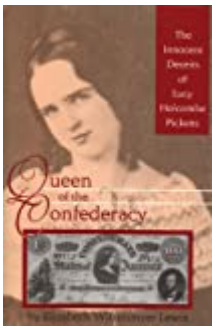
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Elizabeth Wittenmyer Lewis. *Queen of the Confederacy: The Innocent Deceits of Lucy Holcombe Pickens.* Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2002. xvi + 253 pp. $24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57441-146-1.

Reviewed by Antoinette G. van Zelm (Tennessee Civil War National Heritage Area)

Published on H-CivWar (November, 2005)

On Her High Horse Or the Power Behind the Throne? The Airs and Influence of a Southern Woman

Elizabeth Wittenmyer Lewis has written the first full-length biography of Lucy Holcombe Pickens, wife of South Carolina Governor Francis Pickens during the Civil War and the only woman pictured on Confederate currency. In *Queen of the Confederacy: The Innocent Deceits of Lucy Holcombe Pickens*, Lewis captures Pickens's spunk and intelligence. Lewis does not, however, establish exactly how much influence Pickens exerted on her husband or the politics and society of her time.

Queen of the Confederacy is obviously written for a general audience. It has twenty-four short chapters, a list of principal characters, and genealogical charts for the Holcombe and Pickens families. Although not trained as a historian, Lewis has done excellent work researching family papers, public records, newspapers, and Pickens's literary writings, including her 1855 novel *The Free Flag of Cuba or the Martyrdom of Lopez.* That said, Lewis consistently draws on some rather dated historiography in recreating Pickens's social and political milieu.[1]

Lewis's goal is to give Lucy Holcombe Pickens her due recognition as an intelligent and ambitious woman who nonetheless upheld the patriarchal society in which she lived. Well known in parts of the South during her lifetime, Pickens has certainly received inadequate attention from historians but has not been ignored quite to the extent that Lewis's preface (and the book's dust jacket) suggest.[2]

Lewis does a particularly good job in recreating the intimate details of Pickenses' family life, especially her devotion to her parents and siblings and her loyalty to her paternalistic husband. Born in La Grange, Tennessee, in 1832, Lucy was the second of five children born to Beverly Holcombe, a cotton planter, and Eugenia Hunt Holcombe, the well-educated daughter of a wealthy landowner. Despite financial struggles due to Beverly's impetuousness and love of horse racing, the Holcombes provided Lucy with a fine education, first at La Grange Female Seminary and then at the Moravian Seminary for Young Ladies in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. Like many of her nineteenth-century counterparts, Lucy developed a love of writing and a keen desire to make a useful contribution to society, a longing instilled in part by her mother.

As she grew into a young woman, Lucy also thrived in

the social world of the belle. She loved the attention she received from her many male suitors and clearly had a sense of the dramatic. At the same time, she did not want to appear to be indecorous or to challenge the rules that governed life for women in her patriarchal society. The subtitle of *Queen of the Confederacy* comes from Lucy's statement that "submission is not my role, but certain platitudes on certain occasions are the innocent deceits of the sex" (p. ix). Without a doubt, she understood how to play the gender game in her nineteenth-century world.

Lewis suggests that when, at age twenty-five, Lucy married Francis Pickens, who was twenty-six years her senior and had been twice widowed, she did so based more on ambition and a thirst for adventure than love. Francis Pickens had been appointed ambassador to Russia by President James Buchanan. Lewis's chapters on the Pickens' years in Russia from 1858 to 1860 are some of the best in the book. In Russia, Lucy chafed under Francis's paternalism; gave birth to her only child, a daughter; and became close friends with Tsar Alexander II and his wife Maria. Lewis depicts Lucy as the quintessential American abroad, alternately impressed by the wealth and luxuries enjoyed by Russian nobles and disgusted by their shallowness and infidelities.

Surprisingly, given the book's title, relatively little attention is given to the war years themselves, particularly the period after 1862 (mid-1863 to the end of the war in 1865 is covered in one page). Lewis recounts Francis Pickens's transformation into a rabid secessionist and subsequent election as governor. Lucy supported and probably encouraged her husband's fire-eating stance. Fellow South Carolinian Mary Boykin Chesnut commented frequently on the Pickenses, and Lewis peppers her account of the early war years with Chesnut's witticisms regarding the first couple. Chesnut acknowledged Lucy Pickens's intelligence but also found her pretentious and slightly ridiculous. Lewis describes the two as rivals and finds a significant gap in maturity between them: "Kind and thoughtful, [Chesnut] lamented the horrors of war and its waste of manhood whereas Lucy Pickens, ever the idealist, thought it man's privilege to die for his country and championed patriotism" (p. 150).

