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THE RISE AND FALL OF ESTHER B. CHEESBOROUGH: THE BATTLES OF A LITERARY LADY

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Clio is a fickle muse. Her judgments are harsh and her memory is short. Countless men and women have vied for her favor, hobnobbed with the famous and been toasted as celebrities by their contemporaries, only to be buried in obscurity. Such was the fate of Esther B. Cheesborough, one of South Carolina's most prolific and promising antebellum writers. The most generous modern appraisals of Cheesborough's work rank her as a second-rate figure in American literature, a fair judgment, for in the grand scheme of things, Cheesborough does not stand as a literary giant. Yet her modern reputation has suffered unduly because we know too little about her and because her once promising career ended prematurely. She has been dismissed by people who have examined only part of her work and who know little about her life. Essie Cheesborough (as she was known to her friends) was a strong-willed, independent woman of wit and vitality. Her poems, short stories, and essays were praised in the decade preceding the Civil War by some of the most notable of her contemporaries. She deserves a secure place in South Carolina history.

Essie Cheesborough was a child of the South, a fact that molded her life. Born at Charleston in 1826, she was one of three daughters and five children belonging to John W. and Elera Cheesborough. Elera Cheesborough was English. John Cheesborough was a respected Charleston merchant and a director, on different occasions, of the State Bank of South Carolina and of the Charleston Bank. The family owned and rented a number of houses between 1830 and 1860, usually in fashionable parts of the city. On the eve of the Civil War, they lived in a large house on Church Street, a mere stone's throw from the Battery. As the Cheesborough sons grew to manhood, they followed their father's path. One established himself as a factor; the other became head cashier of the Bank of Charleston. The three Cheesborough daughters enjoyed the advantages of an upper-middle-class social position. Several house slaves performed domestic chores, giving the sisters time to receive a good classical education from private tutors at Charleston and Philadelphia. In the tradition of Charleston *belles*, the girls made their debuts at the annual St. Cecilia Society ball. Essie was acquainted with

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Continental Congress. Charleston, he told them, had been liberated at last — and its occupation by his army “gives us compleat possession of all the Southern States.”²⁷ And such was the case, for Charleston and its outlying posts were the last land areas which had remained in British hands in Georgia, the Carolinas, or Virginia.

With the liberation of Charleston, Kosciuszko's active service in the war was over. He had served his adopted country well as an engineer and an intelligence officer, but he encountered difficulty in collecting his back pay from an impecunious Congress. Finally, with the aid of Gen. Greene, he was able to collect enough of his pay to enable him to hire cabin space on a ship bound for Europe.²⁸ It would be pleasant to be able to say that the remainder of his career was attended with success. But such was not the case. He returned to Poland and suffered through its second partition by its powerful neighbors, Russia and Prussia, in 1793. He reacted to the invasion of his country by raising an army and leading it into combat against the Russians, but his troops were overwhelmed by superior force and he was taken prisoner and was forced to spend two years behind the walls of a Russian fortress. By the time he was released from custody, Poland had suffered its third partition, in 1795, and had been completely swallowed up by its neighbors. Thus, a gallant officer who had fought for the independence of the United States lived to see his own country lose its independence.

Sadly, Kosciuszko turned his back upon his native soil and went into exile in Switzerland. It is probable that he would have been welcomed by his erstwhile comrades in arms in the United States had he decided to return there after the partitions of Poland. But he chose to remain in Europe, hoping against hope that he would be able to participate in the liberation of Warsaw as he had done in that of Charleston.

²⁷ Greene to George Washington, Dec. 19, 1782, Papers of George Washington, Library of Congress.

²⁸ Kosciuszko to Greene, June 18, 1783, *Letters*, p. 150; Greene to Kosciuszko, July 10, 1783, *ibid.*, pp. 154-155; Kosciuszko to Greene, July 14, 1784, *ibid.*, pp. 175-176.

