



Mary's World : Love, War, and Family Ties in Nineteenth-century Charleston

Richard N. Cote

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Born to affluence and opportunity in the South's Golden Age, Mary Motte Alston Pringle (1803-1884) represented the epitome of Southern white womanhood. Her husband, William, was a wealthy rice planter who owned four plantations and 337 slaves. Her thirteen children included two Harvard scholars, seven world travelers, three socialite daughters, a U.S. Navy war hero, six Confederate soldiers, one possible Union collaborator, a Confederate firebrand trapped in the North, an expatriate bon vivant in France, and two adventuresome California pioneers.

Mary's World illuminates in lavish detail the world and psyche of this wealthy, well-educated, highly-principled nineteenth-century Southern planter's wife. This biography was drawn directly from over 2,500 pages of Mary's unpublished letters, journals and diaries, none of which, she could have imagined, would ever be read by strangers. Therein lies their power.

In her own words, Mary tells us about the joys, sorrows, frustrations, and terrors she and her family faced before, during, and after the Civil War. We also learn about the vastly different lifestyles, food, clothing, and experiences of their 337 slaves. Mary's World also pays special attention to Lucretia "Cretia" Stewart, Mary's favorite servant, Cretia's husband, Scipio, and their free descendants, some of whom worked for Mary's grandchildren well into the twentieth century.

Between 1861 and the Union occupation of Charleston in 1865, Mary and her husband, William, stood helpless as two sons were killed, another was driven insane, their slaves were freed, their entire social class was destroyed. Mary felt that God had forsaken her and the the Confederacy. Unable to adapt to the realities of post-war life, she and William died forlorn relics of The Lost Cause. How they, their children, and slaves lived before the Civil War, clung desperately to life in the eye of the maelstrom, and coped -- or failed to cope -- with its bewildering aftermath is the story of this book. The letters and images they left behind offer priceless insights into the roots of Southern social history.

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