

## "An Infinite Variety: Forms of Women's Autobiography"

by  
Suzanne L. Bunkers

Over the past fifteen to twenty years, scholars have begun an intensive re-examination of the lives of women. Autobiographical works by women, past and present, have become a central part of this re-examination because women's stories, recorded in a variety of forms, provide the most accurate assessment of what women's lives were and are like.

As a teacher of courses on autobiography, I have done extensive reading of autobiographical works by women: diaries and journals, letters, memoirs, and formal autobiographies. My current research involves the study of unpublished diaries and journals written by nineteenth-century women in Minnesota, Iowa, and Wisconsin. Funded by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, I am completing a book-length critical study of the private texts of approximately 100 of these women; and I am preparing the diary of one woman, Caroline Seabury of St. Paul, for publication by the University of Wisconsin press in 1988.

My research and reading have shown me that women did not write their autobiographies in any one form. In fact, relatively few women have written an "autobiography proper," defined by critic Roy Pascal as a narrative which "involves the reconstruction of the movement of a life, or part of a life, in the actual circumstances in which it was lived" and which accurately renders a "coherent shaping of the past," establishing a "consistency of relationship between the self and the outside world" (5-9). Many more women have written in what have been termed "nontraditional" autobiographical forms—the diary or journal, the letter, the oral autobiography, the memoir, and the daybook. Once we begin to study the splendid variety of stories written by women about their lives, we realize that Pascal's definition of autobiography (formulated almost exclusively on autobiographical forms used by men) needs to be expanded. Emphasis needs to be shifted away from "autobiography proper" toward a continuum of *forms* of autobiography, each characterized by its own aspects and all included under the genre's umbrella.

Such a shift in emphasis will help us to account for the existence of tens of thousands of autobiographical materials, many written day by day with no editor except the writer herself or himself, many written without explicit statements regarding purpose or intended audience, many written without the author's assumption that the finished text would reflect a comprehensive account of one's life.

Like many other scholars, teachers, and readers of autobiography, I am involved in efforts to decanonize the genre and to bring relatively unstudied forms of autobiography to our attention. Our growing awareness of the *context* surrounding the creation of each autobiographical *text* (i. e., the writer's experience of sex, race, ethnicity, class,

age, sexual preference, geographical location, era) is an integral part of our ability to read the work thoughtfully and carefully, appreciative of the story that unfolds. With these thoughts in mind, I would like to share the following bibliography of primary sources on forms of women's autobiography.

I would note that this bibliography is selective, not comprehensive, and that it reflects my own reading experiences and, to some degree, my research specialization. This bibliography is not intended to assess the relative literary merits of any of the entries included, nor is it intended to assert that any work not included is unworthy of consideration as a form of women's autobiography. Rather, this is a selective list of primary sources, compiled at a particular time and place by an individual with specific interests and experiences in the field of women's autobiography. It is my hope that this bibliography will prove useful to scholars, teachers, students, and readers of autobiography.

## WORKS CITED

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## FORMS OF WOMEN'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY: A SELECTED ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

### MEMOIRS, AUTOBIOGRAPHIES, LIFE HISTORIES:

Adelman, Marcy, ed. *Long Time Passing: Lives of Older Lesbians*. Boston: Alyson Publications, Inc., 1986. A collection of memoirs written by lesbians that focuses on women's responses to the aging process.

Andrews, William, ed. *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women's Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986. Spiritual autobiographies of three religious and social activists: Jarena Lee, Zilpha Elaw, and Julia Foote.

Angelou, Maya. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. New York: Random House, Inc., 1970. The first of several volumes of autobiography by black writer and activist Angelou. Focuses on her growing-up years in a rural American community during the 1930's.

Brittain, Vera. *Testament of Youth: An Autobiographical Study of the Years 1900-1925*. New York: Macmillan, 1933. Brittain's memoir of life in England during and immediately following World War I.

Broker, Ignatia. *Night Flying Woman: An Ojibway Narrative*. An Ojibway storyteller's recounting of the life of her great-great-grandmother, whose family was removed to the White Earth Reservation in Minnesota during the 1800's.

Campbell, Maria. *Halfbreed*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1973. The autobiography of a Canadian woman of Cree and Scottish descent growing up in Saskatchewan during the 1940's.

Cameron, Anne. *Daughters of Copper Woman*. Vancouver, B.C.: Press Gang Publishers, 1981. A blend of mythology, oral history, and autobiography, telling the stories of native women on Vancouver Island.

Chernin, Kim. *In My Mother's House: A Daughter's Story*. New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1983. A detailed memoir of the author's mother as well as an exploration of relationships among generations of women in her family.

