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TRADITIONAL BELLES OR BORDERLINE BLUESTOCKINGS? THE PETIGRU WOMEN

WILLIAM H. PEASE AND JANE H. PEASE*

IN 1841 TWO PSEUDONYMOUS CAROLINIANS CROSSED SWORDS in the *Charleston Courier* as they debated the education that Charleston offered its young ladies. "Eugene" concluded that it produced women of intellectual vapidty. But "Pickwick" defended the city's belles who, in his estimation, "read well, dance well and converse as brilliantly as your Boston favorites" but who, unlike the Yankee women to whom he compared them, "are not as 'blue,' . . . they make less parade of their attainments."¹ This interchange encapsulated a persistent battle of stereotypes that though it admitted of striking exceptions like Louisa Cheves McCord, the brilliant essayists who published her political and economic analyses in *DeBow's Review*, still pitted theoretical extremes of empty-headed Southern ladies against arid Northern bluestockings. While neither stereotype holds up in light of recent scholarship,² the extended correspondence among members of the Petigru family casts further doubt on an hypothesized uniformity of reading among Southern ladies and on regionally defined intellectual differences among educated antebellum American women.

Who were these Petigrus—other than the nineteenth-century descendants of Louise Gibert Pettigrew, the daughter of the Huguenot minister who had left her Badwell, the Abbeville district farm that became her family's homestead?³ The prosperity of her five daughters, born between 1800 and 1816, ranged from the luxurious wealth Adele, who married fabled low-country rice planter Robert F. W. Allston, enjoyed to the

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¹*Charleston Courier*, August 11, 19, 1841.

²Although the literature on women's writing is more abundant, their reading has also attracted scholarly attention. Among the most revealing work about what and how women read are Mary Kelly, "Reading Women/Women Reading: The Making of Learned Women in Antebellum America," *Journal of American History*, LXXXIII (September 1996), 401-424; Barbara Sicherman, "Sense and Sensibility. A Case Study of Women's Reading in Late-Victorian America," in Cathy N. Davidson, ed., *Readings in America: Literature and Social History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 201-225; and D. R. Woolf, "A Feminine Past? Gender, Genre, and Historical Knowledge in England, 1500-1800," *American Historical Review*, CII (June 1997), 645-79.

³Jane H. Pease and William H. Pease, *A Family of Women: The Carolina Petigrus in Peace and War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999) gives a full account of the nineteenth-century Petigru women.

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prolonged struggle that widowed Jane North waged to make Badwell something more than an upcountry farm. The fortunes of the next generation were equally varied. Jane's eldest daughter Caroline married a Pettigrew cousin whose vast low-country North Carolina plantation promised more than it ever delivered. Her youngest remained unmarried and largely dependent on kin until, at age 49, she married Adele's son Benjamin, by then an impoverished small-town cleric. But despite their varied fates, all were avid readers. Of the daughters of James Petigru, Louise's most talented son, who changed the spelling of the family name, one, despite their mother's minimal intellectual interests, became a published author, and the other collected an extraordinary personal library. And of the third generation, who largely came of age during the financially grim post Civil War years, half employed the wide reading that had shaped their education at home to support themselves by teaching. Not all Petigrus, however, were so avid. The daughter of Thomas Petigru, like her mother, read almost nothing. Accordingly, there was a significant variation among the twenty-five Petigru women whose reading can be traced in family correspondence and other personal documents.

Regardless of the diligence or the dilatoriness of their reading, local and national newspapers came regularly to their homes. Charleston's *Courier* and *Mercury* brought news of foreign wars and national politics as well as of the doings of local government. Whig editorializing and additional national news came regularly to Badwell via the *National Intelligencer* published in Washington. At Chicora Wood, the Allston plantation north of Georgetown, the reading table was laden with monthlies and quarterlies, among them Adele's favorite, the British *Cornhill Magazine*. In the 1850s, almost all the Petigrus, staunch partisans of Southern culture, subscribed to Charleston's *Russell's Magazine*, which they balanced with that new northern favorite, *Harper's Magazine*.⁴

These periodicals, like many of their books, were constantly at hand as much to relieve the boredom of plantation life as the ennui of the city. But they were far more than a source of simple amusement or current information, for they also enabled the women who read them both to forward their own ongoing education and to supplement that of their children, whom they taught, in part or in whole, at home. As a result, although they read for themselves, they also made reading a kind of family activity. One kinswoman might pass on to another the title of a book she had especially enjoyed or she

⁴Because references to specific publications are so numerous in their correspondence, only substantive observations and direct quotations are cited here. The Robert Francis Withers Allston Papers and the Vanderhorst Family papers in the South Carolina Historical Society and the Pettigrew Family Papers in the Southern Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill all contain major collections of Petigru family correspondence.



Carolina Petigru at age eighteen. Thomas Sully portrait reproduced in *Life, Letters, and Speeches of James Louis Petigru: The Union Man of South Carolina* by James Petigru Carson, 1920.

might send the book itself as a present. Not infrequently when she visited she brought along books likely to interest her hostess. If she had profited significantly from a book or article she wished to keep, she could summarize it in a letter. In letters to country cousins Charlestonians praised or condemned the new works to which as city dwellers they had first access. But whether town folk or rural residents, most of them built personal libraries for their own pleasure, for the edification of their family circle, and for their children's education.

