



Winnie Davis: Daughter of the Lost Cause

Heath Hardage Lee

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Varina Anne “Winnie” Davis was born into a war-torn South in June of 1864, the youngest daughter of Confederate president Jefferson Davis and his second wife, Varina Howell Davis. Born only a month after the death of beloved Confederate hero general J.E.B. Stuart during a string of Confederate victories, Winnie’s birth was hailed as a blessing by war-weary Southerners. They felt her arrival was a good omen signifying future victory. But after the Confederacy’s ultimate defeat in the Civil War, Winnie would spend her early life as a genteel refugee and an expatriate abroad. After returning to the South from German boarding school, Winnie was christened the “Daughter of the Confederacy” in 1886. This role was bestowed upon her by a Southern culture trying to sublimate its war losses. Particularly idolized by Confederate veterans and the United Daughters of the Confederacy, Winnie became an icon of the Lost Cause, eclipsing even her father Jefferson in popularity.

Winnie Davis: Daughter of the Lost Cause is the first published biography of this little-known woman who unwittingly became the symbolic female figure of the defeated South. Her controversial engagement in 1890 to a Northerner lawyer whose grandfather was a famous abolitionist, and her later move to work as a writer in New York City, shocked her friends, family, and the Southern groups who worshipped her. Faced with the pressures of a community who violently rejected the match, Winnie desperately attempted to reconcile her prominent Old South history with her personal desire for tolerance and acceptance of her personal choices.

Winnie Davis: Daughter of the Lost Cause Details

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From Reader Review Winnie Davis: Daughter of the Lost Cause for online ebook

Guy Gugliotta says

Daughter of the Lost Cause is the poignant story of Winnie Davis, one of the last casualties of the Civil War. Jefferson Davis's youngest daughter was destined by birth to carry the torch of the Confederacy. It was an obligation she never asked for but could never refuse. She had the then- "modern" advantage of an education in Europe, which gave her the intellectual tools and the ambition to break free from a domineering mother and a cosseted upbringing in the defeated south. But her willingness to be the handsome, poised, dutiful daughter of the Confederacy's first family instead turned her into the living symbol of an antebellum way of life that she had never known. Heath Lee tells this tale with simple elegance and matter-of-fact sensitivity. She makes you understand that neither of Winnie's two worlds--the languor of the Mississippi Gulf Coast or the hustle of downtown New York--would ever bring her peace. Guy Gugliotta, author of Freedom's Cap

Winnie Davis: Daughter of the Lost Cause

Sarah Beth says

This book is the first biography of Varina Anne "Winnie" Davis, the youngest child of Confederate president Jefferson Davis. Born at the end of the Civil War, Winnie eventually became a living symbol of the Southern wife and family for defeated Confederates. Although highly educated in Germany and very publicly engaged, Winnie died young and single.

Winnie was the sixth and youngest child of Jefferson Davis and his second wife Varina. Jefferson's first wife died tragically just months after their marriage, and Jefferson is said to have never completely recovered from this loss. Jefferson and his second wife Varina lost their first child, Samuel as a baby. By the time Winnie was born the family had expanded from the loss of their first child to include Margaret, Jeff Jr., Joseph, and William. Tragically, just months before Winnie was born in 1864, young Joe fell from a balcony of the executive mansion in Richmond to his death. Thus Winnie was born and raised in both a home and a community of mourning - of personal loss and also the loss of the war. More tragedy was to come; all four of the Davis sons would die young, leaving Jefferson and Varina with only Margaret and Winnie to carry on the family legacy.

Winnie was raised with an emphasis on "piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity." Personal sacrifice was applauded and Winnie sought approval through attempting to meet these ideals. At the age of thirteen, Winnie was sent to an austere boarding school in Germany. Although initially very homesick, Winnie eventually assimilated very fully into the European culture. By the completion of her schooling, "Winnie had become fluent in German and French, knowledgeable about European history, and particularly well versed in German literature and history. All this in addition to her notable skills in painting, writing, and music earned her a deserved reputation as 'one of the most cultured women of her time'" (68). After her return home, she gradually became her father's traveling companion, secretary, and literary assistant. Through attending events with her father, she became famous in her own right and was presented at public events as the "Daughter of the Confederacy," a symbol of redemption to the defeated soldiers.

