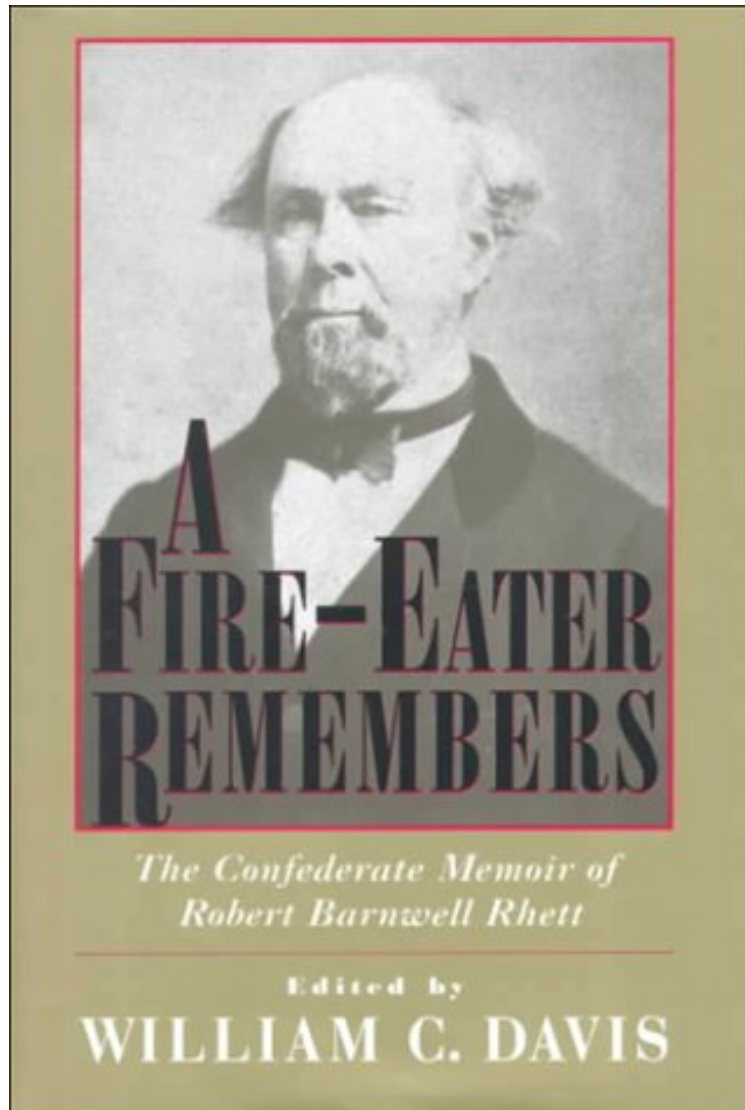


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Robert Barnwell Rhett
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Robert Barnwell Rhett : A Fire-Eater Remembers: The Confederate Memoir of Robert Barnwell Rhett before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised A Fire-Eater Remembers: The Confederate Memoir of Robert Barnwell Rhett:

3 of 4 people found the following review helpful. Rhett on the AttackBy Kevin M. DerbyWilliam C. Davis compiled some of the various autobiographical writings and musings of Robert Barnwell Rhett in an attempt to cobble together some insight into that pivotal secessionist. After the war, Rhett tried to write an autobiography but never quite finished

