



James Z. George: Mississippi's Great Commoner

Timothy B. Smith

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"When the Mississippi school boy is asked who is called the 'Great Commoner' of public life in his State," wrote Mississippi's premier historian Dunbar Rowland in 1901, "he will unhesitatingly answer James Z. George." While George's prominence, along with his white supremacist views, have decreased through the decades since then, many modern historians still view him as a supremely important Mississippian, with one writing that George (1826-1897) was "Mississippi's most important Democratic leader in the late nineteenth century."

Certainly, the Mexican War veteran, prominent lawyer and planter, Civil War officer, Reconstruction leader, state Supreme Court chief justice, and Mississippi's longest serving United States senator to that time deserves a full biography. And, George's importance was greater than just on the state level as other Southerners copied his tactics to secure white supremacy in their own states. That James Z. George has never had a full, academic biography is inexplicable.

James Z. George: Mississippi's Great Commoner seeks to rectify the lack of attention to George's life. In doing so, this volume utilizes numerous sources never before or only slightly used, primarily a large collection of George's letters held by his descendents and never used by historians. Such wonderful sources allow a glimpse not only into the life and times of J. Z. George, but perhaps more importantly an exploration of the man himself, his traits, personality, and ideas. The result is a picture of an extremely commonplace individual on the surface, but an exceptionally complicated man underneath. James Z. George: Mississippi's Great Commoner will bring this important Mississippi leader of the nineteenth century back into the minds of twenty-first century Mississippians.

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