



Helen Taft: Our Musical First Lady (Modern First Ladies)

Lewis L. Gould

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In this fascinating study, Lewis L. Gould has brought a shadowy first lady into the light and restored her to a rightful place as a patron of music. Helen Herron Taft came to the White House intent on establishing Washington, D.C., as the nation's cultural capital. A stroke in May 1909 made her a semi-invalid, impaired her speech, and disrupted her agenda. Historians have written her off as a shrewish figure who pushed her portly husband into the presidency.

Gould challenges this outdated narrative with new information on Helen Taft's campaign to bring the best of classical music to the White House during her four years. He draws on prodigious research about the musicians who performed there—including violinist Fritz Kreisler, pianist Fannie Bloomfield-Zeisler, and contralto Ernestine Schumann-Heink, and reveals for the first time how Nellie Taft enlisted a diverse array of top-notch artists for her musicales, recitals, and social events. The result is a major contribution to a better understanding of the White House as a cultural center at the turn of the last century.

Beyond her musical agenda, Helen Taft enhanced the appearance of Washington with the planting of the cherry trees from Japan that now bloom each spring. Gould also delves with insight into Mrs. Taft's role in the politics of her husband's administration. He provides the most complete recounting into her part in the dismissal of Henry White as ambassador to France, a key moment in the emergence of her husband's split with Theodore Roosevelt. He discusses the nature of her stroke, based on letters from her husband and her doctors, and reveals how Mrs. Taft, her daughter Helen, and the journalist Eleanor Egan crafted the first ever memoir of any first lady. Drawing on memoirs and manuscripts not used before, Gould re-creates memorable occasions at the Taft White House, when dramatist Ruth Draper delivered her monologues, Charles Coburn staged Shakespeare on the White House lawn, and Lady Augusta Gregory of the Irish Players dropped by.

Gould's path-breaking study of Helen Taft is a significant addition to the literature on first ladies and a tribute to a complex and brave woman who overcame illness and adversity to leave her own special imprint on the history of the White House.

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