Caroline North Pettigrew demonstrated the value attached to an extensive home library. When, in 1860, an Easter Sunday fire destroyed the big house at Bonarva, the North Carolina plantation on which she spent most of her married life, it was stopped before it reached the outbuilding in which a collection begun by her husband's clergyman grandfather was stored. To it her husband, like his father and his well-educated brothers, had all added generously over the years. Because Carey, as she was always called, had never before gone through those books systematically, she was first startled and then so elated to find that, as a whole, they constituted so good a "beginning for a capital library" that she determined to make room for them all in the new house that she and Charles built the next year.

Orderly person that she was, she organized the books by type and subject, "histories, biographies, romances all distinct." Then in each she pasted a neat bookplate. Moreover, as she worked her way through hundreds of volumes, she was impressed not only by their range but at "how many valuable ones" were in the collection.⁵

Sheer love of books was as much a spur to collecting them as rural isolation. In Charleston Caroline Carson, surrounded from childhood by her father's enviable legal and personal library, emulated his bibliophilia. Later, her omnivorous reading was driven by the lonely years she spent at Dean Hall, her husband's Cooper River rice plantation. Miserable in marriage, she found in books the vehicles to analyze her life. From her mid-twenties to her late thirties, she filled her commonplace books with extended quotations from literature, history, philosophy, and theology. That diversity of reading remained constant after she returned to her parents' Charleston home. When it burned in 1861, the partial list of her losses, which she compiled from memory, was—and still is—an impressive catalogue of a sophisticated private library in three languages. The French she had learned so well as a child allowed her to devour the French classics, ranging from the philosophical writings of Bossuet and Pascal to the plays of Moliere and Racine. Her specially prized thirty-volume collection of French memoirs and other documents had provided an ongoing source for serious and systematic historical study, while her French dictionaries and grammars constituted a utilitarian reference collection. The notation, "many French novels," testifies that titles too numerous to list provided her ample reading for sheer pleasure.

By the late 1840s Caroline had mastered the Italian that enabled her to read Machiavelli in the original and to render her own English translations of Dante in poetic form. Though doing that was her prime reason for studying the language, she also read more modern works ranging from Alfieri's eighteenth-century poetry to the political and philosophical writings of her contemporary, Gioberti. And for fun, there were also "many Italian novels" to remember and list separately. Her collection of English classics ranged from the Puritan writings of Milton and Bunyan—all the Petigrus seem to have read *Pilgrim's Progress* in their childhoods—to Pope's eighteenth-century satires and the nineteenth-century romantic poetry of Wordsworth and Tennyson. Her good friend and distant cousin William Porcher Miles gave her books in Latin, which, thanks to private tutoring by a Charleston priest, she had learned to read easily. But German authors drove her to translations. Heine and Schiller were represented in her library

⁵Caroline North Pettigrew to James Johnston Pettigrew, February 3, 1859 and same to Louise Gibert North Allston, August 8, 1861, Pettigrew Family Papers (hereinafter PFP).

only in their English versions.⁶

The scope of Caroline's bookish enthusiasm was exceptional even among her unusually literate kinswomen. But it was by no means unique. Upcountry at Badwell, her widowed Aunt Jane North made books the staff of life albeit her limited purse and her remoteness from Charleston bookstores precluded her building so extensive and varied a collection. And Adele Allston, a plantation mistress who could afford to spend long periods in Charleston, had the resources of the leading center of bookselling in the Southeast to satisfy her intellectual hunger. When she found that she "could lay out some hundred dollars. . . with all ease and pleasure," she wrote her husband after one trip to Babcock's bookstore that she "was shocked to see how easily money slips thro' ones fingers." Even so, when she had to choose between books and china, she laid out all she "had to spare in books." For her sisters and nieces who lived in Charleston, the Library Society provided a less expensive alternative to book buying. Although the venerable Society admitted only men to membership, it did allow ladies introduced by those gentlemen to borrow books. Fortunately, the Pettigru women were related to three such gentlemen: James Pettigru, Henry Lesesne, and Mitchell King.⁷

However they got their books, they read sometimes quietly and alone, sometimes with others. A family tradition that combined manual labor with mental nourishment went back to Louise Gibert Pettigrew, whose "happiest" hours were spent sewing while her eldest son read to her. Doubtless she, like her daughters after her, intended such reading to serve multiple purposes. Mothers and children read together to develop the youngsters' skills and broaden their interests. Wives and husbands read together to create a world of shared ideas that strengthened marriage bonds. Sisters and cousins read to each other to pass the time while they did daytime tasks or to enliven evenings devoted to fancywork. On Monday evenings during coastal North Carolina's cool winter months, Carey Pettigrew and her guests trudged to nearby Somerset Place where neighbors took turns reading aloud. And in Charleston, adolescent Harriette Pettigru joined a more formally structured circle that met on Saturday evenings to read French comedies in the original—and, under the guidance of author Caroline Gilman, to translate what needed to be translated. But whether they read with the introspection that Caroline Carson recorded in her commonplace books or in groups designed to encourage meaningful

⁶Caroline Carson, List of Things Lost in the 1861 Fire, Vanderhorst Family Papers (hereinafter VFP). Her commonplace albums are in the South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia.