Lucy Pickens showed her patriotism by supporting the outfitting of Confederate troops through the sale of some of the jewelry bestowed upon her in Europe. As the first lady of South Carolina, she reviewed troops, and one of the state's units took the name Holcombe Legion in her honor. Journalists dubbed her "Queen of the Confederacy" based on her dramatic dress, haughtiness, and previous residency in Russia. Images of Lucy were engraved on one-dollar and one-hundred-dollar bills issued by the Confederacy between 1862 and 1864. Her friendship with Christopher Memminger, Confederate secretary of the treasury, and her distinctive facial appearance likely led to this tribute.

Lewis vacillates about the extent of Lucy Pickens's influence on her husband and on governmental affairs. She describes Lucy as merely "playing" at diplomacy in the tense months before the war began (p. 137). Lewis later asserts that "her influence in governmental matters was known and respected," but does not provide any documentation for this claim (p.158). In the epilogue, she depicts Lucy as "the driving force behind her husband in his role as Governor of South Carolina," which seems a stretch given Francis Pickens's own considerable political ambition (p. 200).

Lucy Pickens lived for thirty more years after Francis's death in 1869. She managed their cotton plantation in Edgefield County, South Carolina, and provided financial assistance to family members, in part through additional sales of the jewelry she had acquired in Europe. She lamented the end of slavery and devoted herself to the Lost Cause, serving as president of the county's ladies memorial association and spearheading the effort to erect a monument on Edgefield's courthouse square.

Throughout *Queen of the Confederacy*, discussions of slavery and Reconstruction predominantly reflect the perspective of privileged white Southerners like Lucy Pickens. Lewis, for example, usually refers to slaves as "servants," presumably because this was the term favored by Pickens. Lewis includes some great information about Lucinda, a literate slave who accompanied Lucy to Russia and who as a freedwoman continued to work for her. Lucinda died just three days after Lucy did in 1899, and the two women were obviously extremely close (Lewis established the relationship in part from letters written by Lucinda). While Lewis acknowledges that Lucinda had a strong personality herself, she emphasizes Lucinda's subservient role by almost always referring to her as "devoted" and "faithful" to Lucy.

Future explorations of the life of Lucy Holcombe Pickens will do well to follow the many leads presented by Elizabeth Wittenmyer Lewis in *Queen of the Confederacy*. Perhaps one of the most fascinating is Pickens's role as a vice-regent in the Mount Vernon Ladies Association from 1876 until her death. There is considerable irony in the fact that in 1876, Pickens provided support for Wade Hampton's Red Shirts and a few months later

traveled to Virginia to meet with women from throughout the United States at President George Washington's former home. Might it be that Lucy Pickens's national commitments–in Russia and at Mount Vernon–were ultimately as significant as her Confederate endeavors?

Notes

[1]. Her discussion of Reconstruction, for example, is drawn largely from Francis Butler Simkins and Robert Hilliard Woody, *South Carolina During Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1932) and John Hope Franklin, *Reconstruction: After the Civil War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961).

[2]. *Notable American Women* included Lucy Holcombe Pickens back in 1971, but the more recent *Encyclopedia of the Confederacy* and *Encyclopedia of the American Civil War* do not (nor is she mentioned in the entries on her husband). See *Notable American Women, 1607-1950: A Biographical Dictionary*, vol. 3 (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971), pp. 64-65; *Encyclopedia of the Confederacy*, vol. 3 (NewYork: Simon & Schuster, 1993), pp. 1207-1208; *Encyclopedia of the American Civil War: A Political, Social, and Military History*, vol. 3 (Santa Barbara: ABC-Clio, 2000), p. 1517. See also Emily L. Bull, "Lucy Pickens: First Lady of the South Carolina Confederacy," *Proceedings of the South Carolina Historical Association* (1982): pp. 5-18; Cynthia Myers, "Queen of the Confederacy," *Civil War Times* 35 (Dec. 1996): pp. 72-78; Georganne B. Burton and Orville Vernon Burton, "Lucy Holcombe Pickens, Southern Writer," South Carolina Historical Magazine_ 103 (Oct. 2002): pp. 296-324.