



Murder, Honor, and Law: Four Virginia Homicides between Reconstruction and Great Depression (The American South Series)

Richard F. Hamm

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In 1868 a scion of one of the leading families of Richmond, Virginia, ambushed and killed the city's most controversial journalist over an article that had dishonored the killer's family. In 1892 a Democratic politician killed a crusading Danville minister after a dispute at the polls. In 1907 a former judge shot to death the son of the Nelson County sheriff for an alleged rape, and in 1935 an Appalachian schoolteacher stood accused of killing her father by beating him with a shoe. All of these killers stood trial; two were convicted and two were acquitted. These cases attracted extensive press coverage, and journalists became not only recorders of the stories but integral parts of them, constructing the meaning of the events as they occurred and blurring the lines between reporter and reported.

Journalists from outside the state in their coverage of these cases provoked Virginians, and especially the press, to explain the interaction of their social values and legal system. In *Murder, Honor, and Law*, Richard F. Hamm explores the contrasts between how and to what effect national, particularly northern, newspapers perceived and portrayed Virginia law and custom versus how local papers covered the same events. In each of the cases Hamm shows the interplay of national media and culture with southern law, values, and culture and highlights how newspapers accepted, produced, altered, and disseminated ideas of southern exceptionalism, especially ideas about honor and chivalry. By focusing on the evolving press coverage of a number of crimes and trials over seventy years, Hamm illuminates the shift in southerners' defenses against northern criticism from a position of pride in a society in which honor could trump law to claims that the South was just as law-abiding as the rest of the nation. He thus illustrates some key aspects for transformations of southern exceptionalism.

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