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A Family Affair

One of the most prominent public men of the nineteenth century, Salmon Portland Chase (1808-73) served as U.S. senator, governor of Ohio, secretary of the treasury, and chief justice of the U.S. Supreme Court. He was also widowed three times and four of his six children died in infancy. Two daughters survived, one each by his second and third wives–Kate (1840-99) and Nettie (1847-25). This volume brings together letters exchanged among the members of this most unconventional family. Beginning when Kate was four (before Nettie was born), and continuing up to their fatherâs death, the letters also span the years of sectional crisis, civil war, presidential assassination and impeachment–in all of which Salmon P. Chase played conspicuous roles.

The letters illuminate childhood in the mid nineteenth century, gender roles, and womenâs education. They highlight family dynamics, focused chiefly on Chaseâs aspirations and expectations for his daughters–in part because the great preponderance of letters reprinted here are ones written by him. He continually pushed them to strive for perfection in everything they undertook, and he assured them that only a sense of duty and his great love for them motivated him to point it out whenever he saw room for improvement. Some of the letters in which he defends himself make clear that his daughters found his criticisms excessive (pp. 248, 317).

The editors assert that, for all three Chases, âtheir identities within the familyâ were ânot the sameâ as the identities they had as public figures. For this reason, they refer to Chase (except in the volumeâs introduction) as ââFather,â to match the identity he has in the lettersâ (pp. xiv-xv). However logical a choice that may seem, it proves distracting to the reader. For instance, a letter by a physician treating Chaseâs wife is cited as âDr. Worcester to Father,â though presumably the doctor never addressed Chase that way (p. 66). This convention is maintained even for references to his public service, such as in notes explaining âFatherâsâ actions in the Senate and describing the reactions and relations of other leading public men to âFatherâ (e.g., p. 94).

If the Chases maintained private identities appreciа-

bly different from their public ones, they are revealed in these letters only to a rather limited extent–no doubt for reasons beyond the editorsâ control. For some years covered in the volume, letters from one or another family member have not survived. Inevitably as well, much of the extant correspondence is structured around Chaseâs political career and their lives in the public eye. Indeed, the girlsâ years in boarding schools away from home–the very conditions that generated the early letters among them–appear due as much to his political career as to his status as a widower. Throughout his daughtersâ lives, Chase exhorted them to strive for excellence and to cultivate Christian faith. But in 1853, when Kate was thirteen, he expressed his wish that she prepare herself for the duties that will soon be hers. âIn a few years you will necessarily go into Society,â he wrote. âI desire that you may be qualified to ornament any society in our own country or elsewhere into which I may have occasion to take youâ (p. 136).

Kate did go into society; during the Civil War she nearly eclipsed her fatherâs prominence in the public eye. But these letters reveal much less about her than about her father and sister. For one thing, there are far fewer letters here by her than by the others. There is one she wrote to her father at the age of six about the death of her dog; a letter in 1860 to Nettie, in which she mentions tutoring a servant; and one written by both sisters during an 1862 visit to New York. The next letter by Kate, written in July 1864, reports on the comings and goings of those around her, and expresses almost no sentiments whatsoever (p. 261). In part, this may reflect Kateâs personality. When she was eleven, Chase wrote to her about the rather dry quality of her letters. âYou, I think, are like me. You set down only naked facts without any embellishment whatever. I wish you could put a little more life into your letters, but I cannot blame you much seeing there is so little life in mineâ (p. 91).

But it is also likely that the scandals and tragedies Kate faced in adulthood have something to do with the paucity of extant letters by her. The volume includes several letters Chase wrote to her during a rough time in her marriage, when her husband–U.S. senator and former Rhode Island governor William Sprague–had implicitly attacked her in his Senate speeches and moved one of his mistresses into their Washington home. The editors provide background information and comment on Chaseâs advice to her during this time. But they offer readers very little on why they included no letters at all from Kate from this period–there are none to her father, to her sister, or to her husband. Nor is there reference to Kateâs troubles in the letters between Chase and Nettie. What is more, a letter from Chase to Kate in which he began telling her about his attempt to talk to Sprague cuts off mid-sentence, the rest of it apparently lost. So it is that when affairs within the family are at their most Shakespearean, these family letters still manage to keep them hidden for the most part. One might wish the editors had supplied more explanation or commentary on this point.