Charleston's literary and intellectual elite. James Louis Pettigru, for example, lived next door to the Cheesboroughs when they resided on Broad Street, and Essie became a regular customer at John Russell's famous book shop on King Street, where an impressive southern literary renaissance emerged during the 1850s. She was to be a part of that renaissance.¹

Despite these advantages, Essie never felt at ease in a world of aristocratic exclusiveness and conformity. Indeed, she became something of an intellectual rebel and Bohemian. Several factors account for her rebelliousness. She probably was not a beautiful woman. No photograph or description of her features has survived, but the absence of any exclamation of praise from contemporaries may be interpreted to mean that she was plain in appearance. She never married, and from the early years of her adulthood she prepared to support herself emotionally as well as financially. She and her elder sister, Mary, were both listed as teachers in the 1849 Charleston city directory, and Essie, by that time, was beginning to win a modest reputation as a poet and writer of fiction. Moreover, her family suffered socially on occasion from financial embarrassment. Essie remembered much of her youth as a "battle," and much of the battle was fought over money. Her father was even forced in one instance to sell his house and many furnishings in order to pay mounting debts. He recouped his losses, but Essie never forgot her introduction to the harder facts of life. "So long as my father lived," she recalled, "he fought the battle for me; when he was gone, I fought it for myself. My brother would have fought it for me, but I believed in battling for myself. Bravely, cheerfully, undauntedly, I have fought the great battle, and never once cried, 'I surrender.'"²

Characteristically, Essie rejected many of the social taboos and laws of etiquette cherished by Charleston society. Her character is best

¹ There is no comprehensive biography of Cheesborough. The information contained in the above paragraph was garnered from numerous sources, including U. S. Bureau of the Census, *Population Schedule of the Sixth Census of the U. S., 1840*, Microfilm Roll 509, South Carolina, Vol. 2, Charleston District, and *Population Schedule of the Seventh Census of the U. S., 1850*, Microfilm Roll 850, South Carolina, Charleston County; Morris Goldsmith, *Directory and Strangers' Guide for the City of Charleston* (Charleston, 1831), pp. 28, 63; T. C. Fay, *Charleston Directory and Strangers' Guide for 1840 and 1841* (Charleston, 1840), pp. 17, 23; John H. Honour, *A Directory of the City of Charleston and Neck for 1849* (Charleston, 1849), p. 27; *The Charleston City and General Business Directory for 1855* (Charleston, 1855), I, p. 21; *Directory of the City of Charleston: 1860* (Charleston, 1860), I, p. 51; Ida Raymond, *Southland Writers: Biographical and Critical Sketches of the Living Female Writers of the South with Extracts from Their Writings* (Philadelphia, 1870), II, p. 877.

² Cheesborough to Paul H. Hayne, April 20, 1867, Paul Hamilton Hayne Papers, Perkins Library, Duke University.

illustrated by an episode that occurred when she was just sixteen. Attending her first St. Cecilia ball, Essie ventured to cross the room to speak with a friend. Suddenly, looming before her, stood a *grande dame* who reprimanded her with "startling servery." "My dear," exclaimed the lady, "you have been guilty of an impropriety — a very great impropriety — you have crossed the ball-room without a gentleman escort." Essie, blissfully unaware of the audaciousness of her act, felt like "a culprit." The incident was not soon forgotten either by her or by the duennas of St. Cecilia. Charleston social leaders ever after, she presumed, held her up "as a beacon to warn any impulsive *debutante* who might be betrayed into a similar sin." As for Essie, she began to ponder "the artificial rules of society, which would make mere machines of people." "I thought," she recalled, "if I could only re-model society, my first rule should be that every body should be natural."³

Cheesborough's passion for naturalness, expressed as intellectual honesty in her writing, became her hallmark as an author and as a person. An anthology of American female writers published in 1870 described Cheesborough's style as "fluent and easy." "She does not pander to the sensational," observed the editor, "but is natural, truthful, and earnest, never egotistical, or guilty of 'fine writing.'" Cheesborough's straightforward nature and her refusal to sacrifice moral integrity to literary trends won her a round of enthusiastic plaudits. Her first major work appeared in the *Southern Literary Gazette* in 1850. By the time of the Civil War, she had contributed pieces to the *Charleston Courier*, the *Southern Episcopalian*, *Russell's Magazine*, the *Southern Literary Messenger*, and *Godey's Lady's Book*. Some of these early writings appeared under a variety of *noms de plume*, including "Motte Hall," "Elma South," and "Ide Delmar," but her major work was signed with her full name or by the initials "E. B. C."⁴

