

Becca Hawkins
Research Paper
Section: Meg, Fri 8am
11/21/11

A Comparison of Two Women-Research Paper

Both southern and northern women rallied for the Civil war cause and responded to the call of duty throughout wartime. However, southern women suffered a great deal more throughout the war that caused them to question the stability of the confederacy and their own support for the war cause. This paper will focus on the lives of two elite women: northerner Septima Collis and southerner Mary Chestnut. I am gaining the information from the two women's diaries *A Women's War Record 1861-1865* by Septima Collis and *A Dairy from Dixie* written by Mary Chestnut. I am using these sources to examine the experiences that they each had during the war in order to make a comparison between the two. Through this examination, it becomes clear that Chestnut had a more difficult experience which caused her to question her support for the war. These women do not represent all American women during the Civil War, however these sources may offer insight into how women's lives as a whole were changed due to the war, with southern women suffering a great deal more than northern women.

To better understand what shaped these women's personalities, views, and experiences, some background information is needed. Septima Collis was born in Charleston, South Carolina in 1842. Shortly before the Civil War began she married Charles H. T. Collis, and despite her southern sympathies, she supported her husband who was a Union army officer. She accompanied him through the war and served him and the union army in several capacities.¹ She was a member of the privileged class in the North. Her diary was written as more of a formal

¹ Septima Collis, *A Women's War Record, 1861-1865*, (New York; London: G.P. Putnam's Sons; Knickerbocker Press, 1889), <http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/collis/summary.html>, (accessed November 20, 2011).

document where she describes the war as she experienced it, following the Union army and living in camps with her husband.

Mary Chestnut shares similarities with Collis, she is also a member of the elite class in the South and her diary also possesses a semi-formal tone. Chestnut was born in South Carolina, her father was Stephen Decatur Miller, who had served as U.S Congressman and Senator and in 1826 was elected Governor of South Carolina as a proponent of nullification.² In 1840, she married James Chestnut Jr., the only surviving son of one of South Carolina's largest landowners, who later became a senator in 1858. He was directly involved in the drafting of an ordinance of secession and served in the Provisional Congress of the Confederate States of America. Chestnut accompanied him throughout the war, recording her experiences in diaries. Since she was married to one of the core drafters of the Confederacy, she offers a distinct view of the war events. Both women are similar in this aspect; they were both from the elite class and married to men who were influential throughout the war.

Their initial views of the war, and response to it were also similar in a number of ways and signify a larger view of women's response to the war. Collis describes her towns initial response to the war at the beginning of her diary, stating, "at home all was bustle and excitement, a dozen large stores on Chestnut street had become recruiting stations, public meetings were held every night to encourage enlistment".³ She is commenting on the excitement surrounding the war, and how the Union was trying to get more people to enlist to support the war. Chestnut also

² Mary Chestnut, *A Diary from Dixie, 1823-1886*, (New York:D. Appleton and Company,1905), <http://docsouth.unc.edu/southlit/chesnut/summary.html>, (accessed November 20, 2011)

³ Septima Collis, *A Women's War Record, 1861-1865*, (New York;London:G.P.Putnam's Sons; Knickerbocker Press, 1889), accessed November 20,2011, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/collis/collis.html>.

recounts the initial excitement surrounding the war, she describes, “to show they were wide awake and sympathizing enthusiastically, every women from every window of every house we passed waved a handkerchief. This fluttering of white flags from every side never ceased from Camden to Richmond”.⁴ She also comments on how parties of women came to every station simply to look at the troops passing. In the beginning both possess a similar excitement for the war, they each are supportive of their side and do not seem to believe that the war will last that long. This belief was a common throughout the nation, most people believed that the war would be short. Collis reiterates this view when she stated, “as we bade our loved ones adieu we had few misgivings for their safe return”, demonstrating that she and other northerner women believed this war would be swift with little casualties.⁵ Both Chestnut and Collis’ tones as they were describing the beginnings of the war were upbeat and confident. Each had full faith that the war would be ended quickly and that their side would come out victorious.

