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1 18 | Civil War Diaries and Reminiscences

2 David Anderson

3

4 Keenly aware they were living through a momentous period in
5 the nation's history, many literate southern whites of the Civil
6 War era began keeping private diaries, recording daily happenings
7 and key events as the drama of secession, war, and defeat
8 unfolded. Whether kept with regular enthusiasm or sporadically,
9 then abandoned in moments of despair, keepers of wartime diaries
10 reveal not only the difficulties and demands that four long, hard
11 years of war visited upon them, but also their own sense of
12 themselves as historical observers and actors grappling with
13 continuity and change in their experience and their understanding
14 of themselves. Diaries both reveal and conceal much about
15 writers' selves and silences -- and their ability to remake
16 themselves -- as the factual and the reflective are mixed
17 together to create a purposeful narrative.

18 Civil War soldier diaries like Randolph H. McKim's A
19 Soldier's Recollections: Leaves from the Diary of a Young
20 Confederate (1910), for example, begin and end with the war, thus
21 inscribing the import and centrality of national events onto
22 one's own lived experience and ways of being and seeing. Born in
23 1842 in Baltimore, Maryland, McKim served the duration of the war
24 with the Army of Northern Virginia, first as a private, then as a

1 staff officer, and finally as a chaplain with the 2nd Virginia
2 Cavalry, a journey from raw recruit to experienced veteran.
3 Inspired by what he saw, heard, and did while in camp, on the
4 march, and on the battlefields of Virginia and elsewhere, McKim's
5 diary entries, which the author reworked and revised, are
6 revealing not only for descriptions of battles and prominent
7 officers but also for the writer's allusions and ambitions in
8 such seemingly "spontaneous" writing.¹

9 Scrutinizing the rhetorical practices and strategies
10 employed by approximately one hundred Confederate women in their
11 wartime diaries, Kimberly Harrison has argued for the importance
12 of what southern women's words meant to themselves in the context
13 of their own lives and circumstances and as a wider reflection of
14 Confederate patriotism and nationalist sentiment, crediting these
15 diaries and journals, as forums for elite white women to exert
16 their rhetorical power, with a significant role in shaping
17 identities, values, relationships, and faith. Whether caught up
18 in the war directly as nurses, or chafing under wartime
19 occupation and oppressive conditions on the home front, or forced
20 into exile to live the life of a refugee and rely on the kindness
21 of friends and family, Confederate women were forced to step
22 beyond traditional antebellum feminine conventions to enter a
23 world of wartime responsibility and political conversation.
24 Confederate women's diaries became important spaces to express

1 support for the Confederacy or contempt for the Union, not least
2 its soldiers and officers for whom they reserved particularly
3 venomous invective.²

4 A number of Virginia women have produced some of the most
5 important, candid, and moving journals and diaries chronicling
6 civilian life and home front activity in the state during the
7 Civil War. The best known female diarists from Virginia include
8 Judith W. Brokenbrough McGuire, Sallie Brock Putnam, Cornelia
9 Peake McDonald, Lucy Rebecca Buck, and Ida Powell Dulany.

10 Intended as "a private record" for "friends and kindred,"
11 the publication of Judith McGuire's wartime journal in 1867
12 afforded the Richmond-born author an opportunity to present "a
13 true record" of "wonderful scenes" and "points of great interest"
14 relating to the "War of Secession." Diary of a Southern Refugee
15 During the War (1867), among the first of wartime diaries
16 published after the war, details McGuire's flight from
17 Alexandria, her home city where her husband, the Reverend John P.
18 McGuire, was principal of the Episcopal High School, to various
19 towns across Virginia where friends and relatives provided
20 shelter before she and other family members settled in Richmond,
21 where they were living when the city fell and where McGuire
22 obtained work with the Commissary Department and volunteered in
23 the city's hospitals. A knowledgeable, well-read, and a
24 passionate advocate of the Confederate cause, McGuire reveals the

1 destitution, desolation, and despair of those caught up in
2 war-torn Richmond.³

