

THE FIRST LADY AS AN AUTHOR



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The term “First Lady” became a popular one after the production of a comedy, *The First Lady in the Land*, presented at the Gaiety Theatre in New York City, December 4, 1911. The play, by Charles Nirdlinger, had Dolley Madison as its central character. It is believed that the term was first used in referring to Lucy Ware Webb Hayes, the wife of President Rutherford B. Hayes, in a magazine article describing the presidential inauguration of 1877.

Of our thirty-eight presidents, only one, James Buchanan, was a bachelor. Grover Cleveland was a bachelor when he was elected the first time, but married in the White House during his second year in office. Four were widowers: Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, Martin Van Buren, and Chester A. Arthur. Rachel (Mrs. Andrew) Jackson died in the period between the election and the inaugural. Theodore Roosevelt had been a widower but had remarried before he became president. Benjamin Harrison became a widower in the White House and remarried after leaving the presidency. Two others, John Tyler and Woodrow Wilson, lost their wives while in the White House and remarried while still in office.

Six presidents, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Millard Fillmore, Benjamin Harrison, and Woodrow Wilson, married widows. Andrew Jackson, Warren G. Harding, and Gerald R. Ford, Jr., married divorcees. Two widows of presidents, Mrs. Grover Cleveland and Mrs. John F. Kennedy, remarried after the deaths of their husbands.

From Abigail (Mrs. John) Adams to Lady Bird (Mrs. Lyndon Baines) Johnson, nine First Ladies have been authors, either by intent or posthumously through publication of their letters. Mention should also be made of a tenth First Lady author, Varina Howell Davis, whose husband, Jefferson

Davis, was president of a part of the United States (then called the Confederate States of America) from 1861 to 1865.

The most prolific of author-First Ladies was (Anna) Eleanor Roosevelt. From 1932 until 1963 she was responsible, as author, for at least twenty titles, not to mention innumerable magazine articles, book introductions, and prefaces. While her style was not one to rival that of Mrs. Shelley or Barbara Tuchman, she did write easily, and in the main her subject matter was important. Her volumes of autobiography are very interesting, though revelations in the past few years about her domestic life and relationship with her husband indicate that there was much she did not reveal.

The first First Lady author became one posthumously when her letters were assembled and published by her grandson. Abigail Smith Adams, wife of John Adams, our second president, wrote well and frequently. Charles Francis Adams, her distinguished grandson, a member of Congress and Lincoln's minister to Great Britain, gathered these letters into two small volumes, which were first published in 1840. Most of the letters are addressed to her husband and demonstrate a fine style, as we can note when she writes soon after the Americans have evacuated Ticonderoga and Mount Independence:

I dare say, before this time you have interpreted the Northern Storm. If the presages chilled your blood, how must you be frozen and stiffened at the disgrace brought up on our arms! unless some warmer passion seize you—and anger and resentment fire your breast.

On November 13, 1800, Abigail Adams wrote to her son, Thomas. It was a week after the presidential election in which Thomas Jefferson defeated John Adams' bid for a second term:

Well, my dear son, South Carolina has behaved as your father always said she would. The consequence to us, personally, is, that we retire from public life. For myself and family, I have few regrets.

The work was well received and a new, enlarged edition issued in 1841. In 1947 another collection of Mrs. Adams' letters was published. It was edited by Stewart Mitchell.

Dolley (Dorthea Dandridge Payne Todd) Madison also became an author posthumously when her letters, with a memoir by her grandniece, Lucia Beverly Cutts, were published in 1886. A modest volume, it nevertheless reveals Dolley Madison as an active partner of her husband in the politics of the day. Her letters are rich in historical and political references. One thrills

at reading the letter she wrote to her sister, Anna Payne, from Washington on August 23, 1814, with the British just about to enter the city:

My husband left me yesterday morning to join General Winder. He inquired anxiously whether I had courage or firmness to remain in the President's House until his return. . . . I have since received two dispatches from him. The last is alarming, because he desires I should be ready at a moment's warning to enter my carriage, and leave the city; that the enemy seemed stronger than had at first been reported, and it might happen that they would reach the city with the intention of destroying it. I am accordingly ready; I have pressed as many Cabinet papers into trunks as to fill one carriage. . . . Our kind friend, Mr. Carroll, has come to hasten my departure and in a very bad humor with me, because I insist on waiting until the large picture of General Washington is secured. . . .

In 1914, just a year after she and her husband left the White House, Helen Herron Taft's *Recollections of Full Years* was published. Though both she and President Taft were to enjoy many more useful years, he as chief justice (1921–30), she does discuss many interesting aspects of their life when he was a judge, governor of the Philippine Islands, secretary of war, and president. William Howard Taft was the first president to receive a salary of \$75,000 a year. Mrs. Taft comments on her husband's inaugural:

. . . since the ex-President was not going to ride back to the White House with his successor, I decided that I would. No President's wife had ever done it before, but as long as precedents were being disregarded I thought it might not be too great a risk to disregard this one. . . . There was nobody at the White House to bid us welcome except the official staff and some of their own guests. But it doesn't matter. There is never any ceremony about moving into the White House. You just drive up and walk in,—and there you are.

Mrs. Taft's good humor is present throughout her charming volume: "Fortunately we are a family that laughs."

