

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Leah Rawls Atkins, Joseph H. Harrison Jr., Sara A. Hudson, eds. *A Belle of the Fifties: Memoirs of Mrs. Clay of Alabama*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1999. xxviii + 462 pp. \$29.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8173-0986-2; \$57.75 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8173-1020-2.



Reviewed by Lorien Foote (Department of History, University of Central Arkansas)

Published on H-SAWH (July, 2000)

The annotated reissue of Virginia Clay-Clopton's Civil War-era memoirs should be a more useful edition than it is. Clay-Clopton's reminiscences were originally published in 1905 by Ada Sterling, who served as both writer and editor. The aim of the current edition is to correct errors in Sterling's version and to provide more complete annotations. The editors' inconsistent annotations, however, fail to enhance the reader's understanding of the work. Despite these editorial lapses, Clay-Clopton's memoirs are an important contribution to the body of literature on women during the Civil War that should appeal to scholars and general readers. Portions of the memoirs provide compelling reading, and the work is essential for those studying the attitudes and lifestyle of the slaveholding upper-class.

Born into an elite southern family and married to influential Alabama senator C.C. Clay, Jr., Virginia Clay inhabited the highest political and social echelons of 1850's Washington. She describes the almost bacchanalian festivities in the capital during this decade; readers looking for light on the tumultuous events leading to secession will find little here. Clay focuses on the belles, the fashions, the parties, and the elite individuals with whom she associated. Southerners dominate her Washington, and she scorns the social upstarts of the Republican party.

After secession, C.C. Clay joined the Confederate

government as a senator, and he later served as an agent in Canada. Virginia Clay soon became part of the social scene in the Confederate capital of Richmond. This section of the memoirs contains an interesting account of the gradual chaos that descended on the southern homefront during the war. Clay vividly depicts the daily troubles in women's lives at this time – shortages, constant moves as Union and Confederate forces exchanged territory, and separations from family. Her troubles led Clay to idealize her past life. In one chapter, she upholds the ideal of the plantation world crushed by the war; this entire chapter is a classic formulation that perfectly captures the development of southern myths about antebellum life.

The most interesting sections of the book are the final chapters, where Clay recounts her attempts to claim justice for her husband, who was held without counsel or trial on false charges of conspiracy in President Abraham Lincoln's assassination. She describes the imprisonment of her husband and former Confederate president Jefferson Davis in Fortress Monroe and provides an account of the political maneuvering of President Andrew Johnson, Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton, and other leading figures associated with her husband's case.

The 1999 edition includes a useful introduction outlining the publication history of the memoirs and giving

basic information about Clay-Clopton and Ada Sterling. The editors fail, however, to annotate adequately or provide a context that might render the chronicle more accessible and compelling. They do not alert the reader to annotated items. This leaves the reader with the frustrating task of having to guess which persons or events in the text have an annotation. The reader soon discovers that identification of persons and events in the text is inconsistent. On a few occasions obscure individuals, especially military officers, are unidentified.

The editors are most remiss, however, in failing to annotate events mentioned in the text. For example, on page 59, Clay refers to President Franklin Pierce's "message of 55" and proceeds to praise his brave stand. There

is no annotation for this item – the reader is not given any information about the content or context of the message. Nor do the editors contextualize the dramatic events of Mr. Clay's arrest. There is no full explanation of this key event in the introduction, and the first time Mrs. Clay refers to a presidential proclamation against her husband, there is no note identifying the proclamation. Ultimately, inadequate annotations create confusion for all readers and provide little context for those who are not Civil War scholars.

Copyright (c) 2000 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-sawh>

Citation: Lorien Foote. Review of Atkins, Leah Rawls; Jr., Joseph H. Harrison; Hudson, Sara A., eds., *A Belle of the Fifties: Memoirs of Mrs. Clay of Alabama*. H-SAWH, H-Net Reviews. July, 2000.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=4341>

Copyright © 2000 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.