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James Hamilton of South Carolina (Southern Biography Series)

Robert Tinkler

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An esteemed planter, politician, and military leader influential in the affairs of both South Carolina and Texas, James Hamilton (1786--1857) so declined in reputation during the last twenty years of his life that his home state refused to acknowledge him when he died. Robert Tinkler's superb, first-published biography of Hamilton conveys the enormous drama, dignity, and pathos that marked Hamilton's pursuit of the greatness achieved by his prominent Revolutionary-era forebears and his subsequent profound reversal brought on by debt.

While a member of Congress during the 1820s, Hamilton came to champion states' interests over a strong central national government. As governor of South Carolina, 1830--1832, he reached the pinnacle of his political and social glory when he presided over the Nullification Crisis of 1832. Hamilton's undoing began with a series of ill-advised cotton speculations that left him deeply and very publicly in arrears by 1839. He desperately sought relief -- even supporting the Compromise of 1850 in hopes of monetary benefit, while alienating his old allies in the process. To his fellow southerners, Hamilton became a scourge and embarrassment as one who compromised his political beliefs because of fiscal distress.

Perhaps even more than his political apostasy, Hamilton's unforgivable offense may have been to remind planters of their own struggles with chronic debt. Tinkler's extraordinary research into both Hamilton's life and the dynamics of reputation and debt in the antebellum South suggests that many contemporaries simply wished to forget Hamilton's plight so as to avoid facing their own financial reality. Possessing the weight of tragedy, James Hamilton of South Carolina documents a powerful man's achievements and the events and personal flaws that led to his fall.

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