Edith Kermit Carow (Mrs. Theodore) Roosevelt qualifies as an author because of her contribution to an anthology, *Cleared for Strange Ports*, a collection of pieces by Mrs. Roosevelt, her daughter-in-law, Mrs. Kermit Roosevelt, Richard Derby, and Kermit Roosevelt, who edited the volume. Kermit Roosevelt, in his introduction, properly states, "My mother after a number of years of unobtrusively continuous petition, at last, during the course of a long voyage to South America, wrote the 'Odyssey of a Grandmother.' It was expressly understood that it was written only for the perusal

of the immediate family, and it took further cautious maneuvering to lift this embargo.” Though not originally intended for publication, Mrs. Roosevelt’s contribution demonstrates much warmth and not a little literary skill. Her ending is very touching:

Now wanderings are done for the old nurseries are once again full of children, the fields and woods are the setting of their games. The Lilliputians have bound Gulliver, and the cords held in small hands are strong. The fire of life sinks for one generation, but its flames leap high for another.

Mary Todd Lincoln is one of the most misunderstood and vilified women in American history. It is only in recent years that we have come to have a fair appraisal of this unfortunate woman who had so much tragedy in her life. Just a few years ago, Justin G. Turner and his daughter-in-law, Linda Levitt Turner, compiled a scholarly and most readable collection of Mrs. Lincoln’s letters. Her letters are never great literary efforts, but they do portray the many moods, trials, and sufferings of this First Lady who lost her husband in a terrible crime, saw three of her four sons die before they attained maturity, and wept while several of her brothers died in a war fighting against the cause championed by her husband. Though during the past years there have been a number of excellent books about Mary Lincoln, she speaks best for herself. In 1848 she writes to her husband, who is in Washington, serving his single term as a congressman from Illinois:

You know I am so fond of sightseeing, & I did not get to New York or Boston, or travel- the lake route—But perhaps, dear husband . . . cannot do without his wife next winter, and must needs take her with him again—I expect you would cry aloud against it—How much, I wish instead of writing, we were together this evening, I feel very sad away from you. . . .

Almost thirty years later she writes to her sister, Elizabeth Todd Edwards, whose granddaughter, aged four, had recently died.

. . . sweet, affectionate little Florence, whom I loved so well. The information saddened me greatly & rendered me quite ill. I have drank so deeply of the cup of sorrow, in my desolate bereavements, that I am always prepared to sympathize, with all those who suffer, but when it comes so close to us, & when I remember that precocious, happy child, with its loving parents—what can I say? In grief, words are a poor consolation—silence & agonizing tears, are all, that is left the sufferer.

Edith Bolling Wilson was the First Lady whom many believed to be the acting president during the last year and a half of Woodrow Wilson's term of office. Her recollections were published under the title *My Memoir*, in 1939. President Wilson's first wife, Ellen Louise Axson Wilson, had died in 1914. In March 1915, in the company of Helen Bones, the president's cousin and formerly the secretary to the late Mrs. Wilson, Edith Bolling met the president. Despite the problems of a country on the verge of war, he found time for a whirlwind courtship, and she became Mrs. Woodrow Wilson in December 1915. Not at all modest, Mrs. Wilson nevertheless has significant history to relate. The account of her courtship, her experiences in Europe with President Wilson, and her trials during their last eighteen months in the White House, is absorbing and was, at the time of its publication, the first really intimate account written by a First Lady. Much has been said about Mrs. Wilson's role in the direction of the country during President Wilson's illness. Her own account begins:

So began my stewardship. I studied every paper, sent from the different Secretaries or Senators, and tried to digest and present in tabloid form the things that, despite my vigilance, had to go to the President. I, myself, never made a single decision regarding the disposition of public affairs. The only decision that was mine was what was important and what was not, and the very important decision of when to present matters to my husband.

Perhaps the best-selling of all books by First Ladies, and the work most carefully planned, was Lady Bird (Claudia Alta Taylor) Johnson's *A White House Diary*. Mrs. Johnson began an audio diary a few days after Lyndon Baines Johnson became president in November 1963. She spoke into a tape recorder whenever she could and wherever she might happen to be, whether in hotel rooms, at the LBJ Ranch, or in her combination dressing room and office on the second floor of the White House. It is a remarkable document, a great contribution to our literature about the presidency, and was so recognized by most of the book reviewers and press. Mrs. Johnson estimated that in all she spoke about 1.75 million words in a little more than five years. She went over the transcribed text several times and finally distilled the work into a book of almost eight hundred pages. From the opening entry, dated Dallas, Friday, November 22, 1963:

It all began so beautifully. After a drizzle in the morning, the sun came out bright and clear. We were driving into Dallas.

to the last entry made both in the White House and at the LBJ Ranch on Monday, January 20, 1969:

A little past 9 I went to bed, with a line of poetry reeling through my mind. I think it's from *India's Love Lyrics*. "I seek, to celebrate my glad release, the Tents of Silence and the Camp of Peace." And yet it's not quite the right exit line for me because I have loved almost every day of these five years.

Legally, Varina Howell Davis does not belong on this list of First Lady authors, but she was, in fact, the wife of a man who was president of a part of the United States for four years. She wrote many articles and one book, *Jefferson Davis, Ex-President of the Confederate States of America: A Memoir by His Wife*. Published in 1890, a year after her husband's death, it is a long work in two volumes. In her introduction Mrs. Davis states:

I shall endeavor . . . to make the book an autobiography—to tell the story of my husband's life in his own words; to complete the task he left unfinished.

It is difficult to fathom whether Varina Howell Davis functions as her husband's biographer, ghostwriter, or attorney—she succeeds at none.

And now, out of the past, almost a century after it was written, comes the personal story of another First Lady. The last to be published, it is the first memoir to be written by a president's wife. Perhaps because it was such an innovative idea, it remained unpublished all of these years. In any event, here it is. Had it been published when written we would have had no previous works with which to compare it. Now, Julia Dent Grant, gone from this earth seventy-two years ago, has to compete and be compared with her successors. But remember, she had the idea first.

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