

### **Anna: The Letters of a St. Simons Island Plantation Mistress, 1817-1859**

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## Review

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**King, Anna Matilda Page and Pavich-Lindsay, Melanie, Editor.** *Anna: The Letters of a St. Simons Island Plantation Mistress, 1817-1859.* University of Georgia Press, \$49.95 ISBN 820323322

Single head of household

Poignant letters reveal hardships

**Anna: The Letters of a St. Simons Island Plantation Mistress, 1817-1859**, a collection of more than 150 letters of Anna Page King, her husband, and children, is an important addition to the growing number of published first-hand accounts of plantation life in the antebellum South. King's letters and her personal situation have already provided substance for earlier historical studies of southern women's lives and family relationships in the Old South. This well-edited volume now allows those without access to manuscript collections to read these poignant, detailed letters. This collection also reflects a great deal of painstaking work by its editor, Melanie Pavich-Lindsay.

While collections of letters can be tedious and repetitive, it is hard to put this volume down. The evolution of the King family and the daily concerns of Anna King make for compelling reading, covering most exhaustively the decade of the 1850s when King was a mother in her fifties. With childbearing now long passed, she had to deal with maturing children, their education, social lives, and occupations. To Anna King, education was the key to success, and she hired tutors to instruct her sons and daughters when they were young. The King children eventually attended various boarding schools and, in some instances, colleges in the Northeast, to complete their schooling.

Anna King was a southern woman whose life seemed totally wrapped up in plantation management and her nine living offspring. What makes this correspondence especially interesting and King's situation unique was that her husband, Thomas Page King, spent most of these years living, traveling, and

working far from his wife and children. Elected to the Georgia legislature, then to the U.S. Congress, later appointed special agent to California, involved in mining schemes and the development of a southern transcontinental railroad, he failed at almost every money-making scheme he pursued. As a father and husband, he seemed to exhibit little guilt about being apart during these important years in his children's lives, or at least not enough to bring him home. For instance, after the sudden death of the oldest King son, Thomas was off again the very next week to pursue another financial venture. The Kings hardly conform to historians' usual perceptions of loving, child-centered planter families. The written outpourings of fatherly affection in these letters were hardly a substitute for the real thing. Only Anna's management of the plantation, Retreat, with its dozens of slaves and hundreds of acres that she inherited from her father, kept the family afloat and living the life to which it had become accustomed. However, Thomas King undermined most of her efforts by accumulating enormous debts, and he seemed anything but eager to return home and confront his creditors. Anna King struggled with the demands and ups and downs of plantation life, dealing with an economic downturn in the 1850s when the nation suffered a severe recession and decline in cotton prices.

Health issues occupy a significant portion of these letters, whether illnesses affected the King children or the family's slaves. Anna King worried incessantly that something would happen to her children while they were far from home. She concluded that many more of the King slaves died than slaves on neighboring plantations. By contrast, her health was surprisingly good, especially considering all the work and worries she shouldered. Finally, in the early 1850s, she admitted to her frazzled condition and exhaustion after caring for so many others, and she escaped to the Northeast for several months to restore her health and state of mind.

Another issue that makes these letters especially interesting is Anna's relationship with her absent husband. While this volume incorporates only a selection of letters, there is no doubt that Anna questioned Thomas's long-term absences, which literally dragged on for years at a time. At one point, she stopped attending church because she couldn't face questions from neighbors and other parishioners. As she confessed to one son on page 349, It is so long now since he [Thomas] has been leaving me for months and years—I fear I am getting used to it. But in her letters to their children, she always defended Thomas, claiming that their father was sacrificing everything for his family, and she encouraged their sons to follow his example. To this reader, what Thomas was

sacrificing and what there was to admire seemed to be best observed from afar. Her letters also suggest that Anna was not the easiest woman to live with. She placed incessant demands on her children, urging them to behave, to improve their spelling, and to write her more often. Isolated on St. Simons Island, with only family and occasional visitors as company, she found time to write, to garden, and to care for her family. Nevertheless, as Anna admitted on page 105, hers was a tread mill life.

This volume will be of immeasurable interest to students, scholars, and the general public û to all those seeking greater insights into women and plantation life in the Old South.

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