Cheesborough's contributions to the *Southern Literary Gazette* are of particular interest for two reasons. First, the *Gazette* offered Cheesborough something nearly every aspiring writer of fiction dreams of: an opportunity to publish a series of short stories. Her *Gazette* stories mark the beginning of Cheesborough's antebellum reputation. Second, and equally important, these stories introduce the theme that dominates Cheesborough's early work: the independent, determined woman who battles to overcome life's adversity, particularly in unhappy love affairs.

³ Cheesborough to Hayne, Feb. 16, 1867, Hayne Papers.

⁴ Raymond, *Southland Writers*, II, p. 877. Truthfulness and honesty were important to Cheesborough in her personal life, too, as seen in Cheesborough to Mrs. Young, Dec. 18, 1852, Esther B. Cheesborough Letter, South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia.

Unrequited, unexpressed, and unfulfilled love were popular themes for most female writers in the 1850s, but Cheesborough's revulsion at the popular and the "sensational" dictated that she not be attracted to this form for the sake of popularity alone. Like some other female writers of the decade, including southerners Marion Harland and Augusta Jane Evans, she used this sentimental approach more as a vehicle than as an end.⁵ Her real purpose was to present strong female characters who were able to cope with the weakness of men or who were strong enough to survive disappointments of the heart. She certainly indulged in the sentimental language of the Romantic age, causing modern critics to dismiss her work as being in "the worst perfervid style of the broken-heart school."⁶ Yet the critics' evaluation is amiss.

Many of Cheesborough's heroines are sentimental and do suffer broken hearts, but they are never flamboyant, eccentric, or cloyingly pitiful. Rather than pine away, they rally to face the future, sometimes even with a sense of humor. The best conceived of these women stir genuine pathos. Consider Cheesborough's series of *Gazette* stories entitled "The Coterie of Old Maids." The series is built around the fictional reminiscences of a group of spinsters who in recalling the men they might have married display a spectrum of the ways in which love is lost. One woman voluntarily gives up her lover for the sake of her family; another rejects her true love when she discovers that he is a fortune hunter. Individual predicaments vary, but the trait shared by all of these women is their ability to cope with their losses, even to accept them as part of the natural order: it is a man's world, and those women who fail to find a male sponsor in their passage through life must get on as best they can.⁷

Such stories tell us something about Cheesborough's own life, too. Given her social background, normally she would have married, established a household, and produced sons and daughters of the South. Even a plain-looking girl of her social position should have experienced little trouble finding a suitable husband. Cheesborough's rebellion against a

⁵ Helen Waite Papashvily, *All the Happy Endings: A Study of the Domestic Novel in America, the Women who Wrote it, the Women who Read it, in the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1956), pp. xiii-xvii; Ann D. Wood, "The 'Scribbling Women' and Fanny Fern: Why Women Wrote," *American Quarterly* XXIII (Spring, 1971): 3-24.

⁶ Frank Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines* (Cambridge, Mass., 1938), II, p. 490; Fronde Kennedy, "Russell's Magazine," *South Atlantic Quarterly* XVIII (April, 1919): 140-141.

⁷ Cheesborough, "The Coterie of Old Maids: A Series of Stories," *Southern Literary Gazette*, III (Feb. 15, 1851): 1; "The Coterie of Old Maids: Rose Martin," *Southern Literary Gazette* III (March 8, 1851): 1; "The Coterie of Old Maids: Verona Walton," *Southern Literary Gazette* III (April 5, 1851): 1.

hum-drum middle-class existence and social milieu only partially explains her failure to conform in this matter. Another factor was at work, for the recurring theme in her short stories of life after love tells us that Cheesborough suffered from an unhappy love affair or from an unrequited love. The details are unclear. It may be that she had a dashing beau who deserted her or who died. It may be that she was hopelessly in love with someone who would not or could not return her love, a married man perhaps. Whatever the circumstances, some deeply felt loss touched Cheesborough's heart and affected her view of life.