⁷Adele Pettigru Allston to Robert F. W. Allston, R. F. W. Allston Papers, (hereinafter RFWAP). Charleston Library Society, Membership Records, Charleston Library Society.



Adele Petigru Allston. From the Collections of the South Carolina Historical Society.

conversation or facility in a foreign language, they expanded their horizons and reflected on what they learned. As Adele Allston advised her son, "Good books and good society are the only means . . . for refining the taste and elevating the character."⁸

What the women read, when and how often they read, and what they derived from that reading largely defined the scope of their intellectual worlds. Nonetheless, each of Louise Gibert Pettigrew's daughters had a distinctive approach to reading that either bounded or enlarged that scope. Jane North, especially after she turned fifty and her eyeglasses did not fully compensate for failing eyesight, more frequently called on young relatives to read to her. In so doing, she led them toward her own relentless cultivation of broad interests, which encompassed scientific works as well as history and literature. Louise Porcher, who read equally seriously, read

⁸Jane Petigru North to [Robert F. W. Allston], n.d., RFWAP. Caroline North Pettigrew to Mary North, March 9, [1856], to Jane Petigru North, January 8, 1857, and to Louise North, March 7, 1857, PFP. Harriette Petigru to Adele Petigru Allston, August 27, 1834, RFWAP. Quotation in Adele Petigru Allston to Benjamin Allston, July 17, 1859, RFWAP.

much more narrowly. Like Mary Petigru, who was still less wide-ranging, she focused on the Bible, biblical commentary, and sermons. Harriette Lesesne, who read less than any of her four older sisters, gave stricter attention to writings on health. All told, however, it was Jane and Adele who, in their generation, cultivated their minds most avidly and most ardently pressed their children to read both intensively and extensively. By contrast, the women who married Louise Pettigrew's sons read less than any of her daughters. Jane Amelia Petigru amused herself with nothing but novels. And, if her letters tell the tale, Ann Petigru read not at all except when she was part of the inescapable evening reading circle at Badwell.

Similar variations recurred in the next generation. Of Jane North's three daughters, Carey Pettigrew, the eldest, most clearly inherited her mother's passion for books, especially history, biography, and serious fiction. Lou Allston was also a constant, though less insistent, reader. But Minnie Allston, the middle daughter, seldom found time for books, particularly after she married and left her mother's roof. And of all Adele Allston's children, only Bessie Pringle read as avidly as her mother—and that only after she was a woman grown. Her sister Della Vanderhorst, once she escaped her mother's oversight, contented herself with novels. And Jinty Hill, if her letters be a guide, rarely read much of anything. So, of all her cousins, Caroline Carson was clearly the most intellectually wide-ranging while her rebellious younger sister, Sue King, boasted that since childhood she had devoured French and English novels but scorned all else. The interests of Mary Anna Porcher, the only one of Louise Porcher's daughters who wrote about her reading, stretched from books on the Holy Land, to which she traveled in 1859, to Thackeray's most spicy novels. And Ann Petigru's daughter Mattie, except when she was under her Aunt Jane North's roof, read as little as her mother.

Unfortunately, even those who read much left few comments about what they read and their reaction to it. Although religion played a central role in the lives of most of them, their observations on their Biblical or theological reading are sparse. Reared as they all had been in the mainstream of Protestant Christianity and frequenters of either Episcopal or Presbyterian services, they regularly read or heard Biblical passages in church and in home prayer. But their letters record no discussion of those texts, though they sometimes comment briefly on the topic and quality of a sermon. Most likely this silence reflects a Christian heritage too ingrained to provoke much discussion. Indeed, except for Mary Petigru and Louise Porcher, they seldom introduced the subject of religion into their letters other than a prayer in time of distress or a passing reference to a specific church service. Even Caroline Carson's commonplace books, which contain excerpts from published sermons, never quote the Bible. And, although Adele Allston's diaries are full of religious torment, she never directly quoted Holy Scripture.

The women's comments on their secular reading are only minimally fuller and merely hint at the intellectual context within which they placed the reading they mentioned. When they did assess a particular book, they more frequently linked it to their own experiences than to other literary portrayals. Therefore it is the scope of what they read that best delineates that context. Because only a few of them read Latin and none read Greek, their knowledge of the ancient world was definitely more restricted than that of their well-educated male contemporaries, whose classical education was rooted in language study. Nonetheless, all Petigru children were introduced to Greece and Rome through Plutarch's *Lives*. The Roman author's short biographies portrayed no hero without his flaws, no villain without his redeeming qualities, and no women at all. It was, therefore, scarcely surprising that little Louly Porcher enjoyed them only "tolerably," for Plutarch's world was confined to powerful men who were guided by complex motives and contorted social mores as they acted on issues of state. Probably neither Louly nor most of her cousins were conscious that reading these "lives" was intended to provide them psychological and moral lessons as much as to introduce them to classical heroes and villains. But their elders doubtless pressed those lessons home as firmly as did Aesop's Fables, whose one-line concluding morals could never be ignored. Aesop's lessons, however, at least in the case of Sue King, also fed the cynicism so often at the heart of her own novels and stories in which a wise but powerless woman punctured the fustian of a villainous man only to realize that hers was but a temporary victory. Still Aesop's frog who exploded in attempting to become an ox and thereby demonstrated that "self-conceit may lead to self-destruction," provided King a theme for several fictions.⁹

