

LUCY VIRGINIA FRENCH'S CIVIL WAR

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Introduction and context for understanding the diaries:

Lucy Virginia French wanted to be remembered. She wanted to write something that would have lasting value. It was a sentiment she expressed several times in the diaries she kept during the years 1862-1865. Female expressions of ambition were rare in the mid-19th century, especially in the South. And, indeed, her friends and admirers always noted her modest character and her unwillingness to put herself forward. Perhaps that was her way of engaging the public sphere without appearing to step out of her expected female role. Histories of the Civil War and Southern women's roles tell us that women confined their lives to domestic roles as wives and mothers and did not engage in public and political activities. According to these interpretations the Civil War removed men from the home and pushed women into more public spheres of work and civil engagement—at least temporarily.

Lucy Virginia French did not follow that pattern. Born into a prominent Virginia family in 1825, she was educated at a prestigious girls' school in Pennsylvania. She and her sister, Lide, were hired as tutors for the children of prominent families in Memphis following their graduation. They worked to pay off the costs of their schooling, which their father had not paid—a rather startling action for women of their time and station. Lucy Virginia also began to publish poetry, first under a pseudonym and later under her own name. She married John H. French in 1853, a wealthy and well-educated Tennessean. The Frenches had three children, a son and two daughters. Lucy Virginia French continued to publish her poetry and essays after her marriage and was literary editor for several southern journals, earning an average of \$400-500 per year for her work. She was well-known in her time, and during the Civil War, men from both armies stopped at her home to meet Mrs. French and get her opinion of their own work. French also was active in political discussions and social reform. She was an ardent adherent of temperance, worked tirelessly for equal education for women, and, as the secession crisis gained momentum, organized and published a women's petition against secession. Thus Lucy Virginia French was both a woman of her time and a woman who was more modern in her expectations for herself and her sense of the possibilities for women. It is this second quality that marks her diary as valuable and important to our understanding of the Civil War home front. As a writer and poet, she was able to stand outside the immediate events and see their consequences. She wrote with

insight and, on occasion, humor—qualities not always present in diaries. She saw the significance of small details, and thus provided future readers with a sense of immediacy. The diary can be read on multiple levels—as a history of war, as a history of community, as a history of marriage and family under war conditions. There is also significant information about her own intellectual life, including the books she read during the war. Finally, her poet’s eye provides us with a view of nature.

In 1860, LVF organized a Ladies Petition against Secession, and invited her personal and intellectual friends from both the North and the South to sign the document. In the petition she warned that secession threatened family and home. She argued that the U.S. Constitution and our mutual history bound us together as a nation and offered the greatest protection to women and children. She did not address the issue of slavery directly, but it is inherent in her claims to history and home. Although she supported the Confederacy after Tennessee seceded, she always believed that secession had been a horrific decision. In today’s presentation, I will focus on the passages in the diary that support her contention that secession and the subsequent war did, indeed threaten home and family as well as those that highlight her belief in the strength of community bonds and the possibilities of reconciliation.

Lucy Virginia French as a writer and poet

- In the 1860 census, beside the name of L. Virginia French is the designation “poetess.”
 - Most women of the day received the designation “wife” or “housewife”; occasionally “teacher.”
 - LVF’s identification reinforced her perception of herself and also suggested that the census taker, like others in the community, considered this proper.
 - In her own time, editors and public commenters repeatedly spoke of her “genius” and talent, with some, like Joseph B. Killibrew, publicly chastising her for not devoting more time to writing.
- LVF’s writing style did not translate well for 20th century readers.
- Her most famous poems were “Tecumseh’s Foot,” which was sometimes compared to Longfellow’s “Hiawatha,” and “The Palmetto and the Pine,” a poem of post-war reconciliation.
- *My Roses* was her most successful book, despite its somewhat risqué topic and treatment of women’s relationships.
- *One or Two* was published by her sister after LVF’s death and contains poems written by both women.

McMinnville and Forest Home

Home and community were central to LVF's diaries and McMinnville, despite its remoteness from larger southern cities, proved to be a good and sustaining intellectual home for the writer.

LVF's home, Forest Home, was described as a place of serenity and learning, with books and musical instruments. John H. French, variously called Darlin' or Col. depending on LVF's mood and the state of their relationship, supported his wife's writing. During the years 1862-1865, his encouragement included tending to the children's lessons to provide time for her work. In 1863, he sent her to Beersheba to move her away from the chaos of war and household concerns. He financed the publication of her first book of poetry, *Wind Whispers*. The larger community was also supportive of LVF's work. Friends wrote newspaper articles to southern papers introducing her work to larger audiences.

McMinnville:

- Warren County residents held slaves, but there were no large planters and cotton was not a significant crop
- Progressive development included the construction of a cotton mill, the organization of an agricultural society, and the construction of a rail line that connected the town to Manchester
- McMinnville residents were well connected to the legal and political elites of the state and a number of well-known Tennessee political figures got their start there.
- McMinnville and Warren County were also the site of several schools and academies.

