
The Confederate Plantation Mistress in Britain, 1861-65

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Abstract

This paper will examine women's narratives of the plantation South published in Britain during the American Civil War (1861-65). In 1863, former plantation actress and British actress Fanny Kemble published a journal of her life on a Georgia plantation (*Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation in 1838-1839*) in Britain. This diary was staunchly pro-Union and its publication worked to deter Britain from formally recognizing the Confederacy. On the other side of the conflict, also in 1863, convicted Confederate spy Rose Greenhow fled to Britain seeking refuge after her imprisonment and wrote a narrative of her time as a spy (*My Imprisonment and First Year of Abolitionist Rule in Washington*). Her narrative was unapologetically pro-Confederate and presented a case for British and French official recognition of the Confederacy. (While in Europe, Greenhow served as an official emissary for the Confederacy and met with British and French government leaders to rally support.) While positioning themselves on opposite sides of the conflict, both Kemble and Greenhow used the British press and publishing culture to advance their respective causes in the American Civil War. The advent of the greatest crisis in American history (up to this point) resulted in an increased international role for the southern plantation mistress: Publishing their narratives in Europe gave them greater political legitimacy than if they had been published in the American South. In the debates surrounding the American Civil War in Europe, southern women's first-person narratives were seen to have political meaning and relevancy to international affairs. Furthermore, in writing such narratives, these southern women became relevant political actors within this political culture in Europe; in the American South, they were excluded from such a political culture. As such, southern women had a greater political voice in Europe than in their own country during the American Civil War.

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