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Civil War Wives: The Lives and Times of Angelina Grimke Weld, Varina Howell Davis, and Julia Dent Grant (Borzoi Books)

Carol Berkin

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Here are the life stories of three women who connect us to our national past and provide windows onto a social and political landscape that is strangely familiar yet shockingly foreign.

Berkin focuses on three “accidental heroes” who left behind sufficient records to allow their voices to be heard clearly and to allow us to see the world as they did. Though they held no political power themselves, all three had access to power and unique perspectives on events of their time.

Angelina Grimké Weld, after a painful internal dialogue, renounced the values of her Southern family’s way of life and embraced the antislavery movement, but found her voice silenced by marriage to fellow reformer Theodore Weld. Varina Howell Davis had an independent mind and spirit but incurred the disapproval of her husband, Jefferson Davis, when she would not behave as an obedient wife. Though ill-prepared and ill-suited for her role as First Lady of the Confederacy, she became an expert political lobbyist for her husband’s release from prison. Julia Dent Grant, the wife of Ulysses S. Grant, was a model of genteel domesticity who seemed content with the restrictions of marriage and motherhood, even though they led to alternating periods of fame and disgrace, wealth and poverty. Only late in life did she glimpse the price of dependency.

Throughout, Berkin captures the tensions and animosities of the antebellum era and the disruptions, anxieties, and dislocations generated by the war and its aftermath.

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