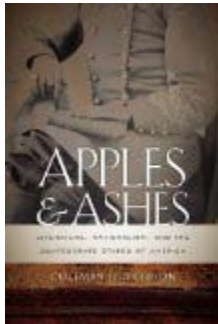


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Allen Mendenhall Interviews Coleman Hutchison

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Thank you, Dr. Hutchison, for doing this interview, and congratulations on the publication of this fine book, *Apples and Ashes*.

You address this question at length in your book, but I'll ask the question anyway for the benefit of those who have not yet read *Apples and Ashes*. Why do you think your book is one of the first to comprehensively analyze Confederate literature and literary culture? Why out of the thousands of books about the Old South and the Civil War has there been no extensive literary history of the Confederacy?

To my mind, there are three key reasons for the neglect of Confederate literature. The first is an assumption made by several generations of historians and literary critics: that there wasn't much of the stuff and in any case it wasn't very good. At first blush this assumption seems sound. Confederate writers and publishers were perpetually beleaguered. They faced severe shortages of paper, ink, type, skilled labor, and printing presses. Thus, it is with good reason that scholars would assume that Confederate literature was meager in both quantity and quality. Yet, as a number of bibliographies attest, and as my book makes clear, the Confederacy produced a startling array of literary texts. And even if a great deal of it proves to be so much patriotic bluster, such patriotic bluster is of great historical interest. After all, Confederate national feeling helped to bring about the most cataclysmic war in American history, one with more than 620,000 casualties.

Second, there is the problem of Confederate defeat. The Confederate States of America failed, and failed spectacularly. The Confederacy was, above all else, a short-lived and often chaotic experiment in nation building. Unfortunately, historians and literary critics have few models for thinking about such failed experiments, especially the emergence and collapse of a nation over the course of a mere fifty-one months. Perhaps more to the point, readers know how this story ends—at Appomattox, in

defeat, as ashes—so why should they care about the *aspirations* of Confederate writers? My book asks us to return to a moment when both a Confederate nation and a Confederate national literature were real possibilities, not merely lost causes. Although it doesn't offer a counterfactual history—What would have happened if the Confederates had won the war?—it does emphasize Confederate literature's once-great expectations over of its stultifying disappointments.

Finally, I think literary historians in particular have avoided the literature of the Confederacy because they worry about the politics of treating an overwhelmingly conservative, even reactionary set of texts that made the case for a proslavery, antidemocratic republic. Put simply, no one wants to write about the bad guys—especially if that writing will be interpreted as personal sympathy with, or an apologia for, the bad guys. For many, to write about the Confederate nation is to risk being seen as endorsing its right to exist. NB: My colleagues in history seem to have addressed any such political qualms. Over the past 25 years historians like Drew Gilpin Faust, Gary Gallagher, Anne Sarah Rubin, Stephanie McCurry, and Michael T. Bernath have produced immensely helpful histories of the Confederacy, none of which are apologies. Now it's time for literary scholars to do the same.

You make a point to say that you find “almost nothing that is admirable in the politics and culture of the Civil War South.” Such a disclaimer seems necessary for anyone wishing to engage in scholarship on the Confederacy. Why is that? Let me put this another way. Scholars in other fields usually do not find it necessary to separate their views from the views of their subjects, since that separation is generally already understood by readers. Why is your subject different?

I thought long and hard about whether to include such a disclaimer. In the end, I decided that clarity and transparency were important, in no small part because I think my colleagues' fears about the politics of writing about the Confederacy are well-founded. Alas, many people assume that a book written about the Confederacy is probably (perhaps secretly?) sympathetic to the Confederacy. I included the disclaimer in the opening pages of *Apples and Ashes* in order to force my readers to acknowledge, as you say, the separation between my views and the views of my subjects. But it was also a way to address forthrightly and quickly the politics of writing about the Confederacy before moving on to the real work at hand.

As my tone here suggests, I have very little patience for such handwringing, which, as I suggest above, is one of the reasons Confederate literature has been largely ignored for nearly a century and a half. Over the past several years I've given talk after talk on Confederate literature. I cannot tell you how many times I've been complimented for giving a “gutsy” conference presentation or public lecture. But there shouldn't be anything “gutsy” about merely doing my job—that is, trying to capture and help my readers to understand the messiness and alterity of the nineteenth century. It's not “gutsy” to pay attention to an understudied and significant literature that rewards close reading; it's actually part of my job description. I've also had no small number of conversations that begin with the questions, “Really, why would you want to write about these people? Are you a southerner? Did your ancestors fight for the Confederacy?” My answer is always the same: “Those people are of intense historical interest. Nothing more, nothing less. Oh, and I'm from Portland, Oregon, for whatever that's worth.”

