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Review

BLUDGEON DIPLOMACY

The 'Godfather of Secession' defends himself and his cause

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Davis, William C. and Rhett, Robert Barnwell. *A Fire-Eater Remembers: The Confederate Memoir of Robert Barnwell Rhett.* University of South Carolina Press, 2000-04-01. ISBN 157003348X

Even the title of Robert Barnwell Rhett's incomplete memoir breathes a kind of ideological fanaticism: "The Last Decade, seen in the extinction of Free Government in the United States, and the Downfall of the Southern Confederacy, in connexion with political Life and Services of the Honorable Robert Barnwell Rhett." Rigid, contentious, and breathtakingly egotistical, Rhett made other southern fire-eaters seem almost calm and restrained by comparison.

Born into an eminent family - whose name was changed from Smith to Rhett in 1837 - he became a prosperous planter whose real passion was politics, or more precisely political argument. While still in his twenties, Rhett became a fervent nullifier committed to an austere 18th-century republicanism that would shape his entire career.

A restless disciple of John C. Calhoun, he flirted with disunion almost from the beginning of his political life and certainly earned the sobriquet, "Father of Secession." Service in both the U.S. House of Representatives and the Senate failed to temper his fanatical devotion to South Carolina as the epitome of free government rightly understood. His vision was at once narrow and intense, his polemics both sharply honed and wildly off base.

This unfinished apologia bristles with a maddening mix of unfounded assertions, misleading information, endless paragraphs, and self-pitying cant. The most unattractive features of Rhett's mind and personality crop up on nearly every page. Although Rhett began working on the manuscript shortly after the Civil War, it remained in an incomplete and fragmentary state at the time of his

death - a rambling and bitter epitaph that served neither its author nor his cause particularly well.

William C. Davis has meticulously gone through the various versions of Rhett's memoir, carefully noted textual alterations, and has attempted to fashion it into a coherent book. Davis terms the work "arrogant," an apt-enough description that some readers may consider too mild. Although Rhett often wrote about himself in the third person, this futile effort at literary detachment was an affectation and sham because, in his own mind, he could always boil down any knotty problems into a series of clear principles. The only catch was that his beloved Southland failed to recognize and take advantage of his profound wisdom. At the outset of his memoir, Rhett informed readers that he would tell the unvarnished truth about how the Confederacy was created and who caused its downfall.

No use for party politicians

Like other South Carolina radicals, Rhett had no use for party politicians and harshly criticized northern Democrats for embracing what he saw as a "consolidationist" view of government. That such a description has little basis in reality seemed of trivial consequence. Always sensitive to the smallest encroachments of power on liberty, Rhett made other southern constitutional hairsplitters appear lax and pliable. In print as in life, he shunned diplomatic niceties and preferred to assail his enemies with the bludgeon rather than the stiletto. Like all too many Confederate memoirs, notably those of Jefferson Davis and Alexander Stephens, this book often makes for dry reading, especially when the author harps on some constitutional fine point.

According to Rhett, secessionists were only resisting the unconstitutional encroachment of a tyrannical majority, though he did concede that Southerners were also responding to attacks on slavery. Yet in attempting to portray himself as the most important of the Confederate founding fathers - and indeed the champion of free trade and various other reforms in the Confederate constitution - he failed to acknowledge his own disappointment with the document. He never mentioned how he had pushed for reopening the African slave trade, for repealing the Federal Constitution's three-fifths clause so as to increase representation of areas with large numbers of slaves, and for barring the admission of free states to the new southern nation. Nor did he discuss how his fellow delegates to the Montgomery convention rejected these extreme proposals

and repudiated Rhett's efforts to assume leadership of the fledgling nation. At one point he concedes that "slavery was the issue" that drove the two sections apart but then quickly adds, echoing both Alexis de Tocqueville and Calhoun, that the North was attempting to destroy the basis of free government by establishing a tyranny of the majority.

Thoroughly unreliable history

As a piece of history, Rhett's work is thoroughly unreliable. Davis's notes, amplifying and more often correcting false and misleading statements, take up nearly half as much space as the memoir itself. In addition, Rhett's animus against Jefferson Davis colors nearly the entire work. To Rhett, Davis had always seemed too moderate, a man whose heart was never in the cause of southern independence. Rhett, however, never acknowledges his own thwarted ambition, a firm belief that he deserved to be the first president of the Confederate States of America. Because of bitter disappointment and sheer pique, Rhett began a relentless campaign to undermine the new administration, even raising objections to buying furniture for the executive mansion in Richmond.

Besides castigating Davis for relying too much on the power of "King Cotton" to force the European powers into granting diplomatic recognition to the Confederacy, Rhett engaged in persistent second-guessing on military affairs. Davis stands accused of neglecting vigorous preparation to obtain arms and ammunition in the War's early months. Like many an armchair strategist, Rhett claimed that the Confederates could have easily advanced on Washington after the victory at First Manassas. But such opportunities were often squandered by a pigheaded commander in chief determined to ride roughshod over Congress through the use of executive patronage, secret sessions, and his veto pen. Even on naval affairs, Rhett considered himself a fount of wisdom.

In order to make his case against Davis, Rhett frequently distorts, omits, and exaggerates, but then accuses the president of propounding various falsehoods. At one point, editor Davis puckishly remarks, "Suffice it to say that if [Jefferson] Davis had somehow enabled his armies to walk on water, Rhett would only have attacked him for getting the soldiers' stockings wet."

During the War and often in the editorial columns of the *Charleston Mercury*, Rhett called for vigorous war policies, but even when he

acknowledged the necessity of conscription, he still offered constitutional quibbles and blamed Davis for making such a draconian measure necessary. From the first, Rhett had opposed secret congressional sessions - primarily on the grounds that such practices prevented the people from appreciating his wise counsel and brilliant speeches. He hated being out of the political spotlight, which may explain why he finally sought reelection to the Confederate Congress in 1863 even though he stood little chance of winning. If returned to Richmond, he planned to push for Davis's impeachment but the voters decided that it was Rhett who was unfit for office.

In Rhett's memoir, the president received full blame for the Gettysburg campaign plan, the loss of Vicksburg, and nearly every other military disaster. After the War, the old fire-eater was in contact with both Joseph E. Johnston and P.G.T. Beauregard, and their strong prejudices merely fed his venom against the administration. Had Rhett been designing a headstone for the Confederacy, it would have read: "Died of Davis."

The collapse of the southern nation, according to Rhett, marked the eclipse of free government. The tyrannical Abraham Lincoln deserved assassination, and even the conservative Andrew Johnson did not win the Carolinian's favor. In the final pages, Rhett offered a long diatribe against the postwar constitutional amendments as the epitome of despotism. To the embittered fire-eater, the Reconstruction years culminated in an unholy alliance of northern "oligarches" and southern "money-makers."

Yet he also predicted - abruptly shifting tone and torturing logic - that in another 30 years, southern whites would once again be "masters" of their own destinies, and one wonders if he even expected slavery to be magically reborn. However that may be and however unattractive Rhett's views and prejudices, we are in William C. Davis's debt for bringing this most unusual document into print and helping us reenter the strange world of Robert Barnwell Rhett.

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