



# Mary Chesnut's Civil War Epic

*Julia A. Stern*

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A genteel southern intellectual, saloniste, and wife to a prominent colonel in Jefferson Davis's inner circle, Mary Chesnut today is remembered best for her penetrating Civil War diary. Composed between 1861 and 1865 and revised thoroughly from the late 1870s until Chesnut's death in 1886, the diary was published first in 1905, again in 1949, and later, to great acclaim, in 1981. This complicated literary history and the questions that attend it—which edition represents the real Chesnut? To what genre does this text belong?—may explain why the document largely has, until now, been overlooked in literary studies.

Julia A. Stern's critical analysis returns Chesnut to her rightful place among American writers. In *Mary Chesnut's Civil War Epic*, Stern argues that the revised diary offers the most trenchant literary account of race and slavery until the work of Faulkner and that, along with his Yoknapatawpha novels, it constitutes one of the two great Civil War epics of the American canon. By restoring Chesnut's 1880s revision to its complex, multidecade cultural context, Stern argues both for Chesnut's reinsertion into the pantheon of nineteenth-century American letters and for her centrality to the literary history of women's writing as it evolved from sentimental to tragic to realist forms.

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