3 Fellow Virginian Sallie Brock Putnam, writing under the
4 pseudonym "A Richmond Lady," also published an eyewitness
5 account, Richmond During the War: Four Years of Personal
6 Observation (1867). Living with her well-to-do parents in the
7 Confederate capital at the outbreak of war, Putnam offers a
8 detailed account of everyday civilian life in Richmond during
9 wartime, covering "The Gala Days of War" and "The Gathering of
10 the Troops" through "Sufferings of the Wounded -- Lack of
11 Supplies" and "Trouble with the Negroes" to "Evacuation of
12 Richmond -- Burning of the City." By turns comprehensive and
13 anecdotal, Putnam's account is less a traditional diary and more
14 an extended historical narrative embracing aspects of memoir and
15 retrospective observation. A final chapter, "Life in the Old Land
16 Yet," suggests Richmond, the City of Seven Hills, will rise
17 phoenix-like from the flames of war with the rebuilding of
18 shattered infrastructure. Pleading with the "rising generation"
19 to "forget not" her homeland's "ancient prestige," Putnam
20 confidently predicted the resurrection of her beloved Virginia.⁴

21 Away from the Confederate capital and its war-weary
22 denizens, a large number of Confederate women's diaries have
23 contoured the effects of the war on Virginia's other towns,
24 cities, plantations, and farms, revealing the economic and social

1 upheavals of war on families and communities across the Old
2 Dominion. Cornelia Peake McDonald's wartime diary of unhappy
3 events in the besieged town of Winchester, supplemented by
4 reminiscences added at a later date, remains a classic of the
5 type. First published in 1935, McDonald's diary, which covers
6 March 1862 to August 1863 (other parts of which were lost or
7 destroyed during the writer's years as a refugee), was kept at
8 the insistence of her husband, Colonel Angus William McDonald,
9 who left Winchester on the eve of its evacuation to find
10 employment with the Confederate War Department in Richmond.
11 Recording facts and incidents of Winchester's occupation and
12 subsequent counter-occupations, and of Lexington, where she lived
13 as a refugee until the early 1870s, McDonald's Civil War was one
14 of hardship, worry, and uncertainty. She offers a firsthand
15 account of the burning of the Virginia Military Institute and
16 Virginia Governor John Letcher's home by Union soldiers,
17 recounting the assistance she rendered to the governor's wife and
18 small children. At war's end, McDonald's husband, stepson, and
19 baby daughter were all dead, the family's estate, Hawthorn,
20 stripped of its resources, and she and her young family were in
21 penury.⁵

22 Located twenty miles south of Winchester, Front Royal, the
23 home town of another well-known female southern diarist, Lucy
24 Rebecca Buck, was also the site of many skirmishes and battles

1 between Union and Confederate forces during the Civil War. In her
2 late teens when war came to Bel Air, her father's successful
3 plantation, Lucy began her diary on Christmas morning 1861 and
4 continued to record her thoughts and opinions on wartime events
5 through April 1865. Sensitive to her altered surroundings and the
6 changed circumstances of the household, she eagerly anticipated
7 news from the front lines where her two brothers, Alvin and
8 Irving, served in the Confederate ranks. "We were so rejoiced at
9 getting a letter from them that I would not long harbor the
10 thought of danger to them," she confessed to her diary in March
11 1862. Like many other Confederate diarists, Lucy suddenly
12 discontinued her writing efforts as the war neared its end.⁶

13 Begun to escape wartime boredom, young Lucy Breckinridge of
14 Grove Hill plantation in Botetourt County, Virginia, abandoned
15 her diary on Christmas Day 1864 and intended to destroy it prior
16 to her marriage to a young Confederate officer. Given to blunt,
17 pessimistic introspection, Breckinridge was frustrated by the
18 patriarchal norms of southern plantation living and mightily
19 depressed by the twin prospect of marriage and frequent
20 childbirth. Less concerned with the military or political climate
21 of the day, Breckinridge's diary reveals a plantation belle in
22 fear of a future of submissiveness that would suppress her own
23 talents and interests.⁷ However, any inability, or unwillingness,
24 on the part of Virginia's Confederate citizenry to elaborate