However, this upbeat tone quickly changed as the war progressed. In both diaries the women began to comment on the hardships they faced when their husbands around were not around. Collis describes a hardship she faced stating,

“what a better illustration of the abnormal condition of society in those days can be given than a statement of the fact that my daughter was born on September 25, 1862, and that her father, although within twelve hours reach of us, did not see her

⁴ Mary Chestnut, *A Diary from Dixie, 1823-1886*, (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1905), accessed November 20, 2011, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/southlit/chesnut/maryches.html>.

⁵ Collis, *A Women's War Record, 1861-1865*, 12.

until June, 1863-and he would not have seen her then, except he was brought home to die”.⁶

This experience of raising her child alone for almost a year, although only briefly mentioned in Collis’s diary, was a true hardship she faced. This concern of raising a child alone was common for many women throughout the North and South. Faust comments on this in her book, Mothers of Intervention, describing how terrified women were of having to raise a child on their own without men around.⁷ Although Collis only offers this brief complaint, the way she phrases it illustrates that this was a real hardship she had to face and she was frustrated by the situation.

In her book, Faust also explains the emotions Southern women felt when being left alone without men around for the first time. Mary Chestnut describes herself feeling blue-black with melancholy and states that, “the war is making us all tenderly sentimental”.⁸ Although Chestnut was able to see her husband throughout the war and was always surrounded by friends and family, the feelings she describes when she is separated from him are always somber illustrating that she was affected by this separation even if it was only for a brief time. Both women also comment on the worry and uncertainty they experienced while separated, unsure if their loved ones were dead or alive after major battles occurred. Chestnut retells stories of women losing their loved ones in battles and not knowing if they were dead or alive for weeks. Collis describes this waiting period as, “an awful suspense, which seemed an eternity”.⁹ Many women were

⁶ Ibid, 17

⁷ Drew Giplin Faust, *Mothers of Intervention*, (The University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill& London, 1996).

⁸ Chestnut, *A Diary from Dixie, 1823-1886*, 62.

⁹ Collis, *A Women’s War Record, 1861-1865*, 52.

experiencing these same emotions throughout the war, left home wondering if their loved ones were still alive and their families still in tact. Although both women were able to see their husbands and traveled with them throughout wartime, their experiences in times of separation affected them greatly.

Though both women exhibited similarities in their discussion of their wartime experiences, these similarities began to disappear as the war progressed and the South declined. This can be seen by comparing how both women comment on monetary issues. Collis describes how, “things were very expensive too, especially the necessities of life; common muslin, I remember, which is now ten cents a yard, then cost a dollar, and the pay of an Officer was very small with a enormous premium”.¹⁰ Although Collis mentions this in her diary, it does not seem to affect her to the same degree it does Chestnut. It appears to be a brief comment in her diary and does not change her view of the war or affect her life that drastically.

However, this was not the case for Chesnut. Chestnut comments on the issue of money and the effect it had on her life many times throughout her diary. The Confederacy had to deal with establish themselves as country and fight a war which meant that their money system was weak and almost inexistent. Mary Chestnut, like many other upper class women, was forced to adapt to survive these hardships. This frustrated her and at times caused her to question the decisions being made. For example she explicitly mentions that, “Mr. Clayton, Assistant Secretary of State, says we spend two millions a week. Where does that money come from? They don’t want us to plant cotton, but to make provisions. Now, cotton means money, or did when

¹⁰ Ibid, 16.

there was an outlet for it and anybody to buy it. Where is money to come from now?"¹¹ Mary Chestnut is asking important questions about the system in place in the confederacy, she expresses great concern with how money is being spent at such a massive amount if there is no money to be found in the confederacy, and everyone is suffering. She mentions a lot of times throughout her diary how her life has changed due to the war and how she has had to deal with the issue of money. Like many other women at the time she resorts to making her own clothes. She also describes instances where she suffered from extreme hunger because during the war it was difficult to get food to everyone due to lack of resources. She details an event where she bought five dozen eggs and payed with yarn because most people did not trust the value of confederate money.¹² The effects of these monetary issues were felt by Chestnut and other women throughout the confederacy. For Chestnut, these money issues caused her to question certain policies in place. According to Faust, these issues lowered many women's moral for the war cause. Although women were adapting to these situations, not all were happy about the hardships they were facing and illustrated frustrations with their situations during wartime.¹³ Women were becoming frustrated with their situations and began questioning the Confederate policies, wondering how much they are willing to sacrifice for the war cause. This lack of funding and monetary system was a huge issue for the Confederacy and was a main reason why Chestnut, and other women in the South, suffered more greatly than Collis, and other Northern women.