Chicago, Judy. *Through the Flower: My Struggle as a Woman Artist*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1975. The story of Chicago's personal and artistic development as a feminist painter and writer.

Davis, Angela. *An Autobiography*. New York: Random House, 1974. Reflections on the formative influences and political activities of black radical leader Davis.

Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman: An Autobiography*. New York: Arno Press, 1972 (originally published in 1935). The life story of the American author whose story, "The Yellow Wallpaper" has become a classic of late nineteenth-century autobiographical fiction.

Glasgow, Ellen. *The Woman Within: An Autobiography*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1954. An autobiographical account of the personal and artistic growth of the author of *Barren Ground* and *The Sheltered Life*.

Hampl, Patricia. *A Romantic Education*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1981. A memoir in three parts describing Hampl's growth in self-understanding as the result of her search for her Czech ancestors.

Holt, Hazel, and Hilary Pym, eds. *A Very Private Life: An Autobiography in Diaries and Letters of Barbara Pym*. New York: E. P. Dutton, Inc., 1984. A portrait of the British author constructed from excerpts taken from her diaries, notebooks, and correspondence.

Hubbell, Sue. *A Country Year: Living the Questions*. New York: Random House, Inc., 1986. Autobiographical essays by a writer and naturalist living in the Missouri Ozarks.

- Hungry Wolf, Beverly. *The Ways of My Grandmothers*. New York: Quill/William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1980. A compilation of stories passed down by successive generations of Blackfoot Indian women, detailing personal and tribal history and mythology.
- Hurston, Zora Neale. *Dust Tracks on a Road*. Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1942. The autobiography of noted black American novelist and social activist Hurston, a leading figure of the Harlem Renaissance.
- Israeloff, Roberta. *Coming to Terms*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1984. A memoir describing Israeloff's pregnancy and birthing of her son Benjamin in which the author comes to terms with the changes in herself brought about by her becoming a mother.
- Johnston, Jill. *Mother Bound: Autobiography in Search of a Father*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983. Author Johnston's recounting of her efforts to learn the identity of her father and to resolve her differences with her mother.
- Kerfoot, Justine. *Woman of the Boundary Waters: Canoeing, Guiding, Mushing and Surviving*. Grand Marais, Minnesota: Women's Times Publishing, 1986. Autobiography of an eighty-year-old woman who has lived and worked along the Gunflint Trail in northern Minnesota for nearly sixty years.
- Kingston, Maxine Hong. *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1976. Collection of stories based on the author's memories of growing up as a Chinese-American and on family stories as well as Chinese mythology.
- Koller, Alice. *An Unknown Woman: A Journey to Self-Discovery*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1981. An introspective account of the author's solitary winter on Nantucket and of her quest to understand herself better.
- Le Sueur, Meridel. *Ripening: Selected Work, 1927-1980*. Old Westbury, New York: The Feminist Press, 1982. A collection of Le Sueur's essays, stories, poems, and autobiographical pieces.
- Lindbergh, Anne Morrow. *Hour of Gold, Hour of Lead*. New York: Harbrace, 1973. One in a series of autobiographical works by Lindbergh in which she analyzes the ways in which her experiences have shaped her beliefs.
- Linderman, Frank B., ed. *Pretty-Shield: Medicine Woman of the Crows*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1972 (originally published in 1932). An as-told-to autobiography in which the narrator provides an in-depth portrait of a woman's life as a medicine woman among the Crow Indians.

- Lurie, Nancy Oestreich, ed. *Mountain Wolf Woman, Sister of Crashing Thunder: The Autobiography of a Winnebago Indian*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1961. An oral autobiography in which the narrator traces her experiences from childhood through adulthood during a time of upheaval for her Winnebago people in Wisconsin.
- McCarthy, Mary. *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., Inc., 1957. Memoirs, written in a series of chapters with commentaries, about the author's growing-up years with her relatives after her parents' deaths from influenza in 1918.
- Mead, Margaret. *Blackberry Winter*. New York: Washington Square Press, 1972. Reflections by anthropologist Mead on her formative years, work, and relationships.
- Mebane, Mary. *Mary*. New York: The Viking Press, 1981. An autobiographical account of growing up as a black girl in North Carolina during the 1930's and 1940's.
- Moody, Anne. *Coming of Age in Mississippi*. New York: The Dial Press, 1965. An autobiography tracing the life of a black woman from childhood to adulthood during the years leading up to the Civil Rights Movement in the United States.
- Murray, Pauli. *Proud Shoes*. New York: Harper and Row, 1956. The history of a racially mixed family, combining memoir, history, biography, and self-reflection by Murray.
- Murray, Pauli. *Song in a Weary Throat: An American Pilgrimage*. New York: Harper and Row, 1987. Autobiography telling of Murray's coming of age as a black woman in white America and of her work as an attorney and clergyperson.
- Oakley, Ann. *Taking It Like a Woman: A Personal History*. New York: Random House, 1984. Reflections on education, family, relationships, and political activities by British feminist and sociologist.
- Randall, Margaret. *Albuquerque: Coming Back to the U.S.A.* Vancouver, B.C.: New Star Books, 1986. The story of poet and political writer Randall's re-entry into American society after living for twenty-five years in Latin America.
- Sanger, Margaret. *An Autobiography*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1938. The life story of birth-control advocate and social reformer in early twentieth-century American society.