1 further on postwar prospects, not least the consequences of
2 military reversal and collapse, was not universal. From her
3 farmhouse in Fairfax, Virginia, Anne Frobelt kept a diary from
4 1861 extending through the Reconstruction era and beyond to 1879.
5 As Union forces moved onto the family lands, taking over their
6 farmhouse, destroying crops, and killing livestock, Frobelt's
7 diary entries increasingly bemoan the rude intrusion into her
8 domestic world.⁸

9 Ida Powell Dulany, like countless other diarists, found her
10 world completely transformed by the turmoil of the Civil War, the
11 crumbling of slavery, and the innumerable trials of the postwar
12 world, a world without slaves. Dulany's diary, published as In
13 the Shadow of the Enemy (2009), is a gracefully written chronicle
14 of a young Virginia Piedmont woman's daily struggles to protect
15 her plantation home and family in one of the war's most hotly
16 contested regions. When Hal, her husband, joined the Confederate
17 army shortly after the outbreak of war, Ida assumed
18 responsibility for running Oakley, their sprawling plantation
19 estate in Upperville, Fauquier County and home to over sixty
20 slaves. In addition to managing the labor force, an increasingly
21 difficult task for many middle- and upper-class plantation
22 households given the exigencies of war, Dulany worked hard to
23 provide for and educate her three young children, maintain
24 relationships with her neighbors, and satisfy social obligations

1 in the wider community. As Union forces gathered near Oakley,
2 many of the Dulany's more restless slaves fled. While some
3 remained with the family and others returned shortly after their
4 initial flight, the promise of emancipation and freedom gradually
5 expedited enslaved blacks from across the South to Union army
6 lines, where some found employment or were entered into military
7 service.⁹

8 Daniel W. Cobb, a cotton farmer of modest means in
9 Southampton County, also lost his slaves to the Emancipation
10 Proclamation. Cobb was a regular diary keeper, and his writings
11 provide a useful ingress into the often overlooked small farmers,
12 or "plain folk," of the rural South in the nineteenth century.
13 Kept from 1842 to his death in 1872, Cobb's writings, like many
14 other male farmer-diarists of antebellum southern society, cover
15 the inclemency of the weather, seasonal rhythms on the farm, and
16 his slave workforce, particularly their health. Conn also
17 provides more intimate comments on his unhappy marriage, his
18 Methodist faith, and the difficulties of maintaining race and
19 class relations in the Cotton Belt. Cobb, who lost his oldest son
20 during the Appomattox campaign, struggled to farm successfully in
21 a postwar world shorn of the system of forced labor upon which
22 the region's economy had rested. If, even after emancipation,
23 southern agricultural routines remained relatively unchanged,
24 labor relationships and incentives to subsist on the region's

1 farms and plantations became decidedly more composite, with the
2 advent of share-cropping and tenant farming. Reflecting these
3 changes to planting and harvesting arrangements and organization,
4 Cobb's diaries narrate his unhappy transition into the
5 post-emancipation world.¹⁰

6 Edmund Ruffin, agricultural reformer, states' rights
7 advocate, militant secessionist, and renowned planter and
8 slave-owner of Prince George County, recoiled at the prospect of
9 Yankee dominion and the transition to free labor, so much so that
10 at war's end he shot himself through the head. Ruffin's diary, a
11 comprehensive chronicle, covers Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor
12 (where Ruffin purportedly fired the first shot of the Civil War),
13 Union campaigns in Virginia, the Emancipation Proclamation, and
14 the enlistment of black soldiers in the Union army. It is a
15 crucially important eye witness account of the South during the
16 Civil War.¹¹

17 A large number of journals and diaries by Confederate
18 soldiers and civilians in government positions have also captured
19 the drama of advancing Union armies, battles and their
20 aftermaths, occupation, the deprivations of city living and camp
21 life, and gnawing uncertainty of what the following months and
22 years would bring, from the trivial to the consequential, in
23 towns and cities across Virginia. Spanning civilian and military
24 worlds, the diaries written by administrators from behind their