One is tempted, of course, to speculate on the identity of this lost or secret love. Given the scanty surviving sources describing Cheesborough's private life, such an exercise is treacherous, but a likely candidate is Paul Hamilton Hayne, the poet. Hayne was part of Cheesborough's literary world. He was Cheesborough's "dear friend," and she admired his work to the point of hero-worship. Part of her admiration resulted from Hayne's respect for her own talent. Cheesborough labored for Hayne while he was editor of the *Southern Literary Gazette*, *Russell's Magazine*, and the *Southern Literary Messenger*. As the editor of *Russell's*, Hayne accepted contributions from Cheesborough more often than from any other writer. Yet there is more than gratitude in Cheesborough's unabashed praise and obvious affection for the poet. Shortly after the Civil War, when Hayne was living in self-imposed exile in the piney woods of Georgia, she wrote to him: "Yes, you have had a hard battle to fight, I well know. I love your poetry so much, that my impulse is to snatch the singer from the chilling mists with which fate has encompassed him, place him high up, where only the sunshine can reach him, and where he can see but the blue skies of life, and there, free from the vexing cares that fret and annoy, let him pour forth his music, which is as strong and lovely as Handel's marches."⁸

All evidence indicates a one-sided affair. A sporadic postwar correspondence, which continued until Haynes's death in 1886, gives no hint of a serious romance on his part. He was fond of Essie, and he did have a photograph of her, as she did of him, but they were not intimate. Indeed, for several years, while correspondents on literary business but still not formally introduced, they deemed it inappropriate even to pause and speak when passing in Charleston's streets. It became a case of Cheesborough loving from afar a man she could not have. Hayne's marriage to the daughter of a wealthy Charleston physician after a

⁸ Cheesborough to Hayne, Dec. 24, 1866, Hayne Papers.

whirlwind courtship in 1852 ended any slim hope she may have nourished.⁹

Cheesborough's battle to conquer the despair of unrequited love is revealed in one of the most autobiographical of her short stories. "Evelyn St. Clair; or a Heart's Story," published in the *Gazette*, embraces the same theme as "The Coterie of Old Maids." Significantly, however, the story's central character speaks in the first person, a technique Cheesborough had not used previously. Evelyn St. Clair reminds one of Cheesborough, too. Physically, she is a plain woman who possesses "very little of what the world would call fascination." She never weds; and the only man she ever loved dies without knowing of her love and with another woman's name on his lips. Crushed at first by this painful experience, Evelyn rebounds. She turns her attention to intellectual pursuits and hides her heartache behind a veil of industrious activity. "I learnt," she declares, "to extend the sphere of my usefulness. I put forth every energy that, fanned by Love's wings, lay idly sleeping; I appeared before the world, not as a love-dreamer, but as a thinking woman. One for whom there had been opened a new page in life, teaching her that not love alone is the great object of woman's life, but Friendship and Charity are also bright flowers worth her culture." Cheesborough and Evelyn St. Clair shared the belief that a woman's life must hinge on something more than a man's love.¹⁰

Cheesborough's poetry pursues the same theme, oftentimes expressed in the same personal tone. A typical example is "Renunciation." The renunciation in this instance concerns, again, the lost hope of love. Those who "art beautiful," she writes, with "dark eyes of witchery," may seek love and know the content of "womanly completeness." She, alas, because of some hidden, unrevealed tragedy in her past, must forsake all those pleasures that love and marriage bring:

But manacled by solemn fate,
I cannot burst the fetters;

⁹ Cheesborough to Hayne, Feb. 16, 1867, Nov. 25, 1871, Hayne Papers. The best modern biography of Hayne, by Rayburn S. Moore, *Paul Hamilton Hayne* (New York, 1972), makes no mention of Cheesborough.

