



Slavery, sex and sin

By Stephanie McCurry

A true Southern belle, Ella Thomas knew the privileged lifestyle of Georgia's planter elite came with a price.

On January 3, 1865, a little more than a month

after Maj. Gen. William T. Sherman's troops destroyed her plantation in Burke County, Ga., Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas sat down at her desk in Augusta and transcribed into her diary an incredible letter she had written to Sherman's wife. The letter, which she proposed to publish in the personal section of one of Richmond's papers, exacted revenge for Sherman's destruction by informing his wife of her husband's affair with a "mulatto girl."

"Enquire of Gen Sherman when next you see him who has been elevated to fill your place," Thomas taunted, referring to the "Mulatto girl...spoken of by the Negroes as Sherman's wife." This was a woman, or so Thomas claimed, whose safety mattered so much to Sherman "that she was returned to Nashville when he

commenced his vandal march." The elevation of "the Negro race" had been accomplished, Thomas bitterly pronounced, and now your husbands "are amongst a colored race whose reputation for morality has never been of the highest order." Now Mrs. Sherman and other white women at the North would learn to drink from the same poisoned cup long forced to the lips of cultivated Southern women.

It was an extraordinary letter, one that broached subjects most elite Southern women never mentioned even in the privacy of their own diaries. Thomas never published the letter, and there is no reason to think its contents true. But miscegenation—the propensity of white men to engage in liaisons with enslaved women (most, as she

acknowledged, coerced)—was a central theme in Thomas' diary and in her thinking about the morality of slavery.

Ella Clanton began keeping her diary in 1848, when she was a 14-year-old belle and the apple of her father's eye. She kept it until 1889, when she was an impoverished woman who had supported herself as a schoolteacher: a remarkable 41-year record of a woman's life in a South transformed by war and revolution. Ella, who married Augusta planter James Jefferson Thomas in 1852 when she was 18, was a singularly sensitive observer of the world of plantation slavery and of a South transformed by emancipation and of a woman's place in it.

She had touched on the delicate subject of sex and slavery repeatedly in

earlier years—usually when confronted with the evidence of such sexual relations in the appearance of enslaved children on the plantation who were "almost white"—and her thinking was deeply unconventional. She pitied the enslaved mothers, for example, women "more sinned against than sinning," and she held a distinctly unflattering view that a majority of men were predatory beings, "one degree removed from brute creation with no more control over their passions." Of enslaved women subjected to such a lot, she said, "are they not to be pitied?"

But Thomas' views were shaped by an intensely personal experience. She spent much of her adulthood fending off the fear that her husband and father were not exempt from the general depravity of the sex.

Miscegenation was never far from her mind when she meditated, as she sometimes did, on the morality of slavery. Then, facing her own demons, her sympathetic view of slave women turned inexorably to blaming them and questioning their morals, as in her letter to Sherman's wife. She saw white women like herself as the real victims.

When Thomas' beloved father died in the spring of 1864, her worst fears were realized during the reading of his will. Although he left a generous provision, the will revealed facts about his life—she never said what—that nearly killed her: "As God is my witness I would rather never of had that additional increase of property if...I would



Easy prey Enslaved women had no recourse if their masters chose to rape them. "I know this is a view of the subject it is thought best for women to ignore," Thomas wrote, but "is it not enough to make us shudder for the standard of morality in our Southern homes?"

have been afraid of the knowledge which was communicated at the same time. How hath the mighty fallen! The bright sun which I had worshipped been dimmed!...it is a bitter cup which my heavenly father has allowed my earthly father to press to my lips."

In the months after her father's death, war arrived at Ella Thomas' door. As Atlanta fell and Sherman's army moved toward Burke County, the reality of slave emancipation pressed on her. Poverty and starvation, she wrote in late November, "stare me in the face." Two weeks later, her plantation was destroyed by Sherman's men, and then another of the family's prop-

erties, Cottontown—after Henry, "one of our negroes," led them there and revealed where the driver had hidden the horses and mules. The Yankees burned their cotton and set fire to the gin house corncrib and just about everything else. As she sat in Augusta trying to figure out the direction Sherman's army was heading, she admitted for the first time, "I have experienced a new sensation—I have been frightened."

It was in this context that Thomas penned her poisonous outburst in the context of war, the destruction of the planter class, her own livelihood and status—and the institution of slavery on which it had all been built.

That letter angrily tried to visit on the Yankee victors and their wives the intimate consequences of the reversals faced by elite Southern women: black and mulatto women elevated over white, slave over free, poor over rich, the illiterate over the educated. Sherman had given President Lincoln

a Christmas gift of Savannah; Ella Thomas would give his wife "a New Year's gift" of information designed to humiliate her. "Woman's nature is the same the world over," Thomas wrote. This news will "dim and make hollow and empty the mirth by which she is surrounded." Thomas was determined to make Sherman taste the bitter cup from which she had already been forced to drink.

In the end, she did not send the letter. The news that Ellen Sherman had lost a baby—an experience Ella Thomas knew all too well—killed the urge for vengeance. But she transcribed it into her remarkable diary, giving us a painfully raw vantage point on a revolutionary war. □

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■ ■ **How hath the mighty fallen! The bright sun which I had worshipped been dimmed!**