French, the foreign language that most of the first generation and all of the second studied, and Italian, which far fewer of them mastered, introduced many of the Petigru women to the substance of classical drama. Although they could read neither Sophocles nor Euripides in Greek, they could and did read Corneille's *Polyeucte*, Racine's *Phedre*, and Alfieri's *Antigone*. Similarly, though they were not drilled in Virgil's *Aeneid* as their male kin were, they read a translation of Homer's *Odyssey* that Jane North made a staple in her daughters' and their cousins' education. Penelope's fidelity to

⁹Louise Porcher [jr.] to Louise Petigru Porcher, August 8, 1856, Porcher Family Papers, South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina. Joseph Jacob, trans., "Aesop's Fables" in *Folk-Lore and Fable* (Harvard Classics, XVII [New York: P. F. Collier & Son, c.1909, 1937]), 20. For King's stories with Aesopian morals, see, for instance, "A Male Flirt," in *Sylvia's World. Crimes which the Law Does not Reach* (New York: Derby & Jackson, 1859), 227-257 and, somewhat less overtly, Jane H. Pease and William H. Pease, eds., *Lily. A Novel and Gerald Gray's Wife* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993).

her husband, like Telemachus's loyalty to his father, was, she observed when eighteen-year-old Minnie North read it aloud to fifteen-year-old Phil Porcher, a "wholesome influence."¹⁰ Even Odysseus's explicit sexual ventures and Circe's hot lust were encountered without apparently producing either embarrassment or comment—certainly not censorship.

To learn about Roman history the young women were directed neither to Livy nor Tacitus but to Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, teeming though it was with eighteenth-century anticlericalism. Amusingly, Gibbon's atheism was allegedly so dangerous that pupils at Caroline Petigru's New York finishing school were forbidden to read his books because Mme. Binse insisted that "it is impossible to read [him]. . . without being injured." Nonetheless, when Minnie North read the *Decline and Fall* in 1855, she concluded that, although its author "sneer[ed] too constantly at Christianity," his work was "very grand." Even Louise Porcher, despite her staunch commitment to evangelical Protestantism, read Gibbon aloud with her eighteen-year-old daughter. And when Carey Pettigrew read the *Decline* aloud with her devoutly Episcopalian sister-in-law, she praised it as a worked that helped "enlarge one's interests, instead of narrowing" them.¹¹

This enlargement of perspective was the primary goal in the Petigrus' reading modern history for, as Barbara Sicherman put it, that history "encouraged vital engagement with the world."¹² For mid-nineteenth-century Southern women that world was centered in western European history, for it was England and France that they studied most intensively. The adults especially enjoyed—and assigned to their children—Archibald Alison's four-volume *History of Europe*. Conservative in his interpretations and assessments, Alison built his narrative on the outspoken premise that religion was the central and essential guardian of moral values. He condemned all expediency regardless of its outcome. Not surprisingly, his history, like Plutarch's, was the history of great men—but he assigned true greatness only to those who put public weal above private self-interest. Consequently, because he used men's private lives and personal characteristics as keys to their public actions and the events they precipitated, Alison embedded a clear moral in the body of his narrative. But he also elaborated it as explicitly as Aesop, describing the French Revolution, for example, as "not so much a revolt against the government and institutions"

¹⁰Jane Petigru North to Adele Petigru Allston, September 17, 1850, AP-SCHS.

¹¹Mary Middleton to Elizabeth Middleton, April 25, 1837, Middleton Place Papers, microfiche, South Carolina Historical Society. Mary North to Caroline North Pettigrew, January 5, [1855] and Caroline North Pettigrew to Louise North, April 19, 1855, both PFP.

¹²Barbara Sicherman, "Sense and Sensibility," 215.

as a rejection of the "morality and faith of former times. . . . The old restraints of precept, duty, religion, were to be abolished" in favor of "the rule of action. . . not what is right, but what is agreeable; not what duty enjoins, but what passion desires."¹³

Their reliance on Alison as a basic text set a stage somewhat at odds with the Petigrus' enthusiastic reception of Thomas Carlyle's *French Revolution*, a work that chronicled not how revolution destroyed religious restraint but rather how the monarchy fell in part because the dissipations of the Old Regime had already subverted Catholic faith. For one distant cousin at least, Carlyle's argument undermined Alison's praise of the intertwined conservatism of the Catholic church and the Bourbon monarchy. Furthermore, Mary Blount Pettigrew was so mightily offended by the Spanish Catholic misrule that John Lothrop Motley portrayed in the *Rise of the Dutch Republic* that she had to interrupt her reading of it with more "soothing books." "Was there ever three volumes more replete with horrors?" she sputtered. "I cant stand so many shocking things continuously."¹⁴ But righteous indignation did not, in the end, turn any of the Petigru women away from serious reading of European history. Nor was that reading limited to conservative texts. Carey Pettigrew tackled Jean de Sismondi's moderately liberal *History of the Italian Republics in the Middle Ages* with verve. Caroline Carson ventured into Adolphe Thiers's liberal twenty-volume *History of the Consulate and the Empire*. And Lou North's interests drove her to undertake Voltaire's *History of Charles XII of Sweden*.