¹⁰ Cheesborough, "Evelyn St. Clair," *Southern Literary Gazette*, III (August 31, 1850): 1. A later story by Cheesborough with the same personal touch is "Forty Years of Age; or, A Constant Love," *Darlington Southerner*, Nov. 3, 1866. It, too, laments a love lost in youth, although in this case the lover returns many years later — in the heroine's fortieth year — to reclaim her heart and marry her. It so happens that in Cheesborough's fortieth year, at the same time that she wrote this story, she received her first letter in many years from Hayne. The timing is a bit tenuous. Cheesborough's story was probably written in late Oct. The date of Hayne's letter is unknown, but her reply was not written until late Dec. The gap is a wide one, but it is possible that circumstances prevented an earlier reply.

Or write the story of my life
 In precious, golden letters:
 Love's star for me can never shine;
 Its trembling light grows dimmer,
 As through the dusky veil of grief
 Hope sends a feeble glimmer.¹¹

A decade later, on the eve of the Civil War, Cheesborough still dwelled on this theme, but her work had won a larger audience in a more prestigious journal. *Russell's Magazine*, founded by the famous patrons of John Russell's book shop in 1857, has been compared in quality to the *Southern Literary Messenger* and placed in the "first rank of ante-bellum Southern literary magazines."¹² Charleston's leading intellectuals — and, consequently, one of the finest groups of intellectuals in the South — contributed to its pages. John Dickson Bruns, Samuel Henry Dickinson, Basil Gildersleeve, William J. Grayson, Alfred Huger, Mitchell King, Father Patrick Lynch, James Louis Pettigru, Peyre Porcher, William Gilmore Simms, Henry Timrod, and Hayne, who served as editor, formed part of its hometown coterie. A young writer like Cheesborough could easily have lost herself in such a collection of worthies, and yet she contributed more short stories to *Russell's* — twelve — than any other author.¹³

Seven of Cheesborough's stories are tales of female character, and any one of them could have come from the pages of the *Gazette*, but one in particular stands out as being deeply felt and lovingly crafted. As in the case of "Evelyn St. Clair," this story, "An Old Maid," is strikingly autobiographical. It is the story of a woman who learns to place intellectual activities above love after suffering an unhappy love affair. The story centers on an old governess who, having been passed over by the man she loved, never marries. "Had she married," laments the story's narrator, "she would have been a perfect wife; her true strong heart would have beat most sympathetically and lovingly to that of a nother." Instead, "heaven ordained" a "different fate," and she who possessed

¹¹ Raymond, *Southland Writers*, II, pp. 877-78.

¹² Sidney J. Cohen, *Three Notable Ante-Bellum Magazines of South Carolina* (Columbia, 1915), p. 40.

¹³ Most scholars attribute only seven short stories to Cheesborough, but in so doing they seem to distinguish between her sentimental tales, which do number seven, and her satires. See Edgar Long, "*Russell's Magazine* as an Expression of Ante-Bellum South Carolina Culture" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of South Carolina, 1932), p. 112; Patrick J. Calhoun, "The Ante-Bellum Literary Twilight: *Russell's Magazine*," *Southern Literary Journal* III (Fall, 1970): 97.

such an "infinite capacity for loving" lived out her lonely life with "nought on which to lavish the glowing tide of affection."¹⁴

Cheesborough also used *Russell's* to introduce a new theme in her work: social satire. Nothing of the satirist's penetrating eye enlivens her *Gazette* pieces. Not until her days with *Russell's* had Cheesborough matured enough to attempt that difficult art. Thereafter, her belief that "every body should be natural" led Cheesborough to expose the absurdity of high society's values, taste, and conduct. One of her best conceived satires is "Madame Smith's Fete," in which she ridicules the social pretensions of the *nouveau riche*.¹⁵ A second sketch, "An Interesting Family," touches a modern chord. The story's hero visits his former college chum, who has married and begat eight children. Expecting to spend a quiet evening reminiscing and chuckling about old college days, he finds himself, instead, trapped in a torturous evening of children's games, children's recitals, and a proud papa's back-slapping, rib-punching exclamations of joy at even the least talented of his progeny's accomplishments. The visitor, trying to grin and bear it, must assure his host with ever-increasing eloquence that the children are the most charming, beautiful, and talented he has ever encountered. The evening over, he graciously flees — never to return.¹⁶

