passes for historical analysis on television, it is perhaps fitting that we reflect on how much Americans really don't know about the eighteenth president of the United States, a man who wrote the most impressive autobiography ever penned by a former chief executive and whose own deathwatch and funeral were among the most moving events of the late 19th century. For Ulysses S. Grant has been in the news for the past month, sometimes in ways that typify the profound historical ignorance of precisely those people who claim that they possess some sort of expertise and historical insight into the American past. Take Charles Schumer, New York's senior United States senator, who moved that Ronald Reagan should displace Grant on the fifty dollar bill, because Grant was a butcher as a general and a stumbling ignoramus as president û perhaps next he'll propose bulldozing Grant's Tomb to provide a new stadium for the Yankees. Then there were the television experts during the Reagan state funeral who confidently identified the statue of a bearded general in the Capitol Rotunda to Abraham Lincoln's right as none other than Montgomery Meigs, just as another expert claimed that the reversed boots in the stirrups of the riderless horse was a symbolic representation of the fallen leader looking backward to review his army (obviously the commentator in question has not ridden a horse). Finally, on CNN's *The Capital Gang* on July 3, 2004, journalist Al Hunt and historian Joseph Ellis reminded us all of how Grant's memoirs were ghostwritten by Mark Twain.

Hunt, Ellis, and some of these other luminaries of facile discourse might do themselves a favor and consult Mark Perry's new study about Grant, Twain and

the writing of the *Personal Memoirs of U. S. Grant*. For Twain himself would have been in turn amused and angered at the claim that anyone but Grant composed the two-volume work. Observing that his suggestions were rather limited to punctuation and grammar, Twain marveled at how Grant wrote and rewrote portions of the manuscript, showing an author's tendency to fiddle and whittle away to no end before resting satisfied with the result—something Grant finally achieved just days before he died. As both publisher and friend, Twain would have mobilized an army of attorneys to battle suggestions that anyone else had composed the book, a notion that Adam Badeau, Grant's military secretary, research assistant, aspiring writer, and all-around sycophant, tried to foist upon Grant and the public days after Grant survived a near-death experience. Having dreamt all his life of leaving a literary mark on the American memory, the best Badeau could do was to leave a libelous stain on Grant's reputation. It was Grant's book, and the book was all Grant.

Perry is not the first author to tackle this story or to reflect on the Grant-Twain relationship; much of what he narrates about the process of Grant facing failure, battling cancer, contracting for a book, writing, and dying as a nation watched covers familiar ground. However, among Grant's biographers only William McFeely has done this subject ample justice as an integral part of the Grant story, and Perry's treatment of the relationship and the writing process is the best in-depth one we now have. What Perry does so well is to show much more fully how intertwined were the lives of Grant and Twain and how Twain may have incorporated insights gleaned from getting to know Grant into his own work. Twain comes off as far more engaging than Grant, because Perry is able to get inside of Twain; Grant silently rebuffs his efforts at similar analysis, so we see the Grant that others saw, with only an occasional glimpse into something deeper. Grant appears to have had a bigger impact on Twain than the other way around: Twain's story of how he had once reduced the general to tears in laughing at Twain's description of him as a baby determined to put his toe into his mouth conceals that fact that it was Twain who was reduced to hero-worship in Grant's presence. Grant was flattered by Twain's interest and enjoyed his company; Twain was nearly transformed by the relationship and thereafter viewed the general with reverence. It did Grant good to be accepted by Twain as a fellow writer (for Grant was fiercely proud of the fact that he wrote his own orders, speeches, messages, and, yes, his autobiography); it did Twain even better to be accepted by Grant as a friend. Grant not only saved the Union, but he may also have saved Huckleberry Finn.

Perry fails to exploit several opportunities where he could have developed his parallel analysis. Although he offers some thoughtful reflections on Twain's musings on slavery and race, his discussion of Grant's attitudes is cursory and in some places misguided. It would be hard to come away from a study of Grant's efforts for black equality after the war and conclude that he assiduously ignored the calls for racial equality when he was president. Rather, Perry misses a chance to see how in his memoirs Grant insisted that in the end the core cause of the war was slavery; he did not forget his own role in pushing for emancipation during the war; and how, even in his last weeks, he mused whether things might have gone differently during Reconstruction, especially had his notion to annex the Dominican Republic been successful. More direct comments about the fate of African Americans in Grant's manuscript did not make it into print; Frederick Grant, who did not share his father's commitment to black equality, took it upon himself to wield an editorial pen in such a way as to make Twain despair whether he would ever get his own hands on the second volume.

Although Perry emphasizes the importance of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and Grant's memoirs to American literature, he is far more analytical about the former text as text and in the hands of reviewers than he is about the latter. The story of Grant's memoirs should not cease with the death of its author; the volumes excited controversy even as many Americans bought them as a tribute to the fallen leader. Nor does Perry make a convincing case as to why the *Memoirs* should be treated as great literature. Yet reading them in light of what we know about the composition of the text is an engaging experience. We see Grant trying to be just to Lew Wallace while settling old scores with other generals on both sides; we see a very private man offer a wry glimpse into the moment when he discovered that he was very much in love; we see someone who was very honest and open at times about how he felt, yet tight-lipped about the painful rumors of intoxication that dogged him — as well as nothing about his struggles with alcohol (Twain later reflected that he wished he'd prodded the general to comment on this, an idea that shows that in the end he may know have known Grant as well as he thought he did). One leaves Perry's volume with little sense about how the ravages of illness and the side effects of treatment, to say nothing of other sideshows and distractions, wore on Grant's ability to tell his story; aside from the chapters that first appeared as independent articles and the reflections contained in the final chapters, volume two is not nearly as engrossing as volume one. We learn what Grant is composing and the mechanical process of composition, research, and revision, but we get little sense

of the text as an ongoing creation in context of Grant's life and approaching death. The great achievement of the Memoirs is that the reader comes to see the war as Grant would have the reader see and understand it, yet Grant achieves this in such an understated, matter-of-fact way that the reader is not always aware of how eager Grant is to make his own case.

Here and there Perry stumbles. Sometimes it's a matter of fact: for example, Julia Grant died in 1902, not 1904; Fitz-John Porter found himself in trouble for his performance at Second Manassas, not Antietam; Grant's boyhood home of Georgetown is in Ohio, not Kentucky, although by the 1860s, his father was living in Kentucky, not Ohio. Nor would anyone familiar with Grant declare that Adam Badeau was indispensable, Grant's alter ego, or that his work on Grant's military career was either definitive or a best seller. I would question whether Grant's black manservant, Harrison Tyrell, knew him best, and Perry could have expanded on his discussion of race had he quoted Twain's explanation of why Grant kept him on over the protests of the family. It would be more correct to say that Julia Grant was in denial about her husband's impending death than to claim that her behavior at times constituted distant emotional rejection. But, if sometimes he mishandles the small things, when it comes to the bigger issues Perry has a better grip on matters; his most interesting insights concern Grant's possible impact on Twain's writing, an ironic twist given the preoccupation with how much Twain may have worked on Grant's prose. One only wishes that in several areas, whether it be race or Americans' evolving memory of the Civil War era, that he was pushed to do more; as Twain struggled to help Americans imagine life on the Mississippi and wrestle with the legacies of slavery and racism, Grant fought to make sure his readers did not forget what had happened and what business remained unfinished even as he preached for sectional reconciliation. Both left their mark on the American literary landscape, and whether or not their friendship changed America, as Perry asserts, it certainly changed them and their legacies

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