

## Lincoln's Generals' Wives: Four Women Who Influenced the Civil War--for Better and for Worse

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scholars who possess a mastery of their subjects and the all-to-rare ability to make complex historical events and ideas clear and readily understandable. Both books are valuable contributions to the literature on Abraham Lincoln and the Civil War.

*Lincoln's Generals' Wives: Four Women Who Influenced the Civil War – for Better and for Worse*, by Candice Shy Hooper. Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2016. 432 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$39.95 hard-cover.

Reviewer Stacy A. Cordery is professor of history at Iowa State University. She is the Web bibliographer of the National First Ladies' Library and author of *Alice: Alice Roosevelt Longworth, from White House Princess to Washington Power Broker* (2007).

Candice Shy Hooper, an independent scholar with an M.A. in history from George Washington University, has penned an engrossing book with a simple thesis that delivers both more and less than its title suggests. *Lincoln's Generals' Wives* explores the lives of Jessie Benton Frémont, Mary Ellen Marcy “Nelly” McClellan, Eleanor Ewing “Ellen” Sherman, and Julia Dent Grant, focusing on how they influenced their husbands—and, to a lesser degree, President Lincoln—and thus the course of the U.S. Civil War. Her conclusion is that Ellen Sherman and Julia Grant ably assisted their spouses during the terrible national crisis (“for better”) while Jessie Frémont and Nelly McClellan had an overall negative effect on their husbands’ careers (“for worse”).

Neither Jessie Frémont nor Nelly McClellan regarded Lincoln highly; that, Hooper asserts, is the path affecting the downward trajectory of their husbands’ initially promising careers. Much has been written about Jessie Frémont. Fiercely protective of her husband, she was also strongly antislavery and, of the four women, the most frustrated by the era’s gender limitations. Hooper suggests that the Frémonts’ manifold troubles increased when Jessie took herself to Washington in 1862 to try to convince President Abraham Lincoln that her husband was right to have issued the controversial Missouri emancipation proclamation. Her behavior appalled Lincoln. His shocked her. She thereupon fueled John Frémont’s every contemptuous anti-Lincoln feeling, including encouraging his presidential run against Lincoln in 1864. General Frémont’s promising career never recovered from Jessie’s tongue lashing of Lincoln.

Nelly McClellan similarly encouraged George McClellan’s disdain for Lincoln, but, as Hooper makes clear, she failed as well to overcome his most unsavory characteristics: hubris, self-absorption, and a mes-

sianic complex. George, a fervent convert to his wife's Catholicism, found solace in his belief that God had a special destiny for him. It was only a matter of time, they both believed, until that would become evident to everyone, including Lincoln. Instead of helping him think through his actions (which included ignoring military orders) she approved of the poor choices that resulted in his ultimate downfall. Much like the Frémonts, the McClellans, Hooper deftly summarizes, "could always change a good opinion they had of someone, but never a bad one" (367).

Ellen Sherman and Julia Grant had different relationships with their husbands and thus also, as Hooper explains, with Lincoln. Both women functioned as critical sounding boards, unafraid to challenge their husbands and at ease airing differences of opinion. Ellen rejected William Tecumseh Sherman's notion to quit the military altogether. When newspapers accused him of insanity, she made Lincoln understand that his general was neither mad nor unfit for duty. Because of Ellen's effective advocacy, Sherman went on to success at Shiloh and beyond.

Julia Dent Grant loved her philandering, alcoholic husband and managed to back Lincoln even as he masterminded the demise of her beloved Southern culture. Julia was the "sunshine" Ulysses needed to thrive. She traveled hundreds of risky miles following him. Hooper avers that the president's warmth toward Julia grew from her strabismus, or crossed eyes, a trait she shared with the Lincolns' son Robert.

Hooper conducted archival research at the Library of Congress, Notre Dame, Princeton, Georgetown, and the Grant Presidential Library. She consulted published memoirs and other Civil War collections and worked with noted Civil War historians on the manuscript. Her thesis—that "four women influenced the war by influencing the generals who fought it, in part because of what they thought about Abraham Lincoln" (366)—is not entirely convincing. Tracing a conclusive through-line from influence to action is a recognized difficulty of women's history. The book lacks a consistent gender analysis, confining most of it to the conclusion. A profitable comparison among the women and their marriages might have strengthened Hooper's tale. All four women embraced a traditional understanding of their roles even though their definitions differed as to what constituted wifely advocacy and encouragement. Failure to pursue the gendered nuances of why each marriage functioned as it did was a missed opportunity. Despite this quibble, readers—both academic and general—will find much to relish in *Lincoln's Generals' Wives*. A close reading will enrich one's understanding of the four marriages, the eight individuals, the course of the Civil War, and, to a lesser extent, Abraham Lincoln.