No history, however, grabbed the Petigrus' attention more firmly than that of England. They shared the special pleasure that many Southern women took in Thomas Babington Macaulay's four-volume *History of England from the Accession of James II*. Perhaps it was his fast-paced, readable style that made him a favorite, for Adele Allston found his history "as interesting as a novel." The author was simply "a beautiful writer, his style . . . polished, and his descriptions spirited." And like other favorites he taught a clear moral lesson. "One must be strangely inconsiderate," she advised her eldest son, "who reads history without observing how surely the wicked and faithless are overtaken by their sin—sooner or later."¹⁵ In addition, although Macaulay's history was written within a Whiggish great-man format, it necessarily dealt at length with three privileged women. It praised Queen Mary, the loyal wife and genealogical legitimizer

¹³Archibald Alison, *History of Europe from the Commencement of the French Revolution in 1789 to the Restoration of the Bourbons in 1815* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1844), IV:129.

¹⁴Mary Blount Pettigrew to Caroline North Pettigrew, n.d., PF-SHC-UNC.

¹⁵Adele Petigru Allston to Benjamin Allston, July 17, 1849, AP-SCHS.

for William of Orange's claim to the English throne; and damned Queen Anne as a stupid, dull woman who was easily manipulated by the sinister Duchess of Marlborough, ambitious for her husband's political advancement. That interest in women's history was confirmed by the several Petigru women who not only plodded through Agnes Strickland's heavy-footed annals, *The Lives of the Queens of England from the Norman Conquest; with Anecdotes of their Courts*; but enjoyed it enough to recommend it to others.

However familiar with the ancient history of Greece and Rome and the modern history of Europe they were, the Petigru women read almost no history of the United States. Doubtless the paucity of American historical writing before the Civil War contributed to their apparent uninterest. Yet even George Bancroft's lively ten-volume *History of the United States*, which began publication in 1834 and appeared, volume by volume, until 1874, failed to capture their imaginations. Indeed, there is no evidence that any of them read beyond the first two volumes, which dealt with the colonial era. Perhaps Bancroft's exuberant democratic perspective was the prime obstacle. Certainly his "defense of the equal rights of man," elaborated in an ardent celebration of a nation where "every man may enjoy the fruits of his industry; every mind is free to publish its convictions," comported ill with a slaveholding society. Nor was it likely that his praise of those New England values that promoted the tariffs South Carolina had fought by nullification and the abolitionism that threatened the state's economy would sit well with Southerners. Surely Carolinians might doubt Bancroft's portrayal of early Yankees as "a class of men as remarkable for their qualities and their influence on public happiness, as any by which the human race has ever been diversified."¹⁶

On the other hand, at least three Petigru women read William Hickling Prescott's *History of the Conquest of Mexico*. Perhaps their enthusiasm was fanned by its publication in 1843 just when the politics of annexing Texas and a possible war with Mexico were major public issues. Mary Blount Pettigrew, who read it before the Mexican war began, found the book "very interesting" for its "remarkable descriptions of the early inhabitants," who were so "totally different from any thing [she] had conceived before."¹⁷ And after the war began she continued to read on Mexican topics. When the fighting was at its height, she was engrossed in the memoirs of Madame Calderone de la Barca, the English wife of a Spanish diplomat, who had lived in Mexico for two years. Somewhat later, when she picked up Prescott's *Conquest of Peru*, Mary Blount expanded her Latin American interests still further. Prescott's interpretation was made particularly

¹⁶George Bancroft, *History of the United States from the Discovery of the American Continent* (20th ed. Boston: Little Brown, 1868), I:1, 338.

¹⁷Mary Blount Pettigrew to William S. Pettigrew, September 16, 1844, PFP.

attractive to her by his anti-Catholic, anti-Spanish stance on which he stood firmly with Motley and Macaulay. Where he differed from them was in his ambivalent judgments about European colonization. On the one hand, he treated the various clans of indigenous Mexicans respectfully and deplored their culture's destruction. On the other, he drove home his anti-presentist decision not to apply a nineteenth-century "advance in speculative morality" to sixteenth-century atrocities. His ambiguity, however, created no barrier to admiration for his work. Jane North in comparing him favorably with Motley's overlapping and brilliant treatment of Spain, clearly preferred Prescott, though she justified that preference facetiously as the judgment of "an old fogey."¹⁸

Although they discussed non-fiction more frequently than fiction in their letters, the Petigrus all read, enjoyed, and learned from a vast array of novels, romances, and other stories. Even under the Huguenot shadow at Badwell, the books that were read aloud for entertainment were generally novels. For a reading circle as for a woman reading alone, these stories sparked reveries of other places and different times. Yet escapist or not, reading long nineteenth-century novels aloud over the course of many evenings must have involved their readers deeply in the narrative and promoted discussions about various characters' motivations and the wisdom or folly of their responses to the events molding their lives.

