

### The Man Who Started the Civil War: James Chesnut, Honor, and Emotion in the American South

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#### Recommended Citation

Murphree, R. Boyd (2022) "The Man Who Started the Civil War: James Chesnut, Honor, and Emotion in the American South," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 24 : Iss. 4 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.24.4.05

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol24/iss4/5>

## Review

**Murphree, R. Boyd**

**Fall 2022**

**Koivusalo, Anna.** *The Man Who Started the Civil War: James Chesnut, Honor, and Emotion in the American South.* University of South Carolina Press, 2022. HARDCOVER. \$89.99 ISBN 9781643363042 pp. 304

Drifting for a moment in a rowboat on the waters of Charleston harbor, Col. James Chesnut watched as the first shells of the opening Confederate bombardment of Fort Sumter streamed and screamed across the night sky to explode above the fort in the early morning of April 12, 1861. An hour earlier, it had been Chesnut's order to commence firing at 4:30 a.m. that began the attack that launched war between North and South, making him, according to the title of Anna Koivusalo's fascinating study of Chesnut, "the man who started the Civil War." Koivusalo argues that it was devotion to honor that led Chesnut, a reserved moderate for most of his political career, to play this fateful role in the opening of America's bloodiest drama. She uses Chesnut's life as a vehicle for understanding southern honor and the power of honor in the emotional life of Chesnut, the planter class, and southern society in general. Her book, the first in-depth biography of Chesnut, is an important contribution to the study of Civil War history, southern honor, and the history of emotions.

James Chesnut Jr. was the husband of Mary Boykin Chesnut, the most famous southern diarist of the Civil War. The diary is an essential source for any study of James Chesnut, and Koivusalo makes ample use of it from *The Private Mary Chesnut* and C. Vann Woodward's *Mary Chesnut's Civil War*. She employs the diary and correspondence to narrate the history of their marriage from courtship to death and to analyze their relationship through the lens of their

emotions. James's progression from romantic suitor and fiancé to reserved, correct, and deliberate husband contrasted with Mary's passionate, open, and fiery temperament.

Koivusalo holds that Chesnut's marriage, his political career, and his military service were governed by honor. By itself, such a contention would be a yawningly unoriginal contribution to southern biography. Koivusalo, however, builds on this old foundation chapter by chapter to construct a new look for the importance of honor in southern society. She demonstrates that honor was not just a code of conduct in the South but an emotion that pervaded southern life, acting as a guide "by helping individuals create, shape, and express appropriate emotions" (p. 3).

The most appropriate emotion in Chesnut's case was honorable emotion, which Koivusalo examines thematically by laying out the history of his life in three parts corresponding to his development and practice of honorable emotions: his early life, when he employed honorable emotions in his marriage and first ventures into South Carolina politics; the period from sectional crisis to Fort Sumter, when he had to maintain noble emotions in a time of intense political passions; and his later years, when his honorable emotions were put to the test during the Civil War and Reconstruction. Koivusalo incorporates this thematic approach to meet her goal of writing an "emotional history" of her subject, "rather than merely Chesnut's biography" (p. 13).

However, readers who are more comfortable with a traditional approach will find plenty of detailed narrative. The son of wealthy Camden, South Carolina planter James Chesnut Sr. and Mary Cox Chesnut, James Jr. grew up in a privileged but demanding household. Expecting excellence of their sons, the Chesnuts had to bear the shock and distress of their oldest son John's expulsion from Princeton for rioting. This incident put intense pressure on James Jr. to

uphold the family's honor when he entered Princeton in 1832. Koivusalo makes deft use of family correspondence to narrate James Chesnut Jr.'s youth, education, and introduction to politics, while weaving in analysis and commentary on how honor and honorable emotions informed this stage of his life.

Chesnut's political awareness began with the Nullification Crisis of 1832. His father and brother were Unionists who despised Nullifiers for what they saw as their willingness to destroy the country for the sake of radical notions inspired by enraged emotions. The Chesnuts stood for rational moderation and compromise tempered by honorable firmness. These honorable emotions informed James Chesnut Jr.'s political career in the South Carolina legislature.

