



Lady First: The World of First Lady Sarah Polk

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The acclaimed author of *A Wicked War* now gives us the little known story of Sarah Polk: remarkably influential First Lady, and brilliant master of the art of high politics--a crucial but unrecognized figure in the history of American feminism.

At the same time as the Woman's Rights convention was taking place at Seneca Falls in 1848, First Lady Sarah Childress Polk was wielding influence unprecedented for a woman. Yet, while history remembers the women of the convention, it has all but forgotten Sarah Polk. Now, Amy Greenberg brings her story into vivid focus. We see her father raising her on the frontier to discuss politics and business as an equal with men. We see her use savvy and charm to help her brilliant but unlikeable husband ascend to the White House. And we see her exercising truly extraordinary power as First Lady: quietly manipulating elected officials, shaping foreign policy, directing a campaign in support of America's expansionist war against Mexico. Greenberg makes clear that though the Polk marriage was a partnership of equals, Sarah firmly opposed the feminist movement's demands for then-far-reaching equality. A riveting biography--and a revelation of Sarah Polk's complicated but essential part in American feminism.

Lady First: The World of First Lady Sarah Polk Details

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From Reader Review Lady First: The World of First Lady Sarah Polk for online ebook

Joseph J. says

This impressive biography joins a growing list of serious First Lady studies, and especially as with Catherine Allgor's study of Dolley Madison- A Perfect Union- focuses on an American First Lady's not admirable legacy with American slavery. James and Sarah Polk were a childless couple (Greenberg does not delve into the traumatic early surgery which left James sterile and/or impotent -see her footnotes). In their childless state James and Sarah became true political partners, eventually sharing an office in the mid-19th. century White House. Sarah's political machinations and instincts are highlighted, as is her role in Polk's often unpopular wartime Presidency. Another thrust of this biography is into their lives as slave owners. Like Dolley Madison, the pious, no liquor drinking of dancing good Christian Sarah saw her slaves as financial property and flesh and blood for hellish work on their plantations. Most sickening is James' preference for young slaves-children-as they held the potential to make more slaves. James in his will-like Washington-asked his slaves be emancipated upon Sarah's death, yet his purchase of very young slaves immediately before his own sudden death, and assurances of wealth to Sarah, suggest James was more concerned with how posterity and history may view his legacy. Sarah lived a long widowhood, straddling sectional preference during the Civil War. No doubt favoring the slave owning South-the source of her wealth-she welcomed Union soldiers and Generals Grant and Sherman into her home with cool manners. The South's defeat signaled a downturn in her fortunes, and after her death an assortment of nieces and nephews laid claim to what was left. She was an independent woman and thinker for the 19th. century and much of the biography chronicles her long widowhood and sustained presence in American memory.

Susan O says

"Although Sarah Childress Polk rose to political power by crossing boundaries, skillfully manipulating both men and women, and analyzing politics with a focus nearly as intense as that of the husband who worked himself to death, in public memory Mrs. James K. Polk was celebrated as something quite different, a First Lady who was a lady first whose politics had been driven by love and by a widow's responsibility to protect and cherish the memory of her lost husband. *It wasn't untrue, but nor was it the whole story.*" (emphasis mine)

Sarah Polk was the most well-educated first lady of her time and a companion to her husband in every way. She worked beside him politically, reading about and discussing issues of the day, corresponding with politicians, and reaching out for favors when necessary. She preferred to be with the men in the parlor after dinner than with the ladies in the drawing room. Franklin Pierce said that he would rather discuss politics with Sarah than with her husband. In spite of this, she managed to do all these things with a deference to her husband the men around her that prevented giving offense.

Greenburg paints a thorough portrait of Sarah with all the nuances that come from being an intelligent, ambitious woman of the South in the 19th century. Yes, Sarah had many admirable qualities, but she was also a slave owner. Her relationships with the enslaved people in her life are also discussed, as well as her time of maintaining a "neutral" stance during the Civil War.

While Greenburg's biography of Sarah Childress Polk was well-written and well-researched, it was somewhat dissatisfying. Partly this was due to the lack of information about Sarah, but also the epilogue seemed somewhat removed from the narrative and unnecessary to Sarah's story leaving a strange impression

at the end. Overall, it was well worth the time and I do recommend it for those interested in the lives of the First Ladies of the US.

Janilyn Kocher says

This is a very comprehensive biography. I enjoyed all the thorough research the author did on Sarah Childress Polk. The book illustrates how involved SCP was in her husband's political career. I also appreciated the background on Sarah's family and what happened to the Polk estate after her death. The author provides an expansive bibliography. Thanks to Edelweiss for the advance copy.
