

# Princes of Cotton: Four Diaries of Young Men in the South, 1848-1860

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## Review

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**Berry, Stephen, ed.** *Princes of Cotton: Four Diaries of Young Men in the South, 1848-1860*. University of Georgia Press, \$44.95 hardcover ISBN 9780820328843

### Young Men of the Cotton Kingdom

Fifteen years ago, Michael O'Brien's *An Evening When Alone: Four Journals of Single Women in the South, 1827-67* was the inaugural offering in what has become a long-standing and highly respected documentary history series by The Southern Texts Society. O'Brien's book "launched the society, provided a model for its subsequent releases, and gave the world four distinctive voices to set beside Mary Chesnut and Sarah Morgan" (xiv). In this tradition, Stephen Berry's *Princes of Cotton* seeks to provide O'Brien's book with "a brother" (xiv)—a glimpse into the coming-of-age diaries of four young men in the antebellum South. Punctuated by Berry's captivating prose, *Princes of Cotton* contributes significantly to the new wave of scholarship using race, class, gender and *age* to further explore the shaping of southern identity.

Berry has selected four fascinating yet distinctive diaries for his book: the journal of Harry St. John Dixon, a Mississippian student obsessed with young ladies and the prospect of attending the University of Virginia; the journal of Henry Hughes, an aspiring lawyer bent on greatness and "world domination" (12); the journal of John Albert Feaster Coleman, a South Carolinian farmer whose life followed the daily rhythm of the ground he chose to toil; and the journal of Henry Craft, who chronicled an intimate story of his grief after the death of his fiancée, Lucy. All four men were at different points in their coming-of-age stories, yet shared in a common desire to commit to and develop a well-chosen career, and to use their public and familial lives to reinforce their social respectability.

Of Berry's four southern diarists, the impetuous Harry St. John Dixon from Deer Creek, Mississippi, was least advanced in his journey toward manhood. Betwixt and between boyhood and adulthood, Harry found himself outgrowing his teacher's instruction yet stuck in a waiting game for college. While undertaking a strict study regime filled with all the staples of a sound antebellum education, Harry yearned for the college camaraderie and intellectual pursuits on offer at the University of Virginia. "I cannot but feel despondently when I think that 5 long months must go slowly by before time comes for me to go" he wrote in May 1860 (111). Education, he realized, was one of the key ingredients necessary to make a man out of a boy, and something that separated the gentlemen from those further down the social ladder. So too was the individual assertion of masculinity and self worth, and more importantly, its recognition by the community. When Harry was "overlooked" and ignored by his father's friends and associates, he readily acknowledged the "humiliating indignity" he felt over his social invisibility. "Is it because I am a *boy*?" he wrote. "Because I have no hair on my chin and have not been to College?" (91) While Harry could attend dances, "feel ankles, squeeze hands, and clasp [the] waists" (95) of the pretty belles in attendance, he was, in the end, just another gentleman-in-training. And he knew it.

Fellow Mississippian Henry Hughes may have graduated college, but at the commencement of his law career, he too was absorbed by visions of manhood. Studying under Thomas Jefferson Durant, district attorney for Louisiana, Hughes was plagued by ill health and eye complaints which forced him to periodically return to the Hughes family home in Port Gibson. Unable to read for weeks at a time, Henry shunned society, opting instead to retreat further into himself and his visions of grandeur. Convinced that he was poised on the verge of greatness, he directed his "chiefest meditations" to the "mysteries of Association—suggestion, and of space, time, words and relations" (219). "The World is making ready for me," he concluded in 1848. "The Republics of earth shall all be joined in one Government. I will be their ruler. I feel that for some such destiny as this, God has marked me out" (219). In the pages of his diary, Henry may have been man among men, but in the bustle of 1840s New Orleans, he was a lonely, mediocre lawyer, who had few friends and even fewer female acquaintances. Unable to attain the recognition of his peers—Henry once remarked that only the office boy talked to him, and then only if there was no one else around—Hughes used his journal to build a vision of his life and his southern identity as he wished it could be, not what it was.

And while Henry's head was in the clouds, South Carolinian farmer John Albert Feaster Coleman's mind was on the task at hand. His visions of grandeur amounted to a good cotton or corn crop, shooting a turkey, or winning the love of a down-to-earth girl not afraid of getting her hands dirty. Masculinity, Coleman believed, was earned in daily increments of toil and was reaffirmed through man's seasonal relationship to the land. It was validated by deeds, and rewarded with familial love and contentment. Bereft of contemplation—with the exception of a few blighted remarked about the useless, ornamental lives of elite southern women—John Coleman placed his feet and his masculinity firmly on the ground, where he tied his sense of self worth and recognition by the community to the success of his crop or his prowess over the pistol.

And while John Coleman was ploughing in the steamy Carolina sun, Henry Craft was reflecting on the loss of his fiancée, Lucy, on their eve of their wedding day. Gripped by an all powerful sense of grief that threatened to engulf him within the confines of his room at Princeton University, Henry also mourned the loss of his status as a husband and master, and feared that he may never find love again. After returning to Holly Springs, Mississippi, Henry studied for the bar while contemplating his miserable fate. Yet by applying himself to his work, and using his diary as a way to contemplate his grief, Henry slowly came to the realization that there was still a great deal of possibility and promise in the future. "For a time my heart has been crushed," he noted, "stunned as it were, the cords all unstrung, but I rejoice to find that it is not dead, that I may hope yet" (473). In letting go of the ideal of masculinity so inextricably linked to his nuptials with Lucy Hull, Henry affirmed his self worth through his professional and social ties. "Since my last birthday I have left Princeton, have been admitted to the bar, formed a partnership with an eminent lawyer & assumed the position of a man in the world under more propitious circumstance than young men entering professions generally do," he wrote proudly (493).

Harry St. John Dixon sought southern manhood through education, Henry Hughes through intellectualism and his study of the mind, John Albert Feaster Coleman through planting, and Henry Craft through marriage. *Princes of Cotton* reminds us that southern masculinity, while underpinned by the acknowledgement of self worth and its recognition by the community, was also a dynamic ideal that molded itself to the contours of life's experiences. Stephen Berry's engaging and insightful analysis, coupled with his sound editorial principals, provide the perfect framework for these diaries that will be enjoyed by academics, students, and history enthusiasts alike.

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