

# Civil War Obscura: Diaries from Dixie

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## Feature Essay

### Civil War Obscura: Diaries from Dixie

Spring 2018

**Chestnut, Mary and C. Vann Woodward.** *Mary Chestnut's Civil War.*  
Yale University Press, \$16.50 ISBN 0300029799

Civil War Obscura wants you to have choices, and nothing presents a better opportunity for choice than the variety of diaries by Mary Boykin Chestnut. No one debates how important her daily musings are to the Civil War historical community. Her *Diary from Dixie* has been sourced innumerable times by everyone from high school freshman to James McPherson. One version of her offerings won the Pulitzer Prize, and others have presented challenges to the diarist herself and all the editors who followed her.

Mary Boykin Chestnut (née Miller) lived in South Carolina. She was married to lawyer and politician James Chestnut--the same James Chestnut who rowed across Charleston Harbor to deliver an ultimatum to U.S. Army Major Robert Anderson, the officer in charge of Fort Sumter. Her work represents the experiences and attitudes of the Confederate planter-elite from February 18, 1861 to June 26, 1865--the entire time period of the American Civil War. Her nearness to the political and social centers of power in the Confederacy gave her a unique point of view. Her husband was an aide to President Jefferson Davis and, although circumstances required them to change residences often, she continued to entertain most of the historically prominent people in the South.

Chestnut was aware of the importance of what she witnessed. Because of this, she did not publish her diary until 1905. She edited it and wrote newer versions from the period 1881-1884. Her revisions managed to retain the freshness of unfolding events and capture the growing difficulties of all classes in the South as the end of the war grew nearer. She was raised in a political family and married into one. Her awareness, and intelligence helped her analyze Southern society during the years of the war, especially the roles of women, men, and slavery. One of the most famous quotes from her diary concerns this relationship explicitly:

*But what do you say to this--to a magnate who runs a hideous black harem with its consequences, under the same roof with his lovely white wife and his beautiful and accomplished daughters? He holds his head high and poses as the model of all human virtues to these poor women whom God and the laws have given him.*

Purchasing a copy of this work seems fairly easy, but nothing could be further from the truth. I usually buy my books from amazon.com and use amazonsmile to give to the

Civil War Trust. However, this is NOT a plug for any company. Abebooks, Harvard University Press, Audible, etc., all are sources for the books discussed below.

The original version of the diary published in 1905 is heavily edited and abridged, apparently under the guidance of the author herself. Chestnut entrusted the publication of her efforts to her friend Isabella D. Martin, who had no literary experience. It is currently available online as a part of the UNC-CH database "*Documenting the American South*." [<http://docsouth.unc.edu/southlit/chestnut/menu.html>]. It can be purchased from amazon in a variety of formats from \$0.99 to \$43.16. Reviews are mixed, and this is the edition referred to by Kenneth S. Lyon when he refers to her work as a "hoax," and a "fabrication" in his review of a later edition. In 1949, an expanded version of the original *Diary*, edited by novelist Ben Williams, was released. It is available from amazon as well, in a variety of formats and prices. It is difficult to tell exactly what one is receiving from the way this version is presented. It is allegedly more readable, although the original is certainly not difficult to read. Abebooks also carries this version, as well as many others.

Up until C. Vann Woodward's 1981 Pulitzer edition, all the varieties of Chestnut's *Diary* seem a little ephemeral, with listings of lunch menus, etc. Woodward changed the title to *Mary Chestnut's Civil War* and included a thorough introduction that discusses the evolution of the original diary, and the issues that have been brought forth by its existence. The diary itself is significantly more complete and Woodward's historical work adds a much-appreciated dose of time and place. This is the edition that won the Pulitzer and is my recommendation for purchase if there is to be only one copy of the diary on your bookshelf.

However, it does not end there. *Mary Boykin's Civil War Epic* by Julia Sternt was published in 2010. It is not the actual diary of Chesnut. Instead it is an academic analysis of the diaries that reads like a dissertation. Interesting, but again, not her *Diary*. In 1984, C. Vann Woodward and Elisabeth Muhlenfeld put together *The Private Mary Chestnut: The Unpublished Civil War Diaries*. This contains much of what was left out of Woodward's Pulitzer work, and it becomes obvious why. Unless one is specifically interested in almost 300 pages of daily goings on such as food choices and comments on modes of dress, there is not a lot of meat here. A less-dated approach to the *Diary* is Catherine Clinton's *Mary Chestnut's Diary*. Catherine Clinton is an academic historian who has written much in the field of gender studies and the Civil War. Some of her more familiar offerings are *The Plantation Mistress* and *Divided Houses*. I like the freshness of this version, but it might not satisfy those readers who are more militarily oriented.

In 2011 the Pelican Publishing Company issued a two-volume set called *Mary Chestnut's Diary from Dixie*. Isabella D. Martin and Myrta Lockett Avary edited it using the 1880 manuscript version. This is the only edition to have the imprint of Mulberry Plantation, the main plantation of the Chestnut family and now a National Historic Landmark. Volume I is the diary itself, but Volume II, *Mary Chestnut's Civil War Photograph Album*, is a new addition to the copious Chestnut *oeuvre*. In the *Diary*, Mary mentions her photograph albums several times. It is one of these albums to which she refers when a young cousin looks through it and finds a *carte de visite* of Union President

Abraham Lincoln. Apparently he does not feel it an appropriate addition to her collection. The albums were thought to be long lost, but the archivists at Mulberry plantation finally found several of them, making an interesting detective story in itself. Martha M. Daniels, a member of the Chestnut family and head of the family foundation, researched and annotated each image. Barbara E. McCarthy, Mulberry's assistant archivist, worked with her to create a visual addendum to the diaries themselves. Now one is able to place a face to a name mentioned in Chestnut's work.

I mentioned above that the annotated Pulitzer edition by C. Vann Woodward would be the one to own if one were to limit one's bookshelf space, but it is rare that so many different versions of the same work should still be so readily available. Mary Chestnut was no "fiddle-de-dee" Confederate. She told it like it was, with all the hope and all the sadness that define the ill-fated attempt of Confederate independence. Owning at least one version of her *Diary* should be the goal of every Civil War enthusiast. At least in this case, the buyer has options. If one is to light and fluffy, there are others from which to choose.

*Meg Groeling received her MA in Military History, with a Civil War emphasis, in 2016 from American Public University. Savas Beatie published her first book, The Aftermath of Battle: The Burial of the Civil War Dead, in the fall of 2015, and she has written First Fallen: The Life of Colonel Elmer Ellsworth, which Southern Illinois Press has contracted for publication sometime within the next two years. She is a regular contributor to the blog Emerging Civil War.*