- Sarton, May. *I Knew a Phoenix: Sketches for an Autobiography*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1959. Sarton's reflections on her early years in Belgium as well as on her relationships with her parents and her early forays into the literary world.
- Scott-Maxwell, Florida. *The Measure of My Days*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1968. Spiritual autobiography of writer and psychoanalyst Scott-Maxwell, focusing on her acceptance of herself as an aging woman in America.
- Shostak, Marjorie, ed. *Nisa: The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman*. New York: Random House, 1981. Life-history of a member of the !Kung tribe in Africa; a collaborative effort by Nisa and American anthropologist Shostak.
- Silko, Leslie Marmon. *Storyteller*. New York: Seaver Books, 1981. Retelling of family and tribal stories that span hundreds of years in American Indian tradition.
- Simon, Kate. *Bronx Primitive: Portraits in a Childhood*. New York: Harper and Row, 1982. Memoir about Simon's ethnic immigrant background and her growing-up years as a female within an immigrant Bronx neighborhood after World War I.
- Slone, Verna Mae. *What My Heart Wants to Tell*. Washington, D.C.: New Republic Press, 1979. Memoir of Slone's family's life in the hill country of Kentucky, including family tales and mountain lore.
- Stanley, Julia Penelope, and Susan J. Wolfe. *The Coming Out Stories*. Watertown, Mass.: Persephone Press, 1980. Autobiographical stories of women claiming lesbian identities, based on written narratives and oral interviews with a variety of American women.
- Stein, Gertrude. *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1933. Memoir of Stein and Toklas's life together, with emphasis on Stein's career and friendships.
- Thomas, Sherry. *We Didn't Have Much, But We Sure Had Plenty: Stories of Rural Women*. Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1981. Autobiographical stories of rural women's lives across the United States, based on oral histories and interviews of women by the author.
- Thompson, Era Bell. *American Daughter*. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1986. An autobiography about growing up as a black girl in North Dakota during the period from 1914-1931 and about Thompson's later experiences in St. Paul and Chicago as a young woman.

- Toth, Susan Allen. *Blooming: A Small Town Girlhood*. Boston: Little Brown, 1981. Memoir about growing up in Ames, Iowa, during the 1950's, including chapter prefaces focusing on Toth's present-day relationship with her young daughter.
- Toth, Susan Allen. *Ivy Days: Making My Way Out East*. Boston: Little Brown, 1984. A sequel to *Blooming* that recounts Toth's experiences at Smith College after leaving Iowa.
- Wells-Barnett, Ida B. *Crusade for Justice*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970. Autobiography of journalist and advocate of black people's rights during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the United States.
- Welty, Eudora. *One Writer's Beginnings*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984. Autobiographical sketches of Welty's parents, her relationships with them, and her perceptions of the effects of her background on her writing.
- Wilson, Gilbert L., ed. *Waheenee: An Indian Girl's Story Told By Herself to Gilbert L. Wilson*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981 (originally published in 1927). An as-told-to autobiography of an Hidatsa Indian woman, recorded in the early twentieth century on the Fort Berthold Reservation in North Dakota.
- Wyman, Walker D., ed. *Frontier Woman: The Life of a Woman Homesteader on the Dakota Frontier*. River Falls: University of Wisconsin-River Falls Press, 1972. The autobiography of Grace Fairchild, a teacher from Wisconsin who went to South Dakota in 1898; story reconstructed by Wyman from Fairchild's notes.
- Yellin, Jean Fagan, ed. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself, by Harriet A. Jacobs*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987 (originally published in 1861). Autobiography of Harriet A. Jacobs, written in the form of a slave narrative, tracing her life from childhood enslavement to adulthood and freedom.

