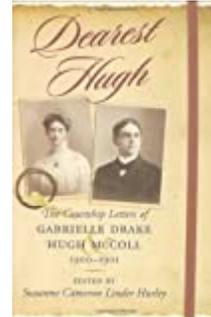




Suzanne Hurley, ed. *Dearest Hugh: The Courtship Letters of Gabrielle Drake and Hugh McColl, 1900-1901*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2008. xxxvii +164 pp.p Plates. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57003-714-6.



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Dearest Hugh

In this age of Internet dating and text-message romance, it is not only instructive but refreshing to read courtship letters written a century ago. These documents reveal social expectations and mores, and they remind the modern audience that while the formalities of establishing a romantic relationship may have changed over times, the emotions, pitfalls, and triumphs of a working on a lifelong bond have not.

Hugh McColl was a young Southerner with excellent prospects. The son of a bank president, McColl was working as a cashier in a bank in Bennettsville, South Carolina when he began pursuing Gabrielle Drake. She was an example of the "New Woman" of the turn of the century: well educated (a recent graduate of Converse College in Spartanburg), literary, and determined to start a career as a teacher. Attractive if not stunningly beautiful, she had several suitors, but McColl was by far the most persistent. Beginning in the summer of 1900 and lasting to their wedding day in November of the following year, the young couple engaged in a vast and diverse correspondence, from brief notes confirming rendezvous

for buggy rides to long, passionate letters in which McColl generally pleaded for Drake to set a wedding date while she debated the wisdom of becoming a bride at such an early age. The almost decade's age difference between the two made for the inevitable tension as the completely smitten McColl wanted to settle down while Drake had hoped for at least a few years of being her own mistress and having an independent income. McColl's promises and personal reforms finally won her over, and the pair lived happily, becoming the parents of three children and pillars of the community before Hugh's death at the age of fifty-six.

The twenty-fifth volume in the series *Women's Diaries and Letters of the South*, this collection is impressive on many levels. First is its completeness: both McColl's and Drake's voices are heard, questions are asked and answered just pages apart. A reader quickly creates a mental image of the lovers and their personalities. *Dearest Hugh* also provides a primer on early twentieth-century upper-middle class courtship. The emotional depths and growing levels of intimacy can eas-

ily be gauged. One can observe as Drake puts her swain through various trials and tests, unwilling to give up her opportunities for freedom without being certain of his level of devotion. *Dearest Hugh* is one of the best representations of the inner life of a New Woman, highlighting as it does the terrible choice that women faced in an era when they could marry and have a family or pursue a career, but could not hope for both.

The volume contains a well-written introduction that helps the reader understand the conventions of courtship and provides additional information on the lives that the McColls led both before and after their union. The notes are likewise useful and not intrusive. Readers will not

learn much about Southern politics or business in this volume, because almost all the action takes place in the hearts of two young people who had become each other's world. Their almost complete self-absorption might be a flaw to some readers, but the missives' texts reveal much about how upper-crust Southerners sought and captured lifelong companions in an era when plantations and slaves were becoming a more distant memory.

A reader searching for a rare look into the makings of a happy marriage—or perhaps wondering how to impress a significant other who despises e-mails and phone messages—will find *Dearest Hugh* to be a delightful journey into real romance.

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