"Feasting the Lions" is the most successful of Cheesborough's satires and one of her very best pieces. Like "Madame Smith's Fete," it pokes fun at the *nouveau riche*, but it is a much more finely penned portrait and seeks a wider target. It is an attack on Charleston's high society, on the *grande dames* of St. Cecilia. The story centers on Mrs. Green, who invites two distinguished English travelers to stay at her home while they are visiting the city. She wines and dines them at a sumptuous banquet given in their honor and tries to impress them with her breeding and good taste. She succeeds only in making a fool of herself. Shortly thereafter, Mr. Green chances upon a series of letters published by the recent guests in an account of the American sojourn. One of the letters deals at length with their grotesque experience at the Greens' banquet. The Greens are both roundly insulted, Mrs. Green for her lack of taste and ignorance of fashion, Mr. Green for being "most disagreeably plebian." Cheesborough, wishing to leave nothing to chance, concludes her tale with a heavy-handed statement of its moral.

¹⁴ Cheesborough, "An Old Maid," *Russell's Magazine* III (June, 1858): 267.

¹⁵ Cheesborough, "Madame Smith's Fete," *Russell's Magazine* IV (Feb., 1859): 401-405. It should be noted, too, that scholars have treated Cheesborough's satires with more respect than her sentimental stories. See Long, "*Russell's Magazine*," p. 112.

¹⁶ Cheesborough, "An Interesting Family," *Russell's Magazine* V (May, 1859): 150-53.

"*Mutato nomine, de te fabula narratur*, she warns her readers; "Change but the name, and the story is told of yourself."¹⁷

The career of *Russell's* and the antebellum phase of Cheesborough's literary career both ended amid the tragic events of the winter of 1860-1861. With the coming of the Civil War, old literary and journalistic pursuits were impossible and unreasonable. Cheesborough, her mother, and her sisters had moved to Philadelphia two years before the war. Her father had died, and she and her sisters assumed responsibility for their mother. Essie hoped to extend her literary contacts and reputation in Philadelphia by writing for a northern audience. Her change in venue did not, however, alter Cheesborough's political sympathies. She remained a southerner in spirit as well as by birth. She continued to reside in Philadelphia for the first two years of the war because she believed that she could best serve the Confederate cause from that place.

Cheesborough's initial effort at wartime service was to supply clothing, food, and personal items, such as stationery and sewing kits, to Confederate prisoners at Fort Delaware (New Jersey) and the West Philadelphia Hospital. She secured these items through the cooperation of the citizens of Philadelphia, many of whom were ardent Confederate sympathizers. Some, like the Cheesboroughs, were native southerners. From the spring of 1862 to the spring of 1863, Cheesborough obtained, packaged, and delivered thousands of dollars worth of materials and goods to Confederate prisoners, winning in the process the heart-felt thanks of hundreds of men. Among the prisoners who benefitted from Cheesborough's activities were personal friends from Charleston, but most of the men were nameless objects of mercy. One incarcerated Virginian wrote to her: "Had it not been for your indomitable energy and untiring exertions, more than *one* of my fellow prisoners would have severely suffered since we have been here . . ."¹⁸

¹⁷ Cheesborough, "Feasting the Lions," *Russell's Magazine* III (Sept., 1858): 517-20. The story's genesis inspires speculation. William Makepeace Thackeray made a celebrated visit to Charleston five years before the story was published, and he did have a disagreeable confrontation with a Charleston "lady." However, Cheesborough's Englishman was far more critical of America than was Thackeray, who greatly relished his tour. See James Grant Wilson, *Thackeray in the United States* (London, 1904), I, pp. 137-43, 273-79; George N. Ray (ed.), *The Letters and Private Papers of William Makepeace Thackeray* (Cambridge, Mass., 1946), III, pp. 233-34. A more likely source is the Scots traveler James Stirling, who published a critical account of Charleston just one year before "Feasting the Lions" appeared. Stirling had no unpleasant social encounters, but he was critical of southern life, especially slavery, and had some unkind words to say about Paul Hayne. See James Stirling, *Letters from the Slave States* (London, 1857), pp. 236-62.