#### DIARIES, JOURNALS, LETTERS, ESSAYS:

- Arpad, Susan, ed. *Sam Curd's Diary: The Diary of a True Woman*. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1984. Diary kept from 1860-1863, during which time M. Samuella Curd wrote about life with her husband in Fulton, Missouri; motherhood and children; and events of the Civil War.
- Ascher, Carol, Louise DeSalvo, and Sara Ruddick, eds. *Between Women: Biographers, Novelists, Critics, Teachers, and Artists Write About Their Work on Women*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1984. Essays (autobiographical, biographical, and critical) dealing with ethical and methodological concerns in writing as women about women.

- Billington, Ray Allen, ed. *The Journal of Charlotte L. Forten: A Young Black Woman's Reactions to the White World of the Civil War Era*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1953. Excerpts from Forten's journals, kept from 1854-1864 and from 1885-1892; observations of a black Philadelphian who taught freed slaves in South Carolina.
- Bolsterli, Margaret Jones, ed. *Vinegar Pie and Chicken Bread: A Woman's Diary of Life in the Rural South, 1890-1891*. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1982. Diary dealing with events in Nannie Stillwell Jackson's daily life in Watson, Arkansas.
- Bumgardt, John R., ed. *Civil War Nurse: The Diary and Letters of Hannah Ropes*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1980. Writings of author, reformer, and abolitionist who was a nurse at Union Hospital, Georgetown, D. C., during the Civil War.
- Margo Culley, ed. *A Day at a Time: The Diary Literature of American Women from 1764 to the Present*. New York: The Feminist Press, 1985. Analytical introduction by Culley, followed by excerpts from the diaries of a variety of American women.
- De Jesus, Carolina. *Child of the Dark: The Diary of Carolina Maria de Jesus*. New York: New American Library, 1962 (originally published in 1960). Diary of a poor Brazilian woman, written from 1955 through 1959, telling of her daily activities, relationships with children, and poverty.
- "The Diary of Amelia Buss." *Women's Personal Narratives: Essays in Criticism and Pedagogy*. Ed. Leonore Hoffmann and Margo Culley. New York: Modern Language Association, 1985. 182-213. Diary kept during 1866-67, recording Amelia Butts Buss's journey west and her life in Fort Collins, Colorado.
- Dyer, Thomas, ed. *To Raise Myself a Little: The Diaries and Letters of Jennie, a Georgia Teacher, 1851-1886*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1982. Private writings of Amelia Akehurst Lines, a New York schoolteacher living in Georgia.
- Field, Joanna. *A Life of One's Own*. Los Angeles: J. P. Tarcher, 1981 (originally published in 1936). The journal of writer Marion Milner, in which she analyzes her creative process and the uses of a journal for self-examination.
- Frank, Anne. *The Diary of a Young Girl*. New York: Doubleday and Co., 1967 (originally published in 1947). The detailed diary of a young Jewish girl in hiding with her family in Amsterdam during World War II.

- Franklin, Penelope, ed. *Private Pages: Diaries of American Women, 1830's - 1970's*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1986. Excerpts from thirteen women's diaries, which Franklin located in archives across the United States, prefaced by the editor's analysis of the diary-writing process.
- Gag, Wanda. *Growing Pains: Diaries and Drawings for the Years 1908-1917*. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1984. Journal entries and sketches by the New Ulm artist, describing family relationships and the beginnings of her career as a youthful artist.
- Hillesum Etty. *Etty: A Diary 1941-43*. London: Jonathan Cape Ltd. 1983. Diary of a young Dutch Jewish woman in Amsterdam who died at Auschwitz in 1943.
- Holland, Rupert S., ed. *Letters and Diaries of Laura M. Towne: Written from the Sea Islands of South Carolina, 1862-1884*. Writings of a white teacher from Pittsburgh who, with her intimate companion Ellen Murray, started a school for freed slaves on St. Helena Island, S.C.
- Holmes, Kenneth L., ed. *Covered Wagon Women: Diaries and Letters from the Western Trails, 1840-1890*. Glendale, California: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1983. Excerpts from the autobiographical writings of women on the overland journey.
- Holliday, Laurel, ed. *Heart Songs: The Intimate Diaries of Young Girls*. New York: Methuen, 1978. Excerpts from the adolescent diaries of such individuals as Anais Nin, Selma Lagerlof, and Marie Bashkirtseff.
- Howe, Marie Jenney, ed. *The Intimate Journal of George Sand*. Chicago: Academy Chicago, Publishers, 1977 (originally published in 1929). Sand's journal to Alfred de Musset, her Piffol journal, and her scrapbook reflections, with a lengthy foreword by editor Howe on Sand's life and her writings.
- Hull, Gloria T., ed. *Give Us This Day: The Diary of Alice Dunbar-Nelson*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1984. Diary kept by black writer and activist from 1921-1931, along with lengthy biographical and critical introduction by the editor.
- Karlsen, Carol F., and Laurie Crumpacker, eds. *The Journal of Esther Edwards Burr, 1754-1757*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984. Diary, written as a series of letters, that details Burr's family relationships, household and social duties, and religious activities.
- Lecompte, Janet, ed. *Emily: The Diary of a Hard-Worked Woman*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987. Diary of a poor working woman in Colorado in 1890, telling of her daily work as a nurse and domestic and of her status as a divorced woman and single parent.