it. Scholars should be grateful to Davis for editing this book. Rhett lashes out at political leaders both North and South in this book. Rhett presents his view of why the Confederacy failed and argues that the establishment of the Confederate government and the election of Jefferson Davis doomed the fledgling nation. Rhett presents a number of arguments against both Jefferson Davis and Lincoln which William C. Davis feels the need to comment on in the endnotes. Considering how many corrections Davis needed to make, he should have used footnotes. Rhett's style is dry but his account is an interesting one. Davis wrote an excellent introduction. If dry and legalistic and often incorrect, Rhett's account offers insight into why the men who led the fight for secession were quickly tossed aside in the new Confederacy. This is a fascinating book for political historians of the era though its appeal is obviously limited. 13 of 15 people found the following review helpful. "South Carolina is too small to be a Nation...By Barrie W. Brackenand too large to be an iunsane asylum." Robert Barnwell [Smith]Rhett believed he could create the former and became the latter's most prominent inmate.Rhett was a man of great arrogance, ambition, determination, and little else. Fellow South Carolina radical James Hammond described him as "utterly odious" outside the home state. The South Carolina elite rated Rhett "the most untrustworthy politician in the State. . . . He wants judgment and can never be relied upon for statesmanship." [Quote from Freehling, Road to Disunion, volume II, p. 382]. Most of the influence he had was because of his Charleston Mercury. Rhett would have gloried in the accolade offered by his biographer White--the Father of Secession--but it is hyperbole. He did no more to ensure secession, in fact less, than his fellow fire-eaters Ruffin, Hammond, Yancey, et al. The League of United Southerners formed by Yancey and Ruffin did more for bringing on secession than any of Rhett's ranting and raving.So what is the value of this book? Let it speak for itself. In his very fine biographical introduction Davis states, "within all his fulminating about securities and betrayals or Jefferson Davis and his friends, their lies an invaluable view of the founding fathers at their work in creating the Confederate government, an often dramatic account of the birth pains of a new would-be nation [xv]. Once the new nation became viable Rhett did all possible to dethrone the traitor Davis and denigrate the dictator Lincoln . "The only document put forth by the Confederate Congress, or any of the states, in justification of their confederacy, in their war against the United States, was written by Mr. Rhett [he speaks in the third person throughout]. . . . The real issue involved in the relations between the North and the South of the American States, is the great principle of self-government. Shall the dominant party of the North rule the South, or shall the people of the South rule themselves. This is the great matter in controversy.... it is impossible, we suppose, for the wit of man to conceive a worse government, than that by which the absolute rule of one people, acting under popular institutions, Rhett established over another people, having different pursuits of industry, habits, and institutions [47-48]."Rhett preaches the same justification for state's rights as his predecessors and contemporaries, "there is not a factor whole history more indisputable, then that the several States, which adopted the Constitution of the United States, for the establishment of a government over them, at the time of its adoption were free, sovereign, and independent States; and by no declaration of theirs have they renounced their Sovereignty [49]." Of course he cannot escape the opportunity to defame the hated Jefferson Davis, "Jefferson Davis, far more than Abraham Lincoln, produced the catastrophe. The Government of the Confederacy, destroyed the Confederacy [87-88.]"There are more interesting and detailed journals and diaries written by a fire eaters, but William Davis has done a great service in presenting this particular journal it puts Rhett in its proper place in history. For this reason I give it five stars.6 of 9 people found the following review helpful. Great Subject Marred by Hostile EditorBy JamesAt times, William C. Davis' hostility to his subject is downright ridiculous. Anyone who Rhett likes was a crank; anyone Rhett dislikes was a pillar of statesmanship and virtue. If Rhett ever omits anything, then he's got something to hide. If Rhett ever attributes the division between the North and the South to anything besides slavery, then he's "overstating" his points and "sanitizing" history.W. Davis never gives Rhett the benefit of the doubt, and always assumes that any factual inaccuracies in his memoirs is a malicious lie, not a mistake. At one point, while Rhett is wrongly blaming President Jefferson Davis for the Gettysburg Campaign, W. Davis says that Rhett would not have believed that it was Lee's idea if Lee himself had told him. That's the level of hatred the editor has for his subject; it's embarrassingly unprofessional. Instead of providing historical context or clarification in his footnotes, W. Davis is literally ranting and raving with a venom worthy of Rhett himself. I'm not a Rhett apologist - there are things I like and dislike about him - but I am against unjust and unfounded calumnies upon someone's character, especially someone who cannot even defend himself.In spite of this rampant bias - which, by attempting to discredit Rhett at every turn, makes it hard to get into what he has to say - the text itself is well worth a read. As far as I know, next to Edmund Ruffin's diary, there are no other autobiographies of the Fire-Eaters. Embittered, Rhett believed that those whom were chosen over him - especially President Davis - by restricting free trade, usurping civil liberties, and failing to prepare for war, had betrayed the Confederacy. Believe it or not, Rhett actually says that J. Davis was more responsible for the Confederacy's downfall than Abraham Lincoln.Rhett was often blinded by his arrogance and bitterness, but his dedication to Southern independence is unquestionable. He was championing secession even before his mentor, the great John C. Calhoun. Rhett was not right about everything - no one ever is - but what W. Davis seems to have forgotten is that even an imperfect, flawed, and biased perspective offers valuable insight into the thoughts and feelings of those who actually made history. Something written in the agony of defeat or the thrill of victory tells me more about what it was like to live back then

than anything else. +5 stars for Rhett, -1 star for W. Davis

Some people called Robert Barnwell Rhett the Father of Secession. This book illuminates Rhett's role in secession's time and passage. It tells of Rhett's interest in secession doctrine as early as 1828 and his outspoken support of disunion fully a quarter-century before 1861.

About the Author William C. Davis is the author or editor of thirty-five books on the civil war and southern history, most recently *A Way Through the Wilderness*, *"A Government of Our Own": The Making of a Confederacy*, and the prizewinning biography *Jefferson Davis: The Man and His Hour*. For many years a magazine publisher, Davis now divides his time between writing and consulting for book publishers and television.