That much of the fiction the Petigrus read had little literary merit is not surprising, for they all, at least some of the time, read for pure diversion. Lady Marguerite Blessington's stories, for example, spiced by the author's scandalous life as the child of an army officer, the wife of an English count, and the mistress of her stepdaughter's husband, were wonderfully romantic. Even though Jane North deplored both the style and the characters in Blessington's *Victims of Society*, she nevertheless read it, as did her sisters Adele Allston and Harriette Lesesne. Nonetheless, she felt obliged to excuse her interest as sympathy for the victims of the immorality there portrayed. The awfulness of their lives would surely deter "the greater number among women" from any desire for "companionship with the tainted."¹⁹

If one suspects that Jane North sheltered her young daughters from the likes of Lady Blessington, she probably encouraged their reading books like Susan Ferrier's *Marriage*. Here the author pitted three types of marriage against each other. There was the loveless marriage for wealth and position; the hasty mating in the excitement of momentary physical passion; and the

¹⁸William Hickling Prescott, *History of the Conquest of Mexico*. . . (New York: Modern Library, 1936), 351. Jane Petigru North to Caroline North Pettigrew, February 27, 1857, PFP.

¹⁹Jane Petigru North to Adele Petigru Allston, September 6, 1837, RFWAP.

lastingly happy matrimony of people who shared similar values and social backgrounds. Though the plot was an improbable brew and the characters unbelievable caricatures of barbarian Scottish lairds in conflict with polished English lords and greedy women confronted by angelically virtuous girls—still, *Marriage's* implausible coincidences allowed young imaginations to wax romantic while they imbibed the author's relentless moralizing. It made enough of an impression on Minnie North that she remembered its characters as an adult. What she remembered best, however, was the comic Scottish maiden lady aptly named Miss Grizzly Douglas. The fantasizing she had nourished with such romances was, in fact, habit forming. Long out of her teens, Minnie still read and enjoyed the saccharine prolixity of Catherine Gore.

By contrast there is little evidence that the Petigru women read many domestic novels, that genre which combined pale romance with the conventions of domesticity. None of the Charleston cousins commented on their neighbor Caroline Gilman's fiction even though they knew the author. But in North Carolina fifteen-year-old Mary Blount Pettigrew did read and was delighted by her *Southern Matron*. Perhaps domestic novels required the salt of unfamiliarity to attract attention. The only ones that the Petigru women discussed extensively among themselves were those of Frederica Bremer. Both *Home* and *The Neighbors* were somewhat exotic, set as they were in the author's native Sweden and drawing their characters from the minor gentry. Yet Jane North agreed with her distant cousin William Pettigrew that "few literary females . . . would make good wives, but Miss Bremer must be one of the few."²⁰ *The Neighbors* excelled even *Home* in portraying affection between spouses, validating youth's responsibility toward elders, and—perhaps why Bremer attracted where American domestic novelists did not—in condemning that education which prepared young women for domestic life at the expense of music and literature. Significantly, Bremer's sympathetic treatment of the dark-skinned mistress of *The Neighbors'* Byronic hero and her accompanying critique of slavery provoked no comment.

On the whole the Petigru women showed little interest in the "homely moral tales of everyday middle-class life." But none scorned them as acidly as did Sue King, who called the authors of such tales "Nell Noodles and Poll Poodles," and "budding, nursling vestals at the shrine of Poetry and Prose."²¹ King's own novels were transparent though fictionalized portrayals of her real-life impatience with the restrictive proprieties that governed the behavior of proper Southern ladies. Mirroring her personal rebellion as

²⁰William S. Pettigrew to Mary Blount Pettigrew, September 11, 1843, PFP.

²¹Helen W. 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: Harpers, 1955), 42. King, *Lily: A Novel*, 136-137.

they did, they were less a source of family pride than of overt disapproval and inner discomfort. Of all her cousins, only Carey North, who as an adolescent cherished authorial aspirations, admired Sue's accomplishments. But when she revealed those aspirations to her mother, Jane promptly deflated her daughter's hubris. Just as she should excel in matters of deportment, so writing, like reading, spelling, and ciphering, should receive diligent attention. That was all. Years later, when Carey reread her mother's advice, she added the marginal note: "My ambition to write a *book* was excited by hearing that Sue had written a story. . . . Poor foolish child that I was." Still, that "foolish" ambition kept her from passing the harsh judgments that her aunts and cousins lavished on Sue's caustic social commentary. More typical of family response was Aunt Louise Porcher's judgment that Sue's early stories were mere "*trash*" and her first book only a transitory success that in the long run would make her niece "more unpopular than ever."²²

King's novels and stories were, however, among the few pieces of American literature that her aunts and cousins read, for they were no more drawn to it than to American history. They did, to be sure, dabble in the work of authors with local ties. Adele Allston probably read Carolinian William Gilmore Simms's rough and ready frontier tale *Guy Rivers* after a friend recommended it highly. Minnie North Allston very likely read Edgar Allen Poe's "Gold Bug" if only because it was set on Sullivans Island; but a gift of Poe's complete works so "disgusted" her with its "odour of Intemperance" that she could not get beyond two or three ghastly stories."²³ The writings of the New England Renaissance, on the other hand, were virtually a closed book to all of them. No extant letter mentions Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, Henry David Thoreau, or any of the minor transcendentalists. The only recorded encounter with Nathaniel Hawthorne was Carey North's receipt of his *Twice Told Tales* as a gift. And had not an Allston horse been named Typee, there would not be even a hint that any Petigru had ever heard of Herman Melville. Surprisingly, however, Jane North and her daughter Lou read Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1858 and found it not only "engrossingly interesting" but so very natural that it struck them as "true."²⁴

Like their favorite history, the Petigrus' favorite literature came from England. As did their fellow countrymen, North and South, they read Sir Walter Scott's romantic novels and poetry. In *Quentin Durwood* they

²²Jane Petigru North to Caroline North, March 11, [1845?], PFP. Louise Petigru Porcher to Adele Petigru Allston, October 15, 1849 and November 25, [1853], RFWAP.