All of this brings to mind something the late Jay Fliegelman said about the *Heath Anthology of American Literature's* exclusion of pro-slavery discourses. (The *Heath*, which was hugely important in

making available a multicultural American literary canon, included a number of abolitionist texts.) To ignore such discourses was, Fliegelman wrote, to “embarrassingly reproduce a cultural history of winners. The voices of reaction have to be encountered in all their complexity and not assumed to be self-evident or dismissed as too offensive” (“Anthologizing the Situation of American Literature” *American Literature* 65 [1993]: 335.) This quotation serves as an epigraph for *Apples and Ashes*, and it was a guiding principle in researching the book. As I wrote, I kept thinking how much we lose when we only tell the winner’s story, when we dismiss any part of a rich and vexed literary history.

My review does not say enough about Confederate identification with England, particularly in the literary context. Your book, however, is in a sense “comparative.” It seeks in various ways to show how Southerners tried to create a national literature that was distinct from the literature of other regions. Do you think *Apples and Ashes* contributes to the discipline of comparative literature or to what is now being called transnational studies?

I take that as a high compliment, Allen. I, too, think of the book as a comparative study. My methodology was heavily influenced by postcolonial theory, the comparative history of nationalisms, and the sociology of culture. As a result, I understand literary nationalism to be a relative and contingent phenomenon, a function of cross-cultural comparison. At the risk of putting too fine a point on it, literary nationalism happens when people distinguish their literature from the literature of other people.

As you suggest, this was particularly the case with Confederate writers, who were exceedingly anxious about the relationship between their nascent literary culture and that of the United States and England. Such anxiety requires, then, that my book constantly shuttle between the Confederate and United States of America; the book also makes a number of unexpected detours to places in Europe and Latin America.

Because *Apples and Ashes* identifies a number of specific mechanisms by which literary nationalism helped to engender the Confederate States of America, I hope that my book will help scholars and readers to better understand the relationship between literature and nationalism more broadly. Although my book doesn’t offer a theory of literary nationalism per se, it does tout the usefulness of the Confederate example for thinking about the role of literature in the imagining of political communities.

Finally, while *Apples and Ashes* makes clear the international roots and routes of Confederate literature, it also puts some pressure on the new transnational studies. I acknowledge that the “transnational turn” has been exceedingly productive for literary and cultural studies; at the same time, I worry that it has turned us away prematurely from the study of nations and nationalism. While I applaud the desire to “think and feel beyond the nation”—to write, that is, postnational, transnational, hemispheric, and global literary histories—I think there’s still a great deal of work to be done with and on the nation. For instance, despite decades of intensive study, we seem no closer to a full understanding of the relationship between literature and nationalism. A wide range of scholars agree that there is something fundamentally “literary” about the construction of nationality, but details remain vague.

***Apples and Ashes* is somewhat groundbreaking in its approach to an understudied subject. Is there related work that needs to be done in this area, a gap in scholarship that still needs to be filled?**

Apples and Ashes does not aim to be comprehensive; it is an idiosyncratic rather than a definitive literary history of the Confederacy. As such, I sincerely hope that this will be the first of many literary historical engagements with Confederate literature. (Indeed, I wrote my endnotes with the work of future scholars in mind.) There is still a great deal of work to be done on pre-Confederate southern literary nationalism (the subject of Chapter One). I also unearthed an immense amount of Confederate popular poetry. Scholars of nineteenth-century American poetry would do very well to treat some of these fascinating and troubling poems—many of which, I hasten to add, are available online. Finally, I'd love to see more scholarship on the relationship between the bellum and postbellum literatures of the South. In what ways did the literature of the Confederacy influence the literature of Reconstruction, to say nothing of the literature of the so-called "Southern Renaissance"? As this suggests, I also hope that my book will help to draw attention back to the literature of nineteenth-century South more broadly. (Alas, much of southern studies—both old and "new"—continues to privilege the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.)

Which author do you think was most important to the development of Confederate literary nationalism?

This is a very difficult question, especially since my book argues for the importance of amateur and anonymous Confederate writers. Nonetheless, I think William Gilmore Simms's lifelong advocacy for a distinct and distinctive southern literature was crucially important to the ways Confederates thought about their nascent national literature. (In Chapter One, I discuss the following, apocryphal 1856 Southern Commercial Convention resolution: "Resolved, That there be a Southern Literature. Resolved, That William Gilmore Simms, L.L.D., be requested to write this literature.") For this reason, I'm particularly excited about the work of the Simms Initiatives at the University of South Carolina. If scholars and readers can have easier access to Simms's enormous corpus of texts, then perhaps we can better understand Confederate literary culture and its legacies.

I also think Augusta Jane Evans was a pivotal figure for Confederate literary nationalism. On the eve of the war, the author of *Beulah* (1859) was one of the South's rising literary stars. By 1867, with the publication of *St. Elmo*, she had become one of nineteenth-century America's bestselling novelists. In between Evans produced one of the few successful Confederate novels, *Macaria* (1864), wrote passionately about the future of southern literature, and even pushed the Confederate Congress to extend reciprocal international copyright to foreign authors. There is still much, much work to be done on this recalcitrant figure.

Thanks again for taking the time. I hope that many of our readers will purchase this book and take seriously its compelling arguments.