Winnie eventually met and fell in love with Alfred "Fred" Wilkinson, a young lawyer from New York. Once the news of their engagement became public, Winnie's family received public outcry over her engagement to

a Northerner with an abolitionist grandfather. Winnie, always anxious to please, suffered from depression, anxiety, and anorexia, and was greatly troubled by this feedback. Over time, her mother also turned against the marriage and Winnie ultimately called off the engagement. Neither Winnie or Fred ever married.

Winnie's final years, before her death in her early 30s, were filled with Confederate events and scraping together a living through literary pursuits. Winnie and her mother moved to New York City, another unpopular move in the eyes of the South. After being caught in the rain and a short illness, Winnie died. The actual cause of her death is still unknown, although Winnie does appear to have had many health complaints throughout her life.

I was instantly drawn to this book because I love biographies of historical figures, particularly ones who are lesser known. I was even more excited to learn that the author is a fellow graduate of Davidson College. This was a well written and well researched book that sheds light on Winnie as a woman bound to a cause she didn't necessarily choose and which ultimately and mostly inadvertently became her life's work. I do wonder what Winnie's true feelings towards the Southern cause were. She clearly seems to have identified with European and Northern sentiments. Although much of her correspondence has been destroyed, I wonder how much of her role of "Daughter of the Confederacy" was done out of love and loyalty to her family and how much out of personal conviction.

Kevin Kistler says

When is the movie coming out? This sad tale would make a very moving film about tragedy. I particularly liked reading about stories that you (I) just didn't get in high school history class. The "Southern" perspective is very enlightening and deserves a greater voice.

The book is well written and interesting. That's what helped me actually get all the way through it. And now, I have a much greater appreciation for reading history for pleasure.

John says

heath does justice to this interesting woman and defines the Davis family exquisitely

Amanda Fletcher says

A very well-written and well-researched biography that is also extremely readable and entertaining. A fascinating look at Jefferson Davis' tragic family and an exploration of the post-war south through the life of his daughter Winnie. I did not think that there were more stories to tell about this era, but Heath Hardage Lee has found some! Highly recommend.

Louise says

She was born Varina ("Winnie) Anne Davis in the White House of the Confederate States shortly after her 5

year old brother died of a fall. A year later her mother and namesake gathered her and her siblings to flee their home as Richmond fell to the Union. As a toddler, she was the only child allowed to see her father, the former CSA President, in his post-war incarceration. They bonded.

Too young to know the war but shaped by its aftermath, Winnie aimed to please her parents who were finding their way after the defeat of the CSA. Winnie's father was humiliated not only for the loss of the war, but also for how he was caught, perhaps as the legend goes, wearing women's clothes. Losing their plantation meant that they relied on the kindness of others (perhaps a mistress to her father).

Heath Hardage Lee has been considering and researching her subject for over 20 years. She has thought about the expectations for women (pious, obedient, self-sacrificing) that were embedded in southern culture and how they impacted Winnie. Lee has considered Winnie's parents' marriage: A rigid micro-manager husband and a wife who fought for control. Neither could manage nor control life: Jefferson Davis lost his first wife (the unfair standard by which he would measure Varina) within months of the wedding; by the time of Winnie's birth they had lost two sons.

There is little in this book on Winnie's childhood, although it says that her parents feel she could be stubborn. There is a hint of competition with her older sister. When she was told she would go to a convent boarding school in Germany, Winnie complied. While it was harsh, disciplined and cold, it appears that she got a good education and learned to paint and to appreciate art.

Upon her return she helped her father with his memoirs and traveled to veteran's meetings and memorials with him. It is from those travels that the role "The Daughter of the Confederacy" was thrust upon her. She obediently complied, dressing in queen-like gowns, smiling and waving in parades and giving ceremonial thank yous.

After Jefferson's death, his wife and daughter moved to New York City. They vacationed in Rhode Island. They traveled with the Pulitzers (of newspaper fame) who were Davis shirt tail relatives through marriage. They wrote for magazines. Winnie wrote novels. They led the lives of northerners, not southerners, in this very polarized time in the South.