²³Mary North Allston to Caroline North Pettigrew, August 6, [1859], PFP.

²⁴Louise North to Caroline North Pettigrew, February 15, 1858, PFP.

followed a heroic Scottish knight as he rescued the fair countess Isabelle de Coyne from a forced dynastic marriage to a vile brute, thereby foiling the political ambitions of Charles the Bold of Normandy. *Waverly* and *Old Mortality* added fictional zest to the familiar politico-religious struggles of Protestant William and Mary against Catholic James II, a story they knew well from Macaulay's histories. And if *Ivanhoe* suggested the jousts and tournaments with which romantic young Southern men mimicked medieval quests for love and honor, it also inspired Petigru girls in the charades and tableaux vivantes with which they sparked evening parties.

Some of their favorite English novels, however, were far removed from such fancies. Like Northerners, Petigru women read Charles Dickens's tales of lower and middle-class urban life. In 1851 the entire Badwell household read *David Copperfield* together and concurred that it was his best so far. There was "so much truth and sadness and humour in the book, the pathetic and the ludicrous mingled curiously," as only Dickens had the skill to portray. *Barnaby Rudge* provided a rough introduction to the class hostilities of late eighteenth-century London's church and king riots, little mentioned in the histories they read. Perhaps this chronicle of an underclass manipulated by self-serving leaders and of mob violence directed against their betters' women as well as their property struck a familiar note of fear. Yet Jane North encouraged her daughters to read Dickens as "a great master of the human heart." So much a part of their everyday life did his books become that his characters furnished a family code. Minnie, for instance, needed nothing more to characterize a new acquaintance than her sister's likening him to "Mr. Furneydrop in Bleakhouse."²⁵

More than Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray mocked the ambitions and pretensions of the English middle class and minor gentry. As his novels appeared, they found special favor among the Petigrus. When the author himself visited Charleston on a lecture tour, they flocked to hear him. Even Mattie Petigru, generally a reluctant reader, rushed to the bookstore to buy *Vanity Fair* when it first went on sale in Charleston. She read it swiftly and then sent her copy to Adele Allston, who read it aloud with her vacationing family on Pawleys Island. Two summers later *Pendennis* became the centerpiece of evening reading at Badwell. At the North Carolina Pettigrews' Bonarva plantation, Carey read *The Newcomes* aloud to her husband as it appeared serially from 1853 to 1855. And during the Civil War *Henry Esmond* reinforced Southern pride with the saga of the legitimate heir to an English title who renounced his claim after a brilliant military career in Queen Anne's war and then migrated to Virginia where

²⁵Caroline North Pettigrew to Charles L. Pettigrew, July 11, [1851]; Jane Petigru North to Caroline North Pettigrew, February 8, [1849]; Mary North to Caroline North Pettigrew, December 17, 1854, all in PFP.

he became a planter. Mary Anna Porcher welcomed it doubly as a delicious escape from the realities of wartime Carolina.

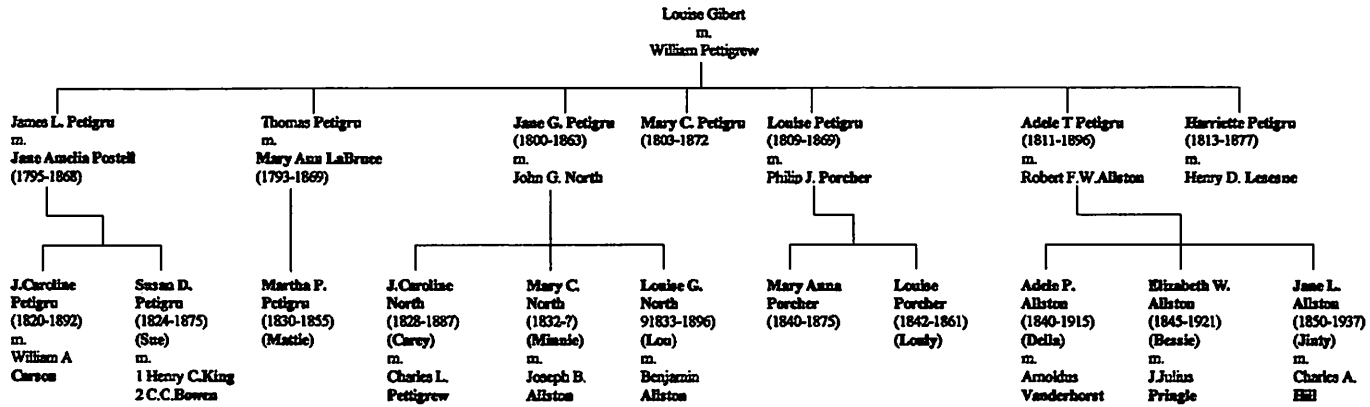
With Thackeray, Dickens, or Scott, the Petigru women followed their favorite authors through book after book. Others they only sampled. Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* and George Eliot's *Adam Bede*, both tales of working class life in which strong women played major roles, fascinated at least two households in which they were read aloud. So did the Bronte sisters' tales, though Jane North found *Wuthering Heights* unnatural and foolish. Indeed, in contrasting Emily and Charlotte Bronte's work, she seemed to imply that it was quite natural and sensible for Jane Eyre to sacrifice a fortune to a distant male cousin and then to marry an older man so maimed in mind and body that her married life was primarily that of a caretaker.

