

## Profiles of 24 Southern literary lions

### Fire in the Cradle: Charleston's Literary Heritage

by David Aiken. Charleston Press. 222 pages. \$28.98.

In "Fire in the Cradle," we view 24 lives trying to establish firm footings — an archetypal Southern experience.

Dr. David Aiken, a professor of English at Charleston Southern University, begins his book with the life of Eliza Lucas Pinckney, "the founding matriarch of Charleston literature," and then proceeds to its "founding father," William Gilmore Simms. Both these authors are shown to have had fertile soil for their work that began an incredibly rich and varied literary culture, which has endured to this day.

The "Fire" of the book's title is an intriguingly rich choice of words. It refers to creative fire, fueled by a nurturing culture based on family, place and tradition. It refers to the fire of two destructive wars and brutal invasions that tested its culture's mettle and threatened to kill it, but instead strengthened its capacity for endurance and survival, and forged a common bond of shared tragedy and triumph.

It is thus the fire of freedom sought, frustrated, but rekindled. It is the fire of hope and renewed life, the fire of the spirit coming out of the fire of destruction. And most certainly, it is the refined spiritual flame that only burns from a deep understanding of life gained from tragedy. The book's fire imagery provides a unifying and artful thematic touchstone.

Above all, the 24 stories portray the nobility of endurance in the face of amazing hardship and cataclysm. That is what Charleston itself comes to symbolize.

One sees clearly why Aiken can claim that Charleston writing is

really the beginning of the great Southern literary tradition, for endurance and redemption are two of that great literature's most celebrated themes.

And Aiken's writing is itself inspired. One is often moved by the eloquence showing through the simplicity of the telling. Each chapter has its lessons of character, resembling "Plutarch's Lives" — a classic, incidentally, that was a primary text in the antebellum South for the education of the young, and a work that has some close affinities with Aiken's.

What is so refreshing about Aiken's book is that despite this profundity, each chapter is like a visit to an old friend. When you leave, you feel you know your acquaintance remarkably well. The chapters are based on extensive and careful scholarship, but this is disguised by the easy and personal narrative voice. The chapters exhibit the oral tradition, which is such a strong and effective hallmark of the Southern

style. They are like stories told on the piazza. It is so remarkable in this age of scholarly pseudo-objectivity to find a writer who is free of condescension, pretentiousness, arrogance and unashamedly respectful of his subject.

More than just a recounting of the lives of 24 authors, then, this work is a sensitive portrayal of a place and its meaning. Jonathan Poston's excellent "The Buildings of Charleston," taken together with "Fire in the Cradle," now constitute the best recent history we have of the city.

What one sees in Charleston's current authors are the same strengths one finds in all her past authors. And this is a telling measure of the depth, validity and worth of the culture.

Some of the true high points of the volume are Aiken's stellar chapters on Timrod, Beatrice Ravenel, John Bennett, Elizabeth O'Neill Verner, Sam Stoney, Drayton Mayrant, Herbert Ravenel Sass, Alexandra Ripley and Robert Jordan.

Aiken's volume leads one to look more closely at Sass, John Bennett, Josephine Humphreys, Alexandra Ripley, Alice Ravenel Huger Smith and others. And one supposes this is the final true test of a book.

In summary, "Fire in the Cradle" is a rare performance, itself a real addition to the abiding cultural traditions of the city, and a gift that will only strengthen her cultural values at their best. The writings of her best authors, now properly placed, should take their proper position alongside these monuments.

No reader will leave this book without being greatly enriched in a number of ways. It is cause for celebration to witness the birth of the Charleston Press, which has begun an auspicious enterprise with this, its first volume.

**JAMES EVERETT KIBLER**

(James Everett Kibler is a professor of English at the University of Georgia and the author of "Our Fathers' Fields.")

