



Ellen and Edith: Woodrow Wilson's First Ladies

Kristie Miller

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The wives of Woodrow Wilson were strikingly different from each other. Ellen Axson Wilson, quiet and intellectual, died after just a year and a half in the White House and is thought to have had little impact on history. Edith Bolling Wilson was flamboyant and confident but left a legacy of controversy. Yet, as Kristie Miller shows, each played a significant role in the White House.

Miller presents a rich and complex portrait of Wilson's wives, one that compels us to reconsider our understanding of both women. Ellen comes into clear focus as an artist and intellectual who dedicated her talents to an ambitious man whose success enabled her to have a significant influence on the institution of the first lady. Miller's assessment of Edith Wilson goes beyond previous flattering accounts and critical assessments. She examines a woman who overstepped her role by hiding her husband's serious illness to allow him to remain in office. But, Miller concludes, Edith was acting as she knew her husband would have wished.

Miller explains clearly how these women influenced Woodrow Wilson's life and career. But she keeps her focus on the women themselves, placing their concerns and emotions in the foreground. She presents a balanced appraisal of each woman's strengths and weaknesses. She argues for Ellen's influence not only on her husband but on subsequent first ladies. She strives for an understanding of the controversial Edith, who saw herself as Wilson's principal advisor and, some would argue, acted as shadow president after his stroke. Miller also helps us better appreciate the role of Mary Allen Hulbert Peck, whose role as Wilson's "playmate" complemented that of Ellen but was intolerable to Edith.

Especially because Woodrow Wilson continues to be one of the most studied American presidents, the task of recognizing and understanding the influence of his wives is an important one. Drawing extensively on the Woodrow Wilson papers and newly available material, Miller's book answers that call with a sensitive and compelling narrative of how private and public emotions interacted at a pivotal moment in the history of first ladies.

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