1 government desks provide valuable insight into the Confederate
2 War Department. Regularly consulted for its assessments on the
3 inner workings of the Confederate government in Richmond, the
4 diary of war clerk John B. Jones, which was published in two
5 volumes in 1866, remains something of a classic, providing a
6 day-to-day record of the South's war effort as well as judgments
7 on Confederate bureaucrats: the war secretaries he worked under,
8 high-ranking officers, and prominent politicians.¹² Of comparable
9 value on civil affairs in the government offices of the
10 Confederate capital, the irregular diary of devoted Virginian
11 R.G.H. Kean offers discerning analysis on the internal goings-on
12 in the Confederate Bureau of War, of which he was Head, and all
13 manner of Confederate military and political matters which fell
14 under his purview. Kean, like Jones, wrote colorfully -- and, at
15 times, critically -- on some of the Confederacy's leading actors.
16 General Joseph E. Johnson, commander of Confederate forces in the
17 west, is summarily dismissed as "a very little man, has achieved
18 nothing, full of himself. . . eaten up with morbid jealousy of
19 Lee and of all his superiors in position, rank, and glory."¹³

20 Among the scores of soldier-diarists who fought in the Army
21 of Northern Virginia under General Lee, two of the best known are
22 John Dooley and Jedediah Hotchkiss. John Dooley, Confederate
23 Soldier (1945) is an articulate account of campaigns, camps, and
24 confinement. Son of an Irish-born Richmond businessman, Dooley

1 left his studies at Georgetown College in 1862 and enlisted as a
2 private in the First Virginia Infantry. He saw action at Second
3 Manassas, Antietam, Fredericksburg, and Gettysburg, where he was
4 seriously wounded in both legs. Dooley was subsequently taken
5 prisoner and detained for many months before his release in
6 February 1865.¹⁴

7 An edited version of Hotchkiss's diary, Make Me a Map of the
8 Valley, appeared in 1973. Born in New York, Hotchkiss moved to
9 Virginia in the late 1840s. He entered into service with the
10 Confederate army shortly after the outbreak of the war and soon,
11 despite any formal training, gained assignment as a topographical
12 engineer, beginning his diary shortly thereafter. In March 1862
13 Stonewall Jackson, preparing for the Valley Campaign, instructed
14 Hotchkiss to reconnoiter the geography of the Shenandoah Valley
15 from Harpers Ferry to Lexington with a view to producing a
16 detailed and accurate map of the region. Supporting operational
17 planning and strategy in the Virginia theater, Hotchkiss's maps,
18 carefully drawn with colored pencils to better illustrate the
19 terrain, were an important boon to Jackson's -- and his
20 successors -- achievements in the field. A significant primary
21 source for those interested in Civil War mapmaking, Hotchkiss's
22 diary yields import information on topographic and cartographic
23 survey during the Civil War, as well as the military operations
24 he produced maps for and the prominent officers he served under.

1 After the war, Hotchkiss remained in engineering, working hard to
2 promote his adopted state's mining and timber resources. He also
3 composed the Virginia volume of Confederate Military History
4 (1899), a vast compendium of battles, campaigns, and biographical
5 sketches of officers drawn from the memories of participants and
6 protagonists.¹⁵

7 After-the-fact reminiscences of the Civil War, whether from
8 soldiers or civilians, trace how memory infiltrates, shapes, and
9 transforms history and how it portrays individual and collective
10 identity. Their economic and social system of slavery in tatters,
11 with the fall of the Confederacy and the onset of Reconstruction,
12 many white southerners struggled to work through the emotional
13 defeat and unnerving political uncertainty that followed. Writing
14 memoirs and reminiscences to reflect upon their own life and
15 times, usually published many years after events described have
16 passed, southerners recorded their wartime memories in first
17 person accounts, embracing both soldier and civilian
18 perspectives. Memorial groups encouraged efforts to preserve and
19 document memories of wartime sacrifice and heroism. The United
20 Daughters of the Confederacy, for one, promoted the "truth" of
21 southern history in schools and universities across the region,
22 even going as far as to amend, edit, or censor "biased" classroom
23 textbooks.