Three questions regarding Winnie may never be answered: her role, her engagement and health. Lee gives no evidence that Winnie wanted or enjoyed her role, or even what she may have thought about slavery and secession. Next is why did she end her engagement to Alfred Wilkerson? Wilkerson was not just any northerner, he was the grandson of noted abolitionist Samuel Joseph May (brother to the Mother of Louisa May Alcott). Her father went out on a limb to support her (did he change his mind?) and her and her mother connived to stop it by finding a problem in his background. By the time it was called off, the damage was done to both Winnie and her suitor. Regarding Winnie's health: Why can't she eat? The situation and her actions suggest she is anorexic.

All three of these questions/stresses in her life twined together and are likely responsible for her early death at age 34. Robert Penn Warren called her "The last casualty of the lost cause."

Lee stays with the subject and the marriage that produced her. She steers clear of the issues of the war and slavery. The Index was not always helpful. The b & w photos are great and there are many. It is well footnoted. This is an engaging micro-history.

Edna Foster says

What a snooze fest. Book club selection. Really awful writing, bad editing and a boring subject. Read like a poorly written masters thesis.

Julie says

I won this book in a Goodreads giveaway. This fascinating biography deals with the life of Winnie Davis, the youngest daughter of Jefferson and Varina Davis. After the War Between the States, many who had supported the Confederacy tried to make Winnie a symbol of enduring Southern virtues. While her life was lived out not as a symbol, but as a human being, the War overshadowed everything she did. Her role as "The Daughter of the Confederacy" had a profound impact on her major life decisions, at times causing her to make excruciating sacrifices. This book contains a few errors in editing, for example, Winnie's brother Joe is referred to as "Joe, Jr." a few times near the beginning of the book, and there is at least one missing period at the end of a sentence. A few sentences were confusing to me. Also, Lee tends to repeat herself at times, and venture into speculation about the motives of Winnie and the other people she writes about. All in all, though, a well-written and interesting book.

Lori says

I picked this up at Chop Suey Books - probably my favorite indie book shop - on Cary Street in Richmond. Hadn't heard of it but it was on the front table...read it in one big gulp. Interesting stuff, compellingly written. (Shout out to Wonton the cat!)

Cheryl Keller says

Well-researched and well-written biography of Winnie Davis, youngest child of Jefferson and Varina Davis, born in 1864 and adopted by citizens of the Confederacy and ultimately by veterans of the Confederacy (and United Daughters of the Confederacy) as a symbol of a mythologized Confederate culture.

The book explores the information that is available about Winnie and her relationship to her parents and siblings. She ultimately is a tragic figure, a captive to the people who idolize her (and the culture she represents to them), and to her parents' emotional needs and controlling interests in her life. She died at the age of 34, after developing a brief career as a writer.

The author deftly explores the contradictions in Winnie's personality and life. For example, she spent more of her formative years in Germany than in the South. She attended a German boarding school, developing her intellect, artistic talent and independence. Yet, as a young adult recently returned to the U.S., she became an icon of a dependent, dutiful, pure Southern Confederate daughter and spent much of her early adult life at public appearances cultivating that persona.

This book is a good read for anyone interested in more detail about the Jefferson Davis family, the evolution of the Confederate "movement" post-Civil War, and the role of women in society in the U.S. post-Civil War.

Lisa says

I enjoyed every moment of this luminous and moving biography of the beautiful and accomplished Winnie, although it's an extremely harrowing story at times. Winnie, the long-suffering daughter of the President of the Confederacy Jefferson Davis, grew up in the shadow of her parents. She saw how her father's ill-treatment in prison affected him, and her parents lost all of their sons. Her mother understandably became deeply depressed, and this wasn't helped by Davis's tendency to become infatuated with other women.

The most fascinating part of the book is Winnie's star-crossed love-affair with a handsome young barrister who was the grandson of a prominent abolitionist. The South made Winnie into a symbol of the 'Lost Cause,' and she was feted at balls and reunions of Confederate veterans. Neither the North nor the South was pleased by Winnie's engagement.

I also liked the tale of how Winnie managed to become a 'New Woman,' - she wrote novels and articles, rode a bicycle, and lived a cosmopolitan life in New York. Here she enjoyed the theatre, opera and other cultural events, and associated with the social elite of the city.

Heath Hardage Lee deserves high praise for bringing this winsome 'Daughter of the Lost Cause' to new life.