The best case for the volumeâs offering a private, insider view of the Chase family is what we learn of the younger sister, Nettie. She may simply have been blessed with a more carefree spirit. An early letter which she âdictatedâ at age three certainly suggests as much, even while it gives more of a sense of her personality than we get of Kateâs from all her letters (see pp. 89-90). Nettieâs own letters as well as those from her parents make it clear that as a child she idolized her older sister. For his part, Chaseâs letters show that he appreciated each daughterâs unique qualities. Evidently Nettie never courted a public role, but might Kate have been more consciously groomed for such? When Nettie was twenty, for instance, Chase encouraged her to maintain her âsimplicity of tastesâ (p. 355). One wonders if he ever suggested the same to her sister, the fashionable, glamorous belle of Civil War Washington.

It is perhaps not surprising then that the most interesting letters refer to the tumultuous politics of the era. In May 1865, Chase toured the defeated Confederacy, in the hope of collecting information which he might use to influence President Johnsonâs Reconstruction policies. He brought Nettie with him. He wrote in detail of his travels to Kate, and asked that she keep the letters so they might function for him as a diary of his trip (p. 271). Similarly, after the 1864 letter mentioned above, the next letters from Kate came in July 1868 from New York, where she tried to manage her fatherâs prospects as a presidential candidate at the Democratic National Convention.

The volume is well organized. The letters are grouped in chapters corresponding to major shifts in the Chaseâs lives. Each chapter begins with a chronology, which is useful. Overall, the notes are helpful, but also quirky and idiosyncratic in some marked respects. One is repetition. Kateâs grandmother is identified half a dozen times. Another is attention to detail. The editors regularly note where the writer unconsciously repeated a word (such as writing âtheâ twice in succession), even when this occurred at the end of one sheet and the beginning of another–a common practice at the time. But

elsewhere, arguably crucial relevant information is omitted. For instance, we learn in a note on page 258 that William Pitt Fessenden succeeded Chase as treasury secretary. But on page 268 a note identifies Hugh McCulloch as treasury secretary, and the explanation of that succession does not appear until page 286. More substantively, a letter from Chase to Kate from September 1863 hints at some appearance of scandal involving her and some of his staff. âPlease remember how terribly annoyed I must be by having your name being brought into any public charges against employees in the Department,â he wrote. âYour explanation relieves me greatly and will enable me, I hope, to get your name out of the paper altogetherâ (p. 225). But there is no note offering explanation, elaboration, or references to further reading. If the reason for the lack of explanation is that nothing further about the incident survives among Chaseâs or Kateâs papers, one would like to know.

A number of interesting illustrations appear in the middle of the volume. There are photographs–of the three as a family, of Kate, and of the two sisters–as well as photographs and drawings of some of the visits they made to soldiers during the war. The editors included images of letters from each of the correspondents. These support and document the editorsâ attention throughout to conventions of letter writing. Indeed, their descriptions of such elements as habits of writing, and materials including monogrammed stationery, lend considerable interest to the volume. Notes for the transcriptions of those letters describe the monograms, but curiously neglect to remind the reader that images of those very letters have been included among the illustrations.

One aspect of the Chase familyâs private life on which this volume sheds intriguing, though scant, light concerns their relationships with their household staff. In 1860, after Chase had been reelected to the U.S. Senate, Kate wrote to Nettie of teaching their young German servant boy to read English. The servants in their home in Columbus, Ohio, at that time also included a woman from Ireland and two women from Wales. The Chase family employed African Americans as well, in varying capacities. Chase supported black Americansâ equal rights for much of his political career. Still, like many antislavery whites, he also occasionally used racialist language; for instance, on his tour of the Confederate states in early 1865, he wrote to Kate in praise of the discipline he observed in a school, noting that at a word from their teacher, âevery little darkey was on his feet in an instantâ (p. 273). Nonetheless, in letters about the household staff, Chase seems to understand that his power and authority are not absolute, and that he must negotiate with his servants in order to preserve domestic harmony. When he moved to a large farm north of the capitol in the 1870s, he delegated to black men on his staff much of its management, including an extensive new gasworks (pp. 380, 423). When Chase died, black men were among his pallbearers, and included some who had worked for him in his early days in Ohio (p. 25).

Overall the letters serve also to humanize somewhat and soften the stern, forbidding public image of Salmon Chase himself. In the summer of 1863, he wrote to Nettie that the company he most preferred at the moment was that of the family dog–an early version of the adage about what to do if you want a friend in Washington (p. 221).

Nearly a dozen years earlier, one of Kateâs teachers had reported to Chase that she had shown improvement. To his daughter, Senator Chase wrote, âDear Kate, this is very pleasant news to me. I would rather hear it, than be made presidentâ (p. 113). It is no small measure of this volumeâs success that by its end, the reader can believe it.