¹⁸ To Miss E. B. Cheesborough, Nov. 15, 1862, Maria Cheesborough Collection, South Caroliniana Library. This collection contains several letters of appreciation to Cheesborough from prisoners at Fort Delaware as well as her financial accounts, showing the types, amounts, and cost of some of the supplies provided in 1862-1863.

Cheesborough proved such a comfort to the men that the commandant of Fort Delaware put an end to her work. By July, 1863, finding that "a check" had been placed on her "operations," she returned to South Carolina. Her mother and sisters were to have returned also, but Mrs. Cheesborough was detained upon arriving at Annapolis for possession of "contraband articles," namely, shoes that she had purchased for her grandchildren. She offered to surrender the shoes, but Federal authorities forbade her to travel further south. She returned to Philadelphia accompanied by her eldest daughter, Mary, while Essie and Maria, the youngest sister, went on to Columbia. "I never heard of a greater outrage," sputtered Essie's brother John. "They of course only made the *shoes* a pretext. I dont think they ever intended to let her pass, as she was marked on account of her active participation in relieving our prisoners at Ft. Delaware."¹⁹

Cheesborough spent the rest of the war in South Carolina, but she was never in one spot for very long. Plans to return to Charleston, where the family still owned a house on Bull Street, were upset by the Federal military threat to the city. Essie became a semi-refugee, shuttling between Chester, Laurens, and Columbia. One of her brothers who worked as a bank cashier in Columbia found a place for his sisters to live there, but Essie still found it necessary to support herself and Maria. Maria, being partially deaf and in poor health, depended on her sister's income. Consequently, Essie traveled in search of work as a tutor. Additional earnings came from contributions to local newspapers, including the Darlington *Southerner*, for which she had written before the war, and the Chester *Standard*. These wartime articles contained no fiction or poetry. Cheesborough now wrote patriotic propaganda to inspire southern resistance by describing her experiences in the North and the grim conditions in northern military prisons.²⁰

Cheesborough's newspaper articles gave South Carolinians a view of the war they had not known. They learned how prisoners-of-war spent Christmas, about the activities of southern deserters and paroled soldiers in the North, of "Yankee outrages" in northern hospitals, and about southern sympathizers in the North. The view was slanted, but it made good reading, and from a strictly partisan point of view,

¹⁹ John Cheesborough to Wife, July 8, 1863, John Cheesborough Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina.

²⁰ John Cheesborough to Wife, July 20, 1863, July 24, 1863, Sept. 4, 1864, Cheesborough Papers. Wartime clippings from the *Southerner* and *Standard* may be found in the South Caroliniana Library. The author wishes to thank Horace Fraser Rudisill, historian of the Darlington County Historical Commission, for providing copies of Cheesborough's articles and valuable information about the *Southerner*.

Cheesborough's articles maintained southern passions against the Yankee foe. For example, in describing the pitiable condition of many southern prisoners at Fort Delaware, Cheesborough exposed the heartlessness and thoughtlessness of Union jailers. The fort's commandant, she reported, "was kindly disposed towards the prisoners, but either from indolence or indifference, he certainly neglected their comfort. He was quite willing that boxes of clothing should be sent to the prisoners by their friends, but he was equally willing that these boxes should remain in his office for months unopened, while the prisoners were actually suffering for a change of garments." Other officers at the fort, such as the contemptible Colonel Segebarth, were mean. Segebarth, wrote Cheesborough, "was heard to say that he was quite willing that the rebel women should send clothing to the prisoners, as his men got the benefit of it."²¹

Some of Cheesborough's stories, such as one about a wounded South Carolina soldier who had been brought to a Yankee hospital to have his leg amputated, stirred conflicting emotions. Whilst this brave fellow was lying "weak and faint" from the effects of the operation, a "mean-spirited wretch" entered the ward to taunt him. "I guess now," jeered the Yankee, "you are ready to take the oath of allegiance [sic]." His eyes flashing, the Carolinian propped himself up on one elbow in his cot and "exclaimed with energy, 'Sir, had I the use of both my feet, I would rise from my bed and knock you down.'" Sadly, the operation proved too much for the young soldier. He died shortly thereafter and was taken away to be buried by a group of southerners living in Philadelphia, all of them unknown to the young hero in life. These people, reported Cheesborough, "felt as they gazed upon his lifeless form that a common cause had made him their brother . . . Loved friends at home could have done nothing more for their beloved one than these new found friends did in the land of the stranger." Such stories inspired a sense of pride and sadness in Cheesborough's readers — pride in the spirit of Carolina's warriors; sadness that the war had dragged on for so long and at such a cost.²²