24 After the Civil War, many of Virginia's high-ranking

1 Confederate officers and soldiers, alongside other individuals
2 who had simply experienced the war in the state, committed their
3 personal narratives to print, taking aim at former enemies and,
4 on occasion, each other, as well as mitigating their war record
5 and the justness of the cause. Prominent among them were many of
6 Lee's Virginia born or raised generals who had served inside
7 Virginia and the eastern theatre, or in the west, over the
8 duration of the war. James Longstreet, Joseph E. Johnson, Jubal
9 A. Early, Sterling Price, Dabney Herndon Maury, Richard S. Ewell,
10 and George E. Pickett all published their memoirs and
11 reminiscences of the war in the decades after Appomattox.
12 Stonewall Jackson and J.E.B. Stuart, dead heroes of the
13 battlefield, were denied the chance to compose their memoirs of
14 life and career, yet did not want for admiring nineteenth-century
15 biographers and essayists keen to exploit their name and fame.

16 One of the most compelling and critically acclaimed
17 post-Civil War reminiscences by a Confederate officer is Edward
18 Porter Alexander's Military Memoirs of a Confederate: A Critical
19 Narrative (1907), which offers a descriptive account of his Civil
20 War career from First Manassas to Appomattox, latterly as
21 Longstreet's chief of artillery in the First Corps of the Army of
22 Northern Virginia. An earlier and more personal memoir written
23 and compiled before Military Memoirs and intended for family
24 members and friends, was edited by Gary Gallagher and published

1 in 1989 under its original title Fighting for the Confederacy:
2 The Personal Recollections of General Edward Porter Alexander.
3 Alexander's narrative is notable for its forthright yet
4 respectful criticism of leading Confederate officers, including
5 Lee and Jackson. Lee's decision to take on General George
6 McClellan at Antietam was, according to Alexander, his "greatest
7 military blunder."¹⁶

8 Another eminently readable memoir from one of the most
9 famous and celebrated officers in the Confederate army is The
10 Memoirs of Colonel John S. Mosby, published posthumously in 1917.
11 Born in 1833 in Virginia and raised on his parent's farm in
12 Albemarle County, John Singleton Mosby was educated at the
13 University of Virginia and was a member of the bar at the
14 outbreak of war in 1861. Lukewarm on secession, Mosby
15 nevertheless entered the ranks of the Confederate army as a
16 private with the First Virginia Cavalry. Given his own command,
17 the 43rd Battalion of Virginia Cavalry, Mosby's partisan unit
18 wreaked havoc on Union supply trains and lines of communication
19 with their daring covert raids into enemy-held territory in the
20 counties of northwest Virginia, providing valuable reconnaissance
21 reports for J.E.B. Stuart, whom he admired greatly, and useful
22 intelligence for Robert E. Lee at Confederate Headquarters.
23 Mosby's volume of reminiscences, though dubious in places, draws
24 on his writings, newspaper articles, letters to his wife,

1 Pauline, and official correspondences to capture these exploits
2 and actions, as well as muse on operational tactics and command
3 decisions made by the Confederate hierarchy. After the war, the
4 unorthodox Mosby became a southern scalawag, a sympathetic
5 Republican, and supporter of President Ulysses S. Grant.¹⁷

6 As wives and daughters of planters, politicians, and
7 lawyers, elite white southern women's autobiographical forays
8 into memoir and reminiscence are especially revealing for the
9 Civil War period in Virginia, demonstrating how public and
10 private worlds of privilege and prosperity dovetail in the
11 historical imagination. Born in Halifax County, Virginia in 1830,
12 Sara Rice Pryor, whose lawyer husband Roger A. Pryor was a member
13 of Congress and colonel in the Confederate army, composed two
14 memoirs at the turn of the twentieth century, Reminiscences of
15 Peace and War (1904) and My Day: Reminiscences of a Long Life
16 (1909). Both delight in memories of happy race relations and a
17 charming antebellum Virginia upbringing at Cedar Grove and
18 Shrubbery Hill plantations, as well as high society in
19 Charlottesville, where her aunt and uncle had a house. Residing
20 in Washington in 1861 where, prior to the outbreak of
21 hostilities, she had mixed in social circles with presidents
22 Fillmore, Pierce, and Buchanan, Sara's memoirs record the rising
23 sectional tensions and enmity in the nation's capital among
24 politicians and diplomats who looked on with either calm or