Lifshin, Lyn, ed. *Ariadne's Thread: A Collection of Contemporary Women's Journals*. New York: Harper and Row, 1982. Anthology of selections from the journals of well-known and unknown women, dealing with subjects such as work, love and friendship, family, and nature.

Low, Ann Marie. *Dust Bowl Diary*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984. Diary kept from 1927-1937 by a young woman living with her family on a large stock farm in southeastern North Dakota; details effects of drought and depression, and describes the author's maturation process.

McCullough, Frances, and Ted Hughes, eds. *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*. New York: The Dial Press, 1982. Excerpts from journals kept by poet and novelist Plath from 1950 to 1962.

Moffat, Mary Jane, and Charlotte Painter, eds. *Revelations: Diaries of Women*. New York: Random House, 1974. Excerpts from diaries of over thirty women, covering such topics as love, work, and power; includes foreword and afterword on issues involved in keeping a diary.

Nin, Anais. *The Diary of Anais Nin, Volumes One to Six*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1966-1976. Detailed series of diaries kept by writer Nin over the course of her life, discussing the creative process, personal relationships, and her life as a woman.

Pym, Barbara. *A Very Private Life: An Autobiography in Diaries and Letters*. New York: E. P. Dutton, Inc., 1984. Life of novelist Pym, as reconstructed from her private writings by editors Hazel Holt and Hilary Pym (see entry under Holt in MEMOIRS list above).

Robertson, Mary D., ed. *Lucy Breckinridge of Grove Hill: The Journal of a Virginia Girl, 1862-1864*. Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 1979. Three-year diary begun by an eighteen-year-old Southern woman during the Civil War, describing life in white Southern society.

Rosen, Ruth, and Sue Davidson, eds. *The Maimie Papers*. Old Westbury, New York: The Feminist Press, 1977. Letters written between 1910-1922 by Maimie Pinzer, a prostitute, to her friend and confidante Fanny Quincy Howe.

Sanford, Mollie. *Mollie: The Journal of Mollie Dorsey Sanford in Nebraska and Colorado Territories, 1857-1866*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1959. Journal describing Sanford's life as a white woman on the frontier; includes observations on homesteading, family life, and relationships between whites and Indians.

Sarton, May. *The House By the Sea: A Journal*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1977. Recounts writer Sarton's experiences living alone in a house on the coast of Maine and analyzes the needs of the creative spirit for solitude and companionship.

Sarton May. *Journal of a Solitude*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company 1973. Journal covering a year in the life of the author, focusing on her perceptions of the inner and outer world, relationships, and herself as a writer.

Sarton, May. *Recovering*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1980. Journal of Sarton's bout with breast cancer and the process of physical and psychological recovery.

Scott, John A., ed. *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation in 1838-1839*. Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1984 (originally published in 1863). Journal of Frances Anne Kemble, kept while visiting her husband's plantation on Butler Island, which describes plight of slaves and expresses Kemble's opposition to slavery.

Sternburg, Janet, ed. *The Writer on Her Work: Contemporary Women Writers Reflect on their Art and Situation*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1980. Autobiographical essays by seventeen writers, analyzing their works in the context of their lives.

Stewart, Elinore Pruitt. *Letters of a Woman Homesteader*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1942 (originally published in 1913-1914). Letters written by Stewart from her Wyoming homestead during the early 1900's, describing working her own land and the people whom she came to know there.

Stewart, Elinore Pruitt. *Letters on an Elk Hunt by a Woman Homesteader*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979 (originally published in 1915). A continuation of Stewart's earlier volume of letters describing her experiences as a woman homesteader.

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Walker, Alice. *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983. Series of essays (autobiographical, biographical, and critical) on social, political, and personal issues affecting Walker as a black woman writer.

Woodward, C. Vann, and Elisabeth Muhlenfeld, eds. *The Private Mary Chesnut: The Unpublished Civil War Diaries*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1984. Diaries on which *Mary Chesnut's Civil War* was based.

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