While novels and histories constituted the staples of the literary diet the family savored together, individuals had their own favorite authors. Both Caroline Carson and Adele Allston relied on Shakespeare for more than theatrical amusement. Caroline regularly read his comedies to calm anxiety and control depression and urged her sons to turn to his tragedies for moral guidance. Although at least twice she set about a systematic rereading of the entire Shakespearean oeuvre, Adele always valued the history plays highest for the insights they gave her into human motivation. Almost as much respected, though not as much read, John Milton was the preferred poet of both worldly Caroline Carson and pious Louise Porcher. Still more worldly Sue King especially enjoyed the froth of Owen Meredith's love poems. Jane North, who seldom read any poetry and confessed herself to be in the tiny minority of those who liked Longfellow's "Hiawatha," much preferred to read Alexander Humboldt's report on his South American ventures on the Orinoco River and John C. Fremont's survey of North America's western mountains.

Whatever their individual preferences, almost all the Petigru women valued books and enjoyed reading. When they were young, they revealed no conflict between their well-furnished minds and playing their parts as belles. And as adults even those who never let their language skills and intellectual interests lag were not known as bluestockings. Neither in youth nor in maturity did they hide their reliance on books to expand their understanding of their own lives and world and to educate their children. For the minority who traveled in Europe, their observations and reflections were informed by the histories and novels that had first introduced them to the places they visited. For those whose travels were limited to their own country, even their own region, those same books provided a familiarity with times long past and familiarized a world that stretched far beyond the Carolinas. For them books and journals, which offered an almost infinite source of learning and culture, were readily available. In dull times and

remote places, reading sparked their minds. When their surroundings were strange or disaster struck, reading comforted them. In all this the Petigrus differed more in particulars than in general pattern from well educated American women of their time. While, for instance, the Northern intellectual Margaret Fuller certainly read the Transcendentalists as no Petigrus did, her serious reading in French and Italian like her preference for British fiction resembled theirs albeit the specific texts they chose differed considerably. So too, Massachusetts born Frances Appleton, the future wife of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, read equally widely though by no means identically with either the somewhat older Fuller or any of the Petigrus. And Carolina born and bred Mary Boykin Chesnut's reading displayed similar likenesses and differences, able as no Petigrus was to keep up with Fuller's reading of German texts in the original. But for them all the constant presence of familiar books was like having "a friend in the next street." To lose even one of them, as Caroline Carson mourned after fire consumed her entire library, was simply "excruating."²⁶

²⁶Caroline Petigrus Carson to Edward Everett, June 25, 1864, VFP.



This table lists in bold type those women who are mentioned in the text. Other names are included only for genealogical continuity. Mary Blount Pettigrew, not included, was the sister-in-law of Carey North Pettigrew. For a fuller Petigru genealogy see the charts in Jane H. Pease and William H. Pease, *A Family of Women. The Carolina Petigru in Peace and War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 286-296.

"GREAT EVENTS HAVE TAKEN PLACE": THE CIVIL WAR DIARY OF ADELÈ ALLSTON VANDERHORST

EDITED BY PAMELA J. CLEMENTS*

ADELÈ ALLSTON, THE ELDEST DAUGHTER OF ROBERT F. W. Allston, like many other young women of the southern planter class, kept a diary during her teens and early adulthood, and despite the burdens of motherhood, at least to some extent throughout the rest of her life. This diary is interesting for several reasons. First, as the eldest daughter of Robert F. W. Allston, rice planter and governor of South Carolina (1856-1858), Adèle occupied a role at the apex of the antebellum plantocracy, and she witnessed the Civil War and Reconstruction along with her own coming of age. In addition, while many women's diaries from this era and class indicate ambivalence with the restrictive roles imposed by the "cult of true womanhood," Adèle's diary illuminates the life of a young woman who accepted her role of daughter, and then wife and mother, without question.

While the extant diary begins in 1859, with descriptions of plantation and townhouse life, Adèle's diary account intensifies with the coming of the war to Charleston, a time that coincided with her entry into society and her "belle" years, during which her main occupation was selecting a husband. After 1870, with her responsibilities mounting with each successive child, the diary entries become less frequent and much shorter, with the diary becoming more of an expanded account book than a personal journal. The section of the diary kept from 1859 to 1861, is clearly a schoolgirl effort. At first, Adèle writes ploddingly and without passion of parties, walks, and horseback riding with various suitors, none of whom seems overwhelmingly interesting to her; "pleasant" is the most common adjective in these early pages. The early years of the diary also dutifully record Adèle's examination of various social and moral lapses, indicating that her diary, along with that of her sister, was part of her at-home education. However, when the capture of Fort Sumter takes place in April of 1861, then nineteen-year-old Adèle is apparently electrified, along with the rest of the country. She begins to discuss current events in greater detail, showing how the war is affecting her; at the same time she begins to measure her suitors more seriously. For that reason, I have excerpted the section from South Carolina's 1861 entry into the war to 1870, when the character of Adèle's diary changes considerably.

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