1 fright as news filtered through of South Carolina's secession
2 from the Union. By 1865, after a spell of wartime nursing in
3 Richmond, Sara relocated to Petersburg and witnessed its fall.
4 After the war, she and her husband settled in New York, where he
5 resumed his career as a lawyer then as a judge. Sara devoted her
6 final years to entertaining, charitable work, and writing.¹⁸

7 Louise Wigfall Wright, the daughter of influential Texas
8 politician Louis T. Wigfall, gathered together her "sad and happy
9 memories" of the Civil War era in A Southern Girl in '61: The
10 War-Time Memories of a Confederate Senator's Daughter, which was
11 published in 1905. Including numerous extracts from family
12 letters, Wright's reminiscences suggest that the war, when viewed
13 through memory's mirror, was not that bad after all. She
14 remembered struggling to pay attention to lessons in Mrs.
15 Pegram's school in Richmond when "such 'beaux soldats' were
16 marching, with drums beating, and banners flying, by our very
17 doors"; singing and dancing at a Culpepper ball to which "flocked
18 all the Virginia belles of the country side" and the "flower of
19 the chivalry of the Army of Northern Virginia"; and picnics in
20 Charlottesville "that infused a spirit of gaiety to the little
21 town." Regardless of disheartening news from the battlefield and
22 crippling scarcities of supplies and resources, Wright claimed
23 that "defeat was not contemplated, nor discussed as a
24 possibility."¹⁹

1 Constance Cary Harrison, a descendant of Thomas Jefferson
2 and the wife of Burton Norvell Harrison, private secretary to
3 Jefferson Davis during the Civil War, recalled her childhood in
4 Alexandria, Virginia and the war years in Recollections Grave and
5 Gay (1911). Like Pryor's and Wright's reminiscences, the
6 distinguishing tone of Harrison's memoir is one of nostalgia for
7 a world consigned to memory. She describes working alongside her
8 mother as a nurse to wounded Confederate soldiers in Richmond
9 after the Battle of Seven Pines, the destruction of their
10 plantation home, and, with the close of the war, the harrowing
11 wait for news on the whereabouts of her brother, Clarence, a
12 midshipman in the Confederate States Navy.²⁰

13 Two memoirs from nurses who served opposing armies in
14 Virginia provide insight into medical services and hospital
15 experiences during the Civil War. Born into a prominent Jewish
16 family of Charleston, South Carolina, Phoebe Yates Pember
17 recorded her duties as Chief Matron of a division at the
18 Chimborazo military hospital in Richmond, where she remained
19 until the end of the war, in A Southern Woman's Story (1879).
20 With thousands of patients under her care during the war, Pember
21 narrates a myriad of stories relating to her onerous supervisory
22 responsibilities in the hospital. Amid much opposition from
23 doctors and surgeons who did not yet recognize the importance of
24 women nurses, Pember's account of courage and nerve and privation

1 and want in the care of sick and wounded Confederate soldiers,
2 which intermingle in a conversational and anecdotal style, is
3 among the most important sources for the study of the medical
4 history of the Civil War.²¹

5 Jane Stuart Woolsey, an experienced wartime nurse and
6 administrator in the North, relocated to Virginia in 1863 to
7 serve as Superintendent of Nurses at the Fairfax Seminary
8 Hospital, a Union medical facility, where she continued to work
9 until August 1865. Hospital Days (1868), her memoir of her
10 experiences and responsibilities there, describes the importance
11 of cleanliness, good diet, and strong management on the hospital
12 wards, as well as the letters she and her colleagues wrote for
13 hospitalized soldiers, thus maintaining their mental and
14 emotional equilibrium in often distressing circumstances: a
15 crucial aspect of wartime nursing.²²

16 Medical activities in the beleaguered city of Petersburg are
17 covered by John Herbert Claiborne's memoir Seventy-Five Years in
18 Old Virginia (1904), which provides much of interest about
19 civilian life amid the chaos and confusion of the city's
20 bombardment and eventual evacuation. During the war, Claiborne, a
21 military surgeon on the medical staff of the Confederate army,
22 was tasked with establishing a hospital in Petersburg to
23 recuperate sick and wounded Confederate soldiers. Displaying an
24 aptitude for Confederate hospital administration, he soon found