McMinnville and the Civil War

The location of McMinnville placed the community at risk during the years 1862-1865, as LVF had feared. Often caught between armies, the town changed hands seven times and experienced the problems of lawlessness and confusion that historians like Stephen Ash identified in situations where neither army was in control.

Testing the Limits of Patriotism and Friendship in Forest's Raid on Murfreesboro, July 1862

Nathan Bedford Forest's raid on Murfreesboro on July 13, 1862, provided LVF and the citizens of McMinnville with their first test of the limits of friendship. For LVF, the raid also raised personal questions about war and patriotism. The successful capture of approximately 1200 Union soldiers was met with celebration in McMinnville. The prisoners marching along the road in front of her house produced an unexpected disturbing sight for LVF, and she recorded her thoughts on seeing the American flag as a captured symbol.

“I shall never forget the scene which passed before us upon this evening. Did I ever think to see the old “stars & stripes,” a captive banner & not weep over it? I felt badly to see it thus I confess—it was the old flag I had loved so long. But was I sorry to see the men who had treated us all so badly a few weeks before, brought up again as prisoners—no—you may be sure I didn’t weep over that! Well here they were—and here were their conquerors!”
July 17, 1862

Dr. John B. Armstrong, a prominent member of the community and an ardent Unionist, was captured in the raid. The Armstrongs were long-time friends of the Frenches, but the differences in their allegiances had strained the relationship. Nevertheless, the Confederate men of McMinnville, led by John French, appealed to Forest to release Armstrong. The restoration of the doctor to his family was the first of what would prove to be a number of examples of the bonds of community and friendship that overwhelmed the power of war. That is not to say that citizens of McMinnville did not experience the problems of a “house divided,” but LVF shows us a much more complex picture of people struggling to live in a community beset by both armies—a community in which friendship sometimes triumphed.

The Battle of Stones River and the Death of Cap Spurlock

The Battle of Stones River over the New Year of 1863 brought home the pain of war in a way that LVF had not previously experienced. In her mind the death of her friend Captain Drury Spurlock (16th Tennessee) on the first day of the battle and Southern secession were intimately tied together. Like LVF, Cap Spurlock had opposed secession. Two years earlier on New Year’s Eve 1860, Spurlock was among the guests who celebrated with a “Union Party” at the French home. Now he was dead.

In very moving passages she narrates the moment of receiving the news of Cap’s death, the gathering of friends and family, and the funeral and burial. However, in the hands of a perceptive writer, the story becomes more than a tale of personal loss, it is an indictment of secession and war.

...he looked the Christian hero that he was. A garland of geraniums & evergreen was laid all around his head & shoulders—my wreath—emblematic of the completeness of life—lay upon his breast. Few looked on him without tears—his family and friends were overwhelmed with grief. The frantic exclamations of his mother—the half-frightened & wild sobbing of poor Florence—& the still, silent agony of the aged father were terrible to me. As Miss Sophie Searcy stood for hours beside his coffin weeping, I wondered if she remembered the time when she had said “Let the war come! I want these Tennesseans roused—let it come—we are ready!” Were any of us ready to part with “Cap?”—The artillery firing at Murfreesboro was tremendous that evening heavier & faster than we ever heard it—and it was heard as Mr. McMurray prayed

and voices tremulous with tears raised the hymn around the soldier's coffin. All the way to the grave-yard—and while we laid him down to his last rest—and as we returned—it came rolling up from the northward—a fitting requiem for the gallant dead.

January 4, 1863

John Hunt Morgan and Winter Quarters, 1863

Following the battle of Stones River, both armies went into winter quarters. McMinnville was host to the troops under the command of General John Hunt Morgan, the dashing cavalryman. He had been at the center of the most important social event of the Confederacy in December 1862, when he married Martha Ready in a ceremony officiated by Leonidas Polk, the Episcopal Bishop turned Confederate General.

In February, the Morgans took up residency in the home of Dr. and Mrs. Armstrong, the same physician recently of the Union army. Mariah Armstrong, the wife of the doctor, was a close relative of Mattie Morgan. The incongruity of the Confederate general living in the home of Unionists was lost on no one. However, the situation meant that a number of social difficulties had to be negotiated.

Confederate sympathizers organized dinners, a ball, and a charity benefit to assist in the care of wounded soldiers—all of which required the attendance of the General and his officers. In each case, the question was raised as to whether or not the Armstrong daughters were to be invited—and in every instance, they were. The propriety of Unionists and Confederates mixing socially was acceptable because of family connections. The “mystic chords” that bound individuals into community were more difficult to break than might be supposed.

Nevertheless, the events were not without controversy or tension. Some thought it disrespectful of the sacrifices of the wounded and killed to engage in parties and balls during war. Lucy Virginia French was aware of these concerns, but she also wrote about another example of disrespect that she saw among Confederate officers.