The war over, Cheesborough found herself in the position of many southerners, that is, poor and with no means of supporting herself in the devastated South. Her family still owned the Charleston house, but all of its furniture and most of its contents had been stolen by the Yankees. Family possessions stored at Columbia had been burned by Sherman's army. The only source of income left to her was the Charleston house

²¹ "The Commanders of Fort Delaware," *Darlington Southerner*, [1863].

²² "Scenes in a Northern City," *Darlington Southerner*, [1863].

itself, which she rented out in the autumn of 1865 for \$700 a year. This accomplished, she and Maria returned to Philadelphia to rejoin their mother and sister.²³

Cheesborough spent most of the rest of her life in the North, first at Philadelphia and later at New York City, where she eked out a bare existence writing for northern and southern newspapers and periodicals. She worked occasionally as an editor for the New York *Family Journal*, *Woods' Household Magazine*, and *Demorest's Magazine*, but she never regained her prewar literary reputation or fulfilled the promise of her earlier years. In retrospect, we know that her postwar career languished because she failed to make the transition from "romantic" to "realistic" literature necessary to reaffirm her regional reputation with a national one. She blamed her decline largely on the northern reading public's lack of taste and the cliquishness of northern writers, editors, and publishers in pandering to that public. Yet she knew, too, that her work had deteriorated in quality. She had become a hack, forced to turn out manuscripts in order to help feed and shelter her aged mother. "I have written when sick in bed," she confided to her old friend Paul Hayne in 1872, "written when I have been nursing the sick of my family, written when I have been bowed down by grief caused by death in my family, written when I have been moving, written when I have been cooking and sweeping and dusting. Can you wonder sometimes that I have written so badly?"²⁴

Finding no audience for the type of stories and satires that had launched her career, she became disillusioned by the present and pessimistic about the future. As the first heavy clouds of winter closed over New York in 1878, she reminisced about the past. "Occasionally," she told Hayne, "I have a glimpse of one of your poems, which always sets me to thinking, and carries me back to the long ago, when I treasured up all your poems And what have all those years, since that day brought us?" He was sick and dying far from their native Charleston; she was "plodding through snow and rain," "chained to the oars of labor in a dirty office, earning scarcely enough to keep above want . . ." ²⁵

When and where Essie Cheesborough gave up her battle is unknown. She was living at New York in 1887, at age 61. She hoped at that time to move to a rural village or town and to establish a school or work as a tutor. A sad end for a lady who had been hailed as one of the South's brightest rising literary stars. Hers had been a promising career drawn to a premature close by war and new literary fashions. We have few

²³ Cheesborough to Hayne, Dec. 24, 1866, Hayne Papers.

²⁴ Cheesborough to Hayne, Sept. 16, 1872, Hayne Papers.

²⁵ Cheesborough to Hayne, Nov. 23, 1878, Hayne Papers.

souvenirs of her life and only a hint of the sadness and frustration that underlie it. It is a life that began with energy and hope; it very likely closed in a morose and shabby flat on West 14th Street. One senses that Cheesborough wrote her own epitaph long before the end. At the height of her fame, she again revealed part of herself in the person of that unfortunate lady Evelyn St. Clair. "There are some people whose inner life we always feel a wish to peer into," Cheesborough had written, "whose heart revelations we ever desire to know, and it is with a feeling of no ordinary disappointment we see them sink into the silence of the tomb, with the leaves of their heart still closely folded — sealed for this world but opened in the next."²⁶ Even in death, Evelyn St. Clair provided the author's vision of her own fate.

²⁶ Cheesborough, "Evelyn St. Clair," p. 1.