1 himself in charge of all military hospitals in the city. Born to
2 a wealthy plantation-owning family and raised in "The Red Oak
3 Neighborhood" of Brunswick County, a locality known for its
4 "culture, refinement, and hospitality," Claiborne insisted on the
5 importance of the Commonwealth to the history of the nation, a
6 nation "founded on principals enunciated by Virginia statesmen
7 and established by the prowess of Virginia soldiers." He
8 positions Virginians as natural born leaders in society,
9 politics, and war.²³

10 Plantation reminiscences, a body of autobiographical
11 life-writing to which Claiborne's volume belongs, were an
12 important Gilded Age and Progressive Era genre. Though little is
13 known today about the authors of these works, of which many were
14 Virginians, across the late nineteenth and early twentieth
15 centuries scores of sentimental volumes were published. In their
16 celebration of the benevolent paternalism of the antebellum
17 plantation and gentile Old South civilization, most plantation
18 reminiscences chart a narrative course through southern history
19 signposting themes of prewar plenty through wartime privation to
20 postwar ruin, rarely deviating from formulaic plotlines across
21 memoirists and publishing houses.

22 Memorials of a Southern Planter, published in 1887 by Susan
23 Dabney Smedes as a glowing encomium to her late father, Thomas
24 Smith Gregory Dabney, may be the most widely known narrative of

1 the genre. Smedes's volume details her father's remarkable
2 lineage, his early years at the family's ancestral Tidewater
3 estate, Elmington, the family's relocation to Burleigh, a large
4 cotton plantation in Mississippi, plantation life there during
5 the 1840s and 1850s, along with their trials and tribulations
6 during the Civil War and Reconstruction. Thomas's life at
7 Elmington was, according to his daughter, "the ideal life of a
8 Virginia gentleman." The plantation house, "red brick, quaint and
9 old fashioned in design," was built near the water's edge. The
10 plantation grew corn, wheat, rye and tobacco; cedar, oak, walnut
11 and pine trees dotted the land. Gloucester County "had been
12 settled by the best class of English people" who "brought to
13 their homes in the New World the customs and manners of the Old."
14 Everybody there "kept open house," and "entertaining was a matter
15 of course, anything and everything was made the occasion of a
16 dinner-party."²⁴ Memorials of a Southern Planter is, for the most
17 part, authentic, faithful, and devoted though anachronistically
18 sentimental in its portrayal of southern plantation life.

19 Like many post-Civil War veteran memoirs, the opening pages
20 in most plantation reminiscences, perhaps in recognition of the
21 artifice of the genre, insist on the accuracy and veracity of
22 what follows. H. H. Farmer, born in Lunenburg County, Virginia,
23 in 1825, and educated at Jefferson Medical College, endeavored to
24 present a fair and true account of his life in Virginia before

1 and During the War (1892). Opposed to secession in 1861, Farmer
2 hoped readers would "form a truer estimate of the state of
3 society and of opinions in the South and especially in Virginia,
4 than usually prevails."²⁵ Myrta Lockett Avery's A Virginia Girl
5 in the Civil War (1903) marks out and stakes a claim for the
6 ability of memoirs to bring readers "close to the human soul." By
7 entering the personal world of how "people thought, felt, and
8 lived" in a "vital and formative period in American history,"
9 Avery hoped her volume would capture "what history can never show
10 us" and "what fiction can unfold . . . only in part." Though
11 Avery lauds the "veracity" of her narrative, she actually uses
12 aliases to hide her identity, and that of her husband, as they
13 travel across the South during wartime.²⁶

14 Plantation reminiscences often establish an ancestry that
15 gives their authors a fresh sense of themselves and a historical
16 understanding of their state. Marion Harland claimed in her
17 autobiography to be a "remote ancestor" of Godfrey of Bouillon,
18 leader of the First Crusade against Jerusalem. Aware of her own
19 proximity to important history, Harland turns to discuss Richmond
20 before the outbreak of hostilities and how the war affected
21 family and friends.²⁷ Other Virginia memoirists narrated in
22 detail familial pedigrees and legends with a generous joie de
23 vivre, an invitation to a sentimentally heroic viewing of their
24 ancestral traces and a glowing pride in the achievements --

1 accurate or otherwise -- of distant relations. Sallie Alexander
2 Moore of Lexington, Virginia, traced her ancestry to Scottish
3 earls in Stirling and reckoned she was a descendant of Robert the
4 Bruce.²⁸ Stories were told, legends weaved, history embroidered.