The occasion was the charity event, a tableaux, organized by the women of McMinnville to aid the Confederate hospitals. LVF's relative, Mollie Smith, was a participant in the event, and French observed from the audience.

“I am very annoyed, however, by some officers who sat on chairs in the aisle just “jam up” to me—who had been drinking and were very anxious for the concert to be over so they could again get some “more of the same sort.” They were determined that everybody near them should know that they were Cols.—talked loud and long of “my regiment” and “my regiment” and “my regiment” until they thought everybody was fully convinced of their officership and then they commenced passing coarse remarks upon the girls and wishing the bore would stop and the ball commence so that they could get brandy. I was sick with the fumes of their breath—disgusted with their conversation—and indignant at their ingratitude.”

February 8, 1863

Beersheba Springs Raid, July 1863

The protection of home and community meant the maintenance of the social hierarchy that LVF understood—a hierarchy that placed “civilization” in the hands of white elites. French recorded a number of examples of the breakdown of society, including the impertinences of Yankee soldiers who did not recognize the position of John French and the increasing “forwardness” of otherwise respectable young women who openly associated with Union soldiers. Although the Frenches opposed secession, they had never been abolitionists. The awareness of the likelihood of emancipation filled LVF with indignation. It was one more indication of the breakdown of society.

In May 1863, John French encouraged his wife to go to Beersheba Springs, the nearby resort community, to move her away from the most immediate military activities in order to live in the relative peace where she could work uninterrupted on her writing projects. However, there was no real escape from the disruption of war. Indeed, while at Beersheba, LVF experienced the most disturbing example of the breakdown of society.

At a moment when the resort was relatively unguarded, the mountain people raided the cabins and the hotel, carting away furniture, clothing, books, china, and other valuables. The raid lasted for days and caused LVF to compare the action to the French Revolution.

“oh! the scenes enacted around that doomed Hotel and among these birds nest dwelling places of luxury and taste in rural retreats! It is that “the masses” had it all their own way on this memorable day—the aristocrats went down for the nonce, and Democracy—Jacobinism—and Radicalism in their rudest forms reigned triumphant. It has been a memorable day this 26th. July 1863—when “the master” went down to town “to take the oath” and become in Lincolnite parlance a “subjugated rebel,”—and Bersheba was sacked in his absence by a wild onset from the very people he has been building up for years!”
July 27, 1863

The End of the War

By the end of the war, LVF expressed an extraordinary weariness. Simple decisions seemed to be beyond her husband. She was frequently incapacitated with headaches. The house that had been her haven was in need of considerable repair. She was certain that their wealth was gone.

As the war ended, one additional crisis engaged the family. The resolution of it demonstrated again the strength of community. Mollie Smith was arrested for expressing her joy at the news of the assassination of Lincoln. As the Frenches prepared to defend her, Dr. Armstrong organized a petition among the community’s Unionists on her behalf. And Union Lt. Colonel W.J.Clift, a long-time citizen of McMinnville, advised her how to answer the questions she would be asked. Mollie was released without charges.

The last entry in the diary is one of discouragement—but with a possibility of a better day.

“Very many bitter thoughts came over me—I have tried to do my duty—but those whom we know have been mean and inconsistent, nay even wrong, but have been successful in life and we have lost—lost until there is little left now to lose. I do feel discouraged—so weary—so worn out with hoping and working and all to no purpose. I have tried so hard, and still seemed to go back all the time that I now feel pleasantly ready to sit down by the wayside and never strike another lick.

Heaven help us all—why do we write thus? I am ready to exclaim with the Preacher “Vanity of vanities—all is vanity!” What a wretched, savage mood I am in today. It wears me so. I wish I had a live book to read to take me out of myself. I will try Shakespeare then for my amusement.”

August 20, 1865

What conclusions can we draw from this diary?

It seems to me that Lucy Virginia French opens several possibilities for further examination.

- LVF shows us the complexity of war. She was very aware of the violence inflicted by her neighbors on both sides of the conflict. She deplored the actions of Morgan’s cavalymen on nearby farms as much as those of Yankees and guerrillas. Likewise, she sympathetically reported a conversation with a Yankee soldier who expressed his one desire to go home to his farm and end the fighting. War was a threat to home and family—the threat could come from your own side and you could find commonalities with the “enemy.”
- French also shows us the strength of community. Although she might write disparagingly about Unionists, she also visited with them during their illnesses, invited them to dinners, and helped them in times of crisis—as they did for her. In everyday examples, she shows us that those “mystic chords” that bound Americans to one another were stronger than expected.
- LVF’s life was one of reconciliation. She fought against secession. And after the war, she struggled for reconciliation. In a commemorative piece written after her death, the author said of her: “No soldier with sword in hand strove more valiantly than did she with her pen to preserve the Union, and when the crash came, with voice and pen she pleaded earnestly for restoration and throughout the remaining years of her life she wrote and worked and prayed for reconciliation as though the breach had been of personal moment.” Was she unique in this quest? Or, have we missed a story worth telling?