¹¹Chestnut, *A Diary from Dixie, 1823-1886*, 110.

¹² Ibid, 361

¹³ Drew Giplin Faust, *Mothers of Intervention*, (The University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill& London, 1996).

Another huge reason why Chestnut and Collis experiences differed, with Chestnut suffering a great deal more, was because almost all of fighting took place in the South. This took a great toll on Chestnut. When the Confederacy began to loose major battles her whole tone changed and her diary went from acting as a professional document to acting as a way to escape her worries of everyday life. She states, “I write daily for my own diversion..It is hard, in such a hurry as things are now to separate the wheat from the chaff. Now that I have made my protest and written down my wishes, I can scribble on with a free will and free conscience”.¹⁴ Her tone changes completely from the beginning of the diary, where she was strongly backing the war and portraying a professional demeanor, to now being forced to use the diary as a tool to distract her from the hardships of daily life. She is no longer trying to act the way the wife of a congressman should but rather acts as any ordinary women would, questioning the situations she was being placed in.

Chestnut’s support of the war continued to decline, once she experienced the results of war first hand. Her town Columbia was burnt to the ground as the Union continued to push forward in their total war policies.¹⁵ She describes how she was the last refugee who was allowed to enter a car, others were scattering to squeeze themselves in through the windows. Chestnut affirms her frustration with the Confederacy’s inability to protect women and children stating, “ I do not understand why we do not send the women and children to the safe place and let the army stay where the fighting is to be. Armies are to save, not to be saved.If this goes on the spirit of our people will be broken”.¹⁶ Here, Chestnut is questioning her faith in the army expressing

¹⁴ Ibid, 137

¹⁵ Ibid, 351

¹⁶ Ibid, 161

concern with why the Confederacy did not protect its supporters. She describes the experience of losing her town in great detail and it is clear that it caused her great anger and frustration. When detailing this event, she predicts that if these sufferings continue the supporters spirit for the war will be crushed and the Confederacy will lose all support.

In contrast to this continued questioning of Confederate policies by Chestnut, Collis does not question the Union in her diary. This could be due to a number of factors. For example, she was writing her diary to be used as a possible professional document in the future and did not want it to appear like she possessed any southern sympathies. Or she was not as focused on the overall policies of the war because she was so closely connected to the individual battles. Though it is not clear why Collis did not question Union policies, what is clear is that Chestnut did question the Confederacy. This questioning came with the continuous hardships she was forced to face. In comparison to Chestnut, Collis's life did not seem as difficult. Collis does not describe any drastic measures she had to take to survive or any direct violence to her or anyone she knew. This could also be due to the fact that almost all of the fighting was occurring in the South making Chestnut's situation, and other southern women's situations, more difficult and severe.

There are a number of different factors that separate the situations of the North and the South during the war. However the differences that account for Chestnut suffering more than Collis were that, the Confederacy possessed an inadequate monetary and economic system and that most of the fighting took place in the South. In the beginning both Chestnut and Collis's diaries possessed similarities in their experiences such as their initial excitement for the war and their concern for their husbands when they were separated. However, their experiences deeply

differed once the war began. Chestnut experienced many hardships including her town being burnt down and being reduced to a level of poverty due to lack of an economy. These hardships caused her to question her support for the war. Although Chestnut would never say that she no longer supported the Confederacy, in her diary it showed that these hardships weighed on her, causing her to question the war.

Works Cited:

Chestnut, Mary. *A Diary from Dixie, 1823-1886*. New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1905. <http://docsouth.unc.edu/southlit/chesnut/summary.html>. (accessed November 20, 2011).

Collis, Septima. *A Women's War Record, 1861-1865*. New York; London: G.P. Putnam's Sons; Knickerbocker Press, 1889. <http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/collis/collis.html>. (accessed November 20, 2011).

Faust, Drew Giplin. *Mothers of Intervention*. The University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill & London, 1996.