Mary Boykin Chesnut’s Civil War Diary

Mary Boykin Chesnut was a Southern lady in the purest tradition, born into South Carolina’s political nobility and educated at one of the finest boarding schools in Charleston. Her husband was the son of a successful plantation owner and an upwardly mobile politico himself.

Following Lincoln’s election in 1860, James Chesnut helped write South Carolina’s Declaration of Secession and during the subsequent war served as an aide to General Beauregard and President Davis, eventually rising to the rank of General.

Women in such circumstances were expected to be well-educated, but not given much opportunity to use their fancy brains. In retrospect, it might have been kinder to either keep them as ignorant as possible or let them do stuff - but such were the mores of the day. So she read, she observed, and she wrote.

Lots.

The diary of Mrs. Chesnut is one of the essential primary sources of the Civil War, and still readily available if you’re interested. It’s quite accessible to the casual reader - you won’t even know you’re learning history, I promise.

The best-known passages describe events in and around her household (a very active place even when wars weren’t being started nearby) as the tensions between North and South approach conflagration, thanks in large part to the stubbornness of Union Colonel Robert Anderson, in command of Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor.

April 12th. - Anderson will not capitulate. Yesterday’s was the merriest, maddest dinner we have had yet. Men were audaciously wise and witty. We had an unspoken foreboding that it was to be our last pleasant meeting…

Mrs. Henry King rushed in saying, "The news, I come for the latest news. All the men of the King family are on the Island," of which fact she seemed proud.

While she was here our peace negotiator, or envoy, came in - that is, Mr. Chesnut returned. His interview with Colonel Anderson had been deeply interesting, but Mr. Chesnut was not inclined to be communicative. He wanted his dinner. He felt for Anderson and had telegraphed to President Davis for instructions - what answer to give Anderson, etc. He has now gone back to Fort Sumter with additional instructions.

When they were about to leave the wharf A. H. Boykin sprang into the boat in great excitement. He thought himself ill-used, with a likelihood of fighting and he to be left behind!

Never has a better case been made for teaching reading and writing, although her keen observations on human nature are perhaps harder to mandate.

Mrs. Chesnut’s observations of her husband are appropriately loving and respectful, always. Her subtle commentary on others, however, brings her writing to life. Her snapshots of Mrs. King and the young Boykin are sympathetic, certainly - but tinted with bewilderment over their enthusiasm for war.

The words themselves maintain perfectly plausible deniability, were posterity to challenge her tone - “Me? Oh, no no - I was just noting what I saw and heard… that’s all.” (fans self with something lavishly decorative*)
“Men were audaciously wise and witty.” What a marvelous phrase. It sounds like the Mad Hatter’s tea party, but instead of pure chaos, her description is redolent of forced fearlessness and social gilding. F. Scott Fitzgerald has nothing on the wealthy belle when it comes to writing dinner parties.

I do not pretend to go to sleep. How can I? If Anderson does not accept terms at four, the orders are, he shall be fired upon. I count four, St. Michael's bells chime out and I begin to hope. At half-past four the heavy booming of a cannon. I sprang out of bed, and on my knees prostrate I prayed as I never prayed before.

There was a sound of stir all over the house, pattering of feet in the corridors. All seemed hurrying one way. I put on my double-gown and a shawl and went, too. It was to the housetop. The shells were bursting. In the dark I heard a man say, "Waste of ammunition."

I don’t know who the man in the dark may have been, but if this were a work of fiction rather than a primary source, I’d point him out as a brilliant bit of literary slight-of-hand.

While the rest of the city - and, by proxy, the South - celebrates the opening rounds of what will no doubt prove a majestic little melee, one anonymous voice just out of view notices that they’re firing land weapons at a fort designed to withstand attack by foreign navies.

Nothing tangible is being accomplished - it won’t work. There’s kerfuffle enough, but no substance. There’s a cost, but for what prize?

I’m no expert on Mary Boykin Chesnut, but if someone who WERE wished to persuade me that she took a little literary license with her account to say things she could not, as a wife and loyal secesh, say - well, I wouldn’t argue.

Last night, or this morning truly, up on the housetop I was so weak and weary I sat down on something that looked like a black stool. "Get up, you foolish woman. Your dress is on fire," cried a man. And he put me out. I was on a chimney and the sparks had caught my clothes. Susan Preston and Mr. Venable then came up. But my fire had been extinguished before it burst out into a regular blaze.

I realize it’s not exactly gut-splitting to read in the 21st century, but this is funny. It’s the 19th century equivalent of zany slapstick humor.

If only the helpful man had said “nyuk nyuk!” and poked her in the eyes just after.

Do you know, after all that noise and our tears and prayers, nobody has been hurt; sound and fury signifying nothing - a delusion and a snare.

This sentence could be used as an example for about 43 different things in ELA, AND it’s a pleasure to read repeatedly. It’s like literary bruschetta.

And remember that ‘plausible deniability’ from a bit ago? It’s about to get pushed to the limits of of beau monde. That Chesnut is a real card.

Louisa Hamilton came here now. This is a sort of news center. Jack Hamilton, her handsome young husband, has all the credit of a famous battery, which is made of railroad iron. Mr. Petigru calls it the ‘boomerang,’ because it throws the balls back the way they came; so Lou Hamilton tells us.
The ‘boomerang’ bit is a brag by Mrs. Hamilton on her husband’s artillery unit - they not only hold their ground when taking incoming fire, they gather the cannonballs fired at them and send them back. Boo-yah!

