

Rhett: The Turbulent Life and Times of a Fire-Eater

William C. Davis



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William C. Davis's biography of Robert Barnwell Rhett provides a definitive picture of South Carolina's most prominent secessionist and arguably the best known in the nation during the two decades leading up to the Civil War. Dubbed the "Father of Secession," Rhett attached himself to South Carolina statesman John C. Calhoun, but grew more zealous than his mentor on the secession issue. Rhett first raised the possibility of secession in 1826, well before Calhoun adopted the notion, and would ever after hold fast to his one great idea. In this examination of Rhett's personal and political endeavors, Davis draws upon many newly found sources to reveal the extremism that would make and mar Rhett's adult life. Davis traces the statesman's obsession with a separation from the union, which he initially associated with a protective tariff and internal improvements but by the 1840s had unabashedly connected with slavery. Davis details Rhett's seven terms in Congress, his short-lived stint as a United States Senator, and his leading role in the South's newly energized movement toward secession after the 1860 election. Davis reveals Rhett's ambition to be rewarded with the presidency of the new Confederacy or, at least, a premier cabinet post, and his disappointment when he received neither. Impoverished and embittered at war's end, Rhett spent his last eleven years planting and writing, devoting himself primarily to a caustic personal memoir that he would never complete. Davis evaluates Rhett's place in history as the hungriest of the "fire-eaters" and finds that such rabid extremism rendered Rhett largely ineffectual, with even South Carolinians refusing to march to his most radical drumbeats.

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