Ellen Brown says

Heath Hardage Lee deserves five stars for being the first scholar to unearth and tell this fascinating story. It boggles the mind that it took so long for Winnie to earn her own biography! The book deserves another five stars for being a wonderfully written and powerful read.

Ceecee says

My roots run South in this country; therefore, I was instantly intrigued by this novel.

I'm very familiar with The Daughters of the Confederacy, and the prodigal daughter that started it all, but this author has taken an extraordinary approach by reintroducing Winnie Davis to the world in a most intimate manner. Starting from her birth, we get a detailed background on how Winnie's future was forged by the chaotic world to which she was born. This young woman was thrust into situations that exceeded her limitations both physically, and mentally. The relationship she had with her mother is one in which many in the South can relate, and her timid behavior was that of a true lady.

Although Winnie is the main subject, she is by no means the only person of which whom we become familiar. The whole family is introduced, as well as the love of her life, which later gives reference to Winnie's somber and emotional state.

I thoroughly enjoyed this novel, but I must warn that some may feel as if the entire southern gentry are portrayed as one group of like-minded idiots. Readers must keep in mind, the anger and frustration after the war towards "The Yankees" was so intense, it still resonates today. There are also a couple of "hmm"

moments in which the lost Confederate Money conspiracies do not seem so far-fetched. The historical details are extraordinary; however, and the research involved is evident.

My heart ached for Winnie Davis, as the writer has depicted her life with great care. A tragic tale from a tragic time.

Recommended read.

I received a copy via NetGalley in exchange for an honest review.

Jude Arp says

Great book, very enjoyable read!

This is a wonderful book that not only tells the story of Jefferson Davis' youngest child, but also of the Jefferson Davis family in general, Richmond during the war, the fall of Richmond, reconstruction and the post war South.

The book begins by telling of the death of Joe Davis, Jeff and Varina Davis' youngest son. Following this was the death of JEB Stuart which was seen as an ominous sign by Southern soldiers. By contrast the birth of Winnie was thought to be a good omen.

At age 13 Winnie was sent away to a boarding school in Germany. She returned an intellectual with a gift for art and writing.

Although the Confederacy lost the war it maintained the vision that the South was superior to the north in terms of cultural, honor and morals. Winnie began accompanying her father on his many trips throughout the South. On April 30, 1886 in West Point, Georgia former Confederate General John B. Gordon introduced Winnie as "The Daughter of the Confederacy." Her father's image signaled to veterans the need to preserve the past, while Winnie symbolized their hopes for the future.

Many former Confederates expressed a hope that through her a sort of Confederate royal bloodline might be preserved and passed on, that she would marry a son of one of the great Confederate generals.

When she became engaged to the grandson of a well known abolitionist Jefferson Davis gave his consent, but the Davis family began receiving letters from Southerners stating their disapproval. Winnie was sent away to Europe to get away from the chaos and for her health. While away absence made her heart grow coldly for her fiancé. Once Winnie returned to the states her mother convinced her that that fiancé of hers could not support a wife and the marriage was called off.

After the breakup Winnie and Varina moved to New York City for pecuniary reasons. They had tried to find writing jobs for Southern newspapers but to no avail. A distant cousin of the Davises was Kate Pulitzer, wife of Joseph Pulitzer, one of the wealthiest men in the country. Winnie and Varina were offered writing jobs paying them \$1500 a year. Winnie wrote two novels after moving to New York with her mother.

Tragically Winnie died on September 18, 1898 while vacationing in Narragansett, Rhode Island. Her death register notes that she died from "acute gastritis and gastroenteritis." She was only 34.

Her death was mourned in the north as well as the South. Many agreed with the symbolism of burying the Daughter of the Confederacy in the former capital of the Confederacy. Richmond was eager to claim her as one of its own. She had been born there, and memories of the Lost Cause and all those associated with it were still strong. Winnie was granted a full military funeral, a rare honor for any woman.

As Southern writer and poet Robert Penn Warren observed, the South that had adored Winnie with a consuming passion ultimately rendered her "the last casualty of the Lost Cause."

Montez Hammack says

This book was well written, but left me very sad for this daughter of Jefferson Davis who was thrust into the limelight during the aftermath of the Civil War, and the sacrifices that she was forced to make because of her lineage.