5 Many plantation memoirists, often writing for their children
6 and grandchildren and adopting a didactic tone, dwell on memories
7 of their own childhoods in antebellum Virginia. Some, like Andrew
8 J. Andrews's A Sketch of Boyhood Days (1905), Alexander S.
9 Paxton's, Memory Days in which the Shenandoah Valley is seen in
10 Retrospection (1908), and P.A.L. Smith's Boyhood Days of Fauquier
11 (1926), as their titles suggest, are almost entirely given over
12 to recollections of childhood adventures remembered in old age in
13 memories that seem as vivid as yesterday.²⁹ The aptly titled The
14 End of an Era (1899) by John S. Wise, a lieutenant in the
15 Confederate army who spent time in the trenches at Petersburg and
16 fought in the Battle of the Crater, laments the passing of his
17 blissful childhood, "days belonging to a phase of civilization
18 and a manner of life which are as extinct as if they had never
19 existed."³⁰

20 The nostalgic cast in many plantation reminiscences was
21 enhanced greatly with the repeated use of a "memorialist,"
22 usually the author who wrote in the alleged "voice" of an
23 erstwhile slave in dialect reminiscent of the melodramatic local
24 color stories innovated by writers such as Joel Chandler Harris

1 and Virginians Thomas Nelson Page and George William Bagby; the
2 former butler or maid now a "commemorator" for "the lost pieties
3 and sanctions" of plantation life.³¹ Sallie May Dooley's Dem Good
4 Ole Times (1906), written as a conversation between a young girl
5 and her grandfather, a former slave, in the local color dialect
6 that the author had known as a child on her grandparent's tobacco
7 plantation in Lunenburg County, provides a requiem for departed
8 days. "I ruther live one yur in dem times den five in dese,"
9 confirmed the old-timer, in a comment that symbolized an unhappy
10 transition from slavery to freedom.³²

11 The veneration shown to devoted and indispensable black
12 servants, especially "Mammy," a figure epitomizing the faithful
13 slave and a powerful political and cultural symbol in
14 twentieth-century America, particularly in advertising and film,
15 served to maintain a notion of white privilege and harmonious
16 race relations while masking hardening social boundaries with the
17 implementation of racial difference and ideology through Jim
18 Crow. Even during wartime, when "old Virginia was one great
19 camping ground, hospital, and battlefield," the region's slaves
20 shunned emancipation and freedom and "remained faithful" to their
21 erstwhile owners, "manifesting kindness, and in many instances
22 protecting the white families and plantations during their
23 masters' absence," according to Letitia M. Burwell's 1895 memoir
24 A Girl's Life in Virginia before the War.³³ Given the late

1 nineteenth-century fascination with Old South plantation life in
2 novels, dramatic plays, minstrel shows, and popular songs, it is
3 hardly surprising that Virginia authors turned sympathetically to
4 the plantation in praise of antebellum southern society.

5 The written accounts of those soldiers and civilians who
6 experienced the Civil War in Virginia have enduring value. Their
7 diaries and evocative reminiscences, which grew and multiplied in
8 number in the decades following Lee's surrender at Appomattox,
9 help reveal what life was like for participants in and witnesses
10 to one of history's great struggles, one that would fundamentally
11 transform the structure of southern and, by extension, American
12 society. The protagonists themselves understood the import of
13 their historical role, however large or small, as evidenced in
14 how they read, recorded, and remembered the great drama into
15 which their lives were cast.

1 Notes to Chapter 17, "Civil War Diaries and Reminiscences"

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