During the 1850s, however, the growing intensity of the sectional crisis strained Chesnut's moderate Unionism. South Carolina politicians rushed to defend slavery against what they saw as an ever-increasing tide of abolitionism in the North. Chesnut's honorable emotions demanded that he adjust his politics to defend his state's honor and slavery. While recognizing the right of secession, he condemned unilateral action, urging South Carolina to cooperate with fellow southern states to stand united against the North. In his speeches, Chesnut's overriding aim for South Carolina was "to steer our little ship, with honor and safety" (p. 88).

Maintaining that bearing became problematic in the wake of John Brown's raid. While Chesnut's reason dictated that he stay committed to a deliberate, cooperationist path to secession, his honorable emotions pushed him to defend the South's honor in the face of abolitionist attacks. Elected to the U.S. Senate in November 1858, he announced a more aggressive stance against the North in a reply to a June 1860 address by Massachusetts senator Charles Sumner equating slavery with barbarism. Chesnut rose in the Senate to denounce Sumner as "the incarnation of malice, mendacity, and cowardice" (p. 107). His verbal assault on Sumner earned

Chesnut the plaudits of secessionists across the South. Chesnut embraced secession as the only way forward for the South after the Republican victory in November's presidential election. On November 10, 1860, James Chesnut became the first southern senator to resign his seat.

After membership in South Carolina's secession convention and the Confederate constitutional convention in Montgomery, where he served in the Provisional Congress, Chesnut became a military aide to General P. G. T. Beauregard in Charleston. There he issued the order to fire on Fort Sumter. He never regretted his decision as honor, he later insisted, dictated no other course. According to Koivusalo, conforming to honorable duty in their actions was more important for Chesnut and other southerners than the consequences of those actions, even if those actions led to the destruction of the nation they had conceived and the society they were trying to maintain. Koivusalo notes that the "Charge of the Light Brigade" was Chesnut's favorite poem. At Sumter, he was willing to enter "the valley of death" rather than face dishonor.

The third section of the book covers Chesnut's war years, his struggles during Reconstruction, and the last decade of his life, which ended in 1885. He was on Beauregard's staff at First Manassas, where he complemented his honorable emotions by displaying calmness and courage throughout the day's fight. Those emotions also kept Chesnut from lobbying for a military promotion or post in the Confederate government. Instead, the South Carolina secession convention elected Chesnut to serve on the executive council, which exercised the full executive functions of the state. He ran the military department and pushed for the enactment of a conscription bill in March 1862, a month before the Confederate conscription law. Frustrated by political opposition to his work and the seeming lack of honor and patriotism among the populace, Chesnut was happy to be relieved of his burdens when the state legislature abolished

the council. He then served as a military aide to Jefferson Davis and ended the war as a general directing South Carolina's reserve forces.

During Reconstruction, Chesnut tried to remain true to the honor that had governed his life, but, as Koivusalo contends, the antebellum code of honor died with the defeat of the Confederacy as did the supremacy of the elite planter class. New men rose to contest Reconstruction regimes. Men willing to oppose Republican rule and political and civil rights for African Americans by any means necessary. Chesnut joined the conservative movement that opposed the Republicans and rights for African Americans in South Carolina. However, his was a moderate voice that called for respect of the law and limited suffrage for former slaves. Although he did not condemn the motives of Klansmen, he spoke out against violence and called for honorable moderation in race relations, but his fellow white conservatives ignored him. Like *Gone with the Wind's* Ashley Wilkes, Chesnut was out of place in the postbellum world. Unable to adapt to aggressive and common expressions of honor, he retreated from politics, living the last years of his life at home, an unrepentant Confederate and troubled soul, haunted by the war and the honorable life he had lost.

Koivusalo, a historian with Finland's University of Helsinki, brings Chesnut's lost world to life. Her work is academic in the best sense of the word: analytic, revelatory, and innovative. However, readers not familiar with the historiography of the history of emotions may find her effort to gauge Chesnut's emotions through each stage of his life tough going. The book requires a careful and deliberate approach. Although a short biography, *The Man Who Started the Civil War* is, like its subject, a complex work that demands serious attention. Readers picking up the book with this frame of mind will be well rewarded.

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