



Mary Boykin Chesnut: A Biography (Southern Biography Series)

Elisabeth S. Muhlenfeld

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“In her admirable biography of Mary Chesnut, Elisabeth Muhlenfeld has American literature as well as American history in her debt.” —C. Vann Woodward

Mary Boykin Miller Chesnut (1823–1886) is known today for her excellent firsthand account of life in the Confederate States of America. *A Diary from Dixie* (republished in 1981 as *Mary Chesnut's Civil War*) is far more than a simple diary, however, for Mrs. Chesnut's drawing room was a social center for many of the most prominent political and military figures in the Confederacy. Elisabeth Muhlenfeld's expert biography utilizes Mrs. Chesnut's autobiographical writings, her papers, and those of her family, as well as published sources. It traces her life in South Carolina from her childhood, as the daughter of a governor and United States senator, through her schooling and her marriage to James Chesnut, Jr., the son of a wealthy South Carolina planter. During the war her husband served as an aide to P. G. T. Beauregard and to Jefferson Davis, achieving the rank of general.

Muhlenfeld emphasizes Mary Chesnut's last twenty years, when she helped her family through the intricacies of repaying immense debts incurred during the Civil War, rebuilding wrecked homes, and reestablishing some measure of order and security. These were also the years of her serious writing. She experimented with fiction, writing three novels and translating others from the French; and in 1881 she began the last revisions of her Civil War journal. In the descriptive passages, characterizations, thematic patterns, and overall structure of the revised journal, Chesnut employed the techniques she had learned by writing fiction.

Besides adding to our knowledge of this unusual nineteenth-century southern woman, Mary Boykin Chesnut: *A Biography* enhances our knowledge of the history of women in general as it delineates the transformation of a wartime diary into the chronicle that remains a major document in southern history.

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