

Apples and Ashes: Literature, Nationalism, and the Confederate States of America

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Review

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Hutchison, Coleman *Apples and Ashes: Literature, Nationalism, and the Confederate States of America*. University of Georgia Press, \$69.95 ISBN 978-0-8203-4244-3

Examining Literary Nationalism

Coleman Hutchison's *Apples and Ashes* is a welcome addition to the robust and ever-growing field of Confederate nationalism scholarship. His focus is literary nationalism. Confederate literature, he argues, has been largely ignored by literary scholars due to long-standing perceptions of its overt partisanship and, even more damning, its lack of merit. Setting the issue of its quality aside, however, Hutchison maintains that its quantity and the fact that white southerners felt compelled to imagine their short-lived nation through literary means warrants serious attention. While not the first to examine Confederate literary nationalism, Hutchison, an English professor at the University of Texas at Austin, differentiates himself from the historical studies that preceded him. Whereas those books employed historical methodology and asked historical questions, his book asks explicitly "literary questions of the literary texts of the Confederacy." Not seeking to be comprehensive, Hutchison's approach is to focus closely on the "formal and rhetorical structures" of particular texts (14). Organized by genre, each of his five chapters analyzes "a single text or a small set of texts to limn a broader aspect of Confederate literary culture" (15). Those texts include a selection of antebellum editorials and reviews from the *Southern Literary Messenger*, Augusta Jane Evans's Confederate novel *Macaria*, a sampling of Confederate poetry from across the spectrum of book, broadside, and periodical literature, the song "Dixie," and Loreta Janeta Velazquez's 1876 idiosyncratic memoir, *The Woman in Battle*.

The book offers a number of fascinating insights. Echoing others, Hutchison emphasizes the aspirational nature of Confederate literature, its expectations for future national and literary greatness. He also highlights the international

currents within which Confederate authors attempted to situate themselves and to which they hoped their emerging national literature would contribute. Thus, far from being provincial, "Confederate literary nationalism was *global in its purview and imperial in its ambitions*" (12). Hutchison is at his best when closely interrogating individual texts, and his sensitivity to rhetorical techniques and nuances of language yields illuminating results. For instance, those who dismiss Evans's *Macaria* as mere propaganda "ignore the novelistic whole in view of its propagandistic parts," he contends, and fail to appreciate her "interpenetration of the partisan and the aesthetic" (98). His speculation that the first half of the novel was written before the outbreak of war is intriguing, and his analysis of the significant revisions between the 1864 and 1896 editions is highly revealing. His discussion of Confederate poetry, the widest-ranging chapter of the book, highlights the tensions between the local and the national evinced in many poems and the degree to which Confederate nationalism was always "nested," striking an "anxious" balance "between emergent national pride and entrenched local affiliation" (124, 138). While the complicated origins and competing northern/southern versions of "Dixie" are well known, Hutchison does a good job of unpacking the song as "a malleable, even promiscuous cultural object" and he shows how seemingly slight lyrical revisions fundamentally altered its ideological content (145).

Many of Hutchison's arguments are internal to the texts under discussion. This is not surprising given his focus on a relatively small number of key works, but it does raise questions about the larger applicability of his findings and how the book advances our overall understanding of Confederate nationalism. Apart from demonstrating the existence of Confederate literary nationalism and noting some of its characteristics, the book lacks a forceful overarching argument. The reader is not given enough context to judge the representativeness of the selected works, nor does this snapshot approach allow for much sense of change over time. Hutchison's laudable efforts to establish Confederate literary nationalism's international and transnational dimensions are important, but they appear as tantalizing glimpses scattered throughout the chapters rather than the type of sustained analysis that Paul Quigley provides in his recent study, for instance.

Hutchison's most important achievement, however, is his ability to straddle the divide between historians and literary scholars, in both of whose work he is extremely well-versed, and his book serves as a much needed bridge between the two. His work represents what he hopes will be "the first of many literary historical engagements with Confederate literature," and he challenges others to

follow in his footsteps (15). The exclusive domain of historians no longer, “the literature of this failed nation has a great deal to teach literary studies,” Hutchison contends, “and literary studies should have a great deal to say about that literature” (17). If this fine book is any indication of the potential fruits of such engagement, we have much to look forward to.

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