How much you wanna bet Mrs. H. worked that into conversation one way or the other about every three minutes?

*During her first marriage, she had no children; hence the value of this lately achieved baby.*

**Historical documents of a personal nature can be difficult** - especially for students - because tone is everything. Miss a little flirting, or sarcasm, or other emoticon-deficient vibe, and you can misread a source completely.

Mrs. Chesnut is kind enough to write on both levels simultaneously - the obvious, smiling appreciation for a friend’s long-awaited offspring, and - unless I’m projecting - a little wry commentary on Louisa’s mothering as well.

It might even be cruel.

*To divert Louisa from the glories of "the Battery," of which she raves, we asked if the baby could talk yet. "No, not exactly, but he imitates the big gun when he hears that. He claps his hands and cries 'Boom, boom.'"

*Her mind is distinctly occupied by three things: Lieutenant Hamilton, whom she calls "Randolph," the baby, and the big gun, and it refuses to hold more…

*snort*

*I do not wonder at Louisa Hamilton's baby; we hear nothing, can listen to nothing; boom, boom goes the cannon all the time. The nervous strain is awful, alone in this darkened room. "Richmond and Washington ablaze," say the papers - blazing with excitement. Why not? To us these last days' events seem frightfully great.*

**That Chesnut always returns to the sincere - the experience - anchors her prose** in a way mere observation or fiction could not. Her ability to grab descriptive slices of people and events and weave them in so transparently makes this something more alive than most find mere history to be.

But that’s what makes this *real history.*

The war, the guns, the actions, the results - facts mattered, and always will. But people, having experiences, and making choices, and feeling feels… in the end, that’s usually what *produces* the wars and *drives* the actions. Like Anne Frank in her attic or Bridget Jones navigating high society in London, that rare opportunity to zoom in and inhabit the past through the eyes and experiences of another - that’s why we love history.

**It gets even better.**

*April 13th. - Nobody has been hurt after all. How gay we were last night…*

Yes, half of my students are 14-year old boys. This line is always a thing.

*Fort Sumter has been on fire. Anderson has not yet silenced any of our guns. So the aides, still with swords and red sashes by way of uniform, tell us. But the sound of those guns makes regular meals impossible. None of us go to table. Tea-trays pervade the corridors going everywhere. Some of the anxious hearts lie on their beds and moan in solitary misery. Mrs. Wigfall and I solace ourselves with tea in my room. These women have all a*
satisfying faith. "God is on our side," they say. When we are shut in Mrs. Wigfall and I ask "Why?" "Of course, He hates the Yankees, we are told. You'll think that well of Him."

“A satisfying faith” – once again, understated layers of meaning. Chesnut doesn’t directly comment, she portrays - with precision. It’s almost like she’s aware of us, all these years later, reading her through this… 'documentation' of events. Do you feel her smirk knowingly at the camera?

Not by one word or look can we detect any change in the demeanor of these negro servants. Lawrence sits at our door, sleepy and respectful, and profoundly indifferent. So are they all, but they carry it too far. You could not tell that they even heard the awful roar going on in the bay, though it has been dinning in their ears night and day. People talk before them as if they were chairs and tables. They make no sign. Are they stolidly stupid? or wiser than we are; silent and strong, biding their time?

Southern nobility lived with themselves as slave-owners largely by learning not to ‘see’ those they enslaved. Perhaps overseers or smaller property owners were all too aware of what they were doing to real live people, but the elite seem to have largely trained themselves to give wide berth to troubling thoughts. Chesnut’s diary resonates, however, not only from her poignant word choices, but her willingness to watch, and listen, in the first place. She is fully present, and not afraid to see what she sees. We should do so well.

Anyone could have made this observation - it’s glaring, once noted. People have an amazing capacity, though, to see what we wish to see and discard the rest. Whether slaves, dust, quiet students, personal faults, or moonwalking bears, our filters are really something else. We know this, but usually do a pretty good job ignoring this about ourselves as well. Ironic, right?

So tea and toast came; also came Colonel Manning, red sash and sword, to announce that he had been under fire, and didn’t mind it. He said gaily: "It is one of those things a fellow never knows how he will come out until he has been tried. Now I know I am a worthy descendant of my old Irish hero of an ancestor, who held the British officer before him as a shield in the Revolution, and backed out of danger gracefully." We talked of St. Valentine’s eve, or the maid of Perth, and the drop of the white doe’s blood that sometimes spoiled all…

The standard American History book will tell you the South was overconfident after First Bull Run, etc. I’d argue Colonel Manning and his ilk were way ahead of the crowd on this one. It’s still all a play, a fantastic story, to those involved at this stage. This is not something you’ll hear from men a year or two later in this war. Some will look back and shake their heads with a dark chuckle that they’d ever thought such things.

Fort Sumter surrendered, and the war was officially begun. The next major action will be a bit better planned - although not by much. At First Bull Run, young men will actually be injured. Many will die. But not yet.

April 20, 1861. - Home again at Mulberry. In those last days of my stay in Charleston I did not find time to write a word… I have been sitting idly to-day looking out upon this beautiful lawn, wondering if this can be the same world I was in a few days ago. After the smoke and the din of the battle, a calm.

Not for long.

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