



Secret and Sacred: The Diaries of James Henry Hammond, A Southern Slaveholder

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Long encrusted in myth and legend, the planter aristocracy of the ante-bellum South has been depicted by a host of historians, economists, psychologists, novelists, dramatists, and moviemakers. Each has presented an interpretation of his or her own choosing. Now Carol Bleser brings us a remarkable set of diaries that allows one prominent planter and slaveholder to speak as himself and for himself. It affords a look at a vanished era unparalleled in its intimacy and candor.

James Henry Hammond, virtually a character out of a Faulkner novel, was a poor boy, who married into wealth and then fought and struggled to make his South Carolina plantations and slaveholdings among the largest of the South. An articulate intellectual active in politics as a Congressman, U.S. Senator, and South Carolina governor, he became a leading spokesman for the Cotton Kingdom in the last years before the Civil War. He dominated his family, sexually violated his young nieces (causing a scandal that nearly wrecked his career), and fathered children by his slaves. And all the while, he kept his "secret and sacred" diaries, almost all of which survived and have been sequestered in archives until now. Spanning the critical years from 1841 to 1864, these diaries have been masterfully edited by Bleser, who preserves their historical validity so that Hammond's unvarnished voice speaks out clearly on everything from his personal travails to the turbulent politics and key personalities of his age. More importantly, she has gracefully explicated Hammond's background and smoothed the way for the general reader so that the diaries read like a novel, sweeping through the drama and ultimate disaster of the Old South. What emerges is a vivid portrait of a man whose wealth and intellect combined to make him an important Southern leader but whose deep character flaws kept him from the true greatness to which aspired.

Anyone seeking to understand the crisis facing the Union, the nature of the Old South, the institution of slavery, and the aggrandisement of the planter class will have to read these diaries, which Louis Rubin describes in his foreword as "unique among all the historical works ever published about the Old South."

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