

Southern Literary Review

A Magazine for Literature of the American South

## “Apples & Ashes,” by Coleman Hutchison

May 21, 2012 By [Allen Mendenhall](#) [Leave a Comment](#)

*Apples & Ashes: Literature, Nationalism, and the Confederate States of America* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2012). 277 pgs.



### Review by Allen Mendenhall

Confederate literature and literary culture have not received the critical consideration that they warrant. Not only that, but they have been dismissed as scant and mediocre. Scholars of the South and of the Civil War—even those whose work has reached wide audiences—have paid more attention to other humanistic fields than to literature, particularly to Confederate literature and particularly during the so-called “fighting” years of 1861-1865. This neglect, argues Coleman Hutchison in *Apples and Ashes*, is regrettable because “the Confederacy gave rise to a robust literary culture.”

Several factors account for the dearth of scholarship on Confederate literature, not least of which is the fact that the Confederacy existed for only a short time, during which Confederate writers had to overcome, among other things, ink and paper shortages; many of these men and women struggled to see their work reach print in cities occupied by Union troops. Accordingly, much of what might have become Confederate literature was lost or unpublished, yet the relative shortage of Confederate literature was not due to lack of talent, but to printing paralysis.

Another reason Confederate literature has failed to become a common subject of study is the presumption that this topic is not worthwhile, largely because Confederate cultural values have been discredited. There is, today, the tendency to demonize or denounce any person who would take seriously the claims and writings of Confederate partisans, politicians, and highbrows. Yet to take something seriously is not to endorse it, and to proclaim certain intellectual matters off-limits—even if those matters are highly complex and, when studied carefully, telling about contingencies and urgencies of our own day—is dangerous and foolish indeed. Hutchison is just as aware of the importance of Confederate literature as he is of the importance of disclaiming it. “To write about the Confederate nation,” he says, “is to risk being seen as endorsing its right to exist.” He adds, emphatically, that his book “is by no means an apology for the Confederacy or Confederate nationalism,” and that he “finds almost nothing that is admirable in the politics and culture of the Civil War South.” That Hutchison feels compelled to disassociate himself from Confederate ideology at all suggests how strangely anxious the impulsive, opportunistic, or lazy readers will be to either condemn or celebrate (depending on their perspective) this book as pro-Confederate.

Mostly uninterested in matters of taste and judgment regarding the literary quality of his subjects, Hutchison submits that Confederate literature teaches literary scholars not only about the nuances and cultures of nationalism, but also about nineteenth century American (read: non-Confederate) letters generally, since Confederate literature was in conversation with—and in contradistinction to—American literary nationalism. Among the distinguishing features of Confederate literature were its aspirational impulses and its focus upon an imagined and impossible future. In some respects, the South’s *belles lettres* recognized the poignancy of a lost cause narrative before the cause was actually lost.

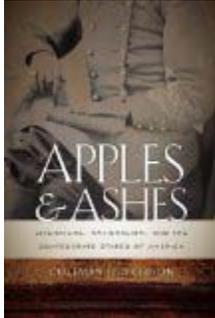
William Gilmore Simms, Edgar Allan Poe, Edward A. Pollard, Paul Hamilton Hayne—these and other writers figure prominently as the upper stratum of Southern literary society who sought cultural autonomy in their various rhetorical modes: novels, poems, plays, and so forth. Hutchison treats the *Southern Literary Messenger*, in which many of these authors published, as a revealing source for examining the “intense debate over the prospect of national literature,” since this publication “offers an uncommon opportunity to read southern literary nationalist discourse both article by article and year to year.” Northern supporters of this journal included such luminaries as Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper, John Pendleton Kennedy, and John Quincy Adams.

The best way to categorize this book is as an interdisciplinary work about Confederate literary nationalism. With chapters addressing bookmaking, music, and memoir, *Apples and Ashes* is impressively researched and beautifully delivered. Hutchison has, in this relatively short book, pointed out what many of us already knew: that the Confederacy produced literature that is worthy of study for how and why it said what it said. Even more significant are Hutchison’s observations about the role of literature in shaping Confederate expectations about its future.

Confederate authors sought to cultivate a national literature that would endure. That so few readers are familiar with Confederate literature today, and that so few scholars have written about it, suggests that the “ashes,” not the “apples,” are what most of us remember about the writing and publishing of Confederate literati. This book offers several unique perspectives of

the apples, both from our vantage point and from the vantage points of those who conceived of a new national literature as it was being produced.

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