George McDuffie Biography

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Biography

George McDuffie (1790-1851), U.S. senator, was a leading exponent of states' rights in the period before the Civil War.

George McDuffie was born near Augusta, Ga., on Aug. 10, 1790, the son of a poor farmer. At the age of 12, while working as a clerk, he attracted the attention of William Calhoun (the brother of John C. Calhoun), who helped him attend South Carolina College. Upon admission to the bar in 1815, McDuffie settled in Edgefield, S.C., developing such a lucrative practice that he was able to buy a cotton plantation (Cherry Hill) in 1829. That same year he married Mary Rebecca Singleton.

In 1821 McDuffie was elected a member of the House of Representatives from South Carolina, serving until 1834, when he was elected governor of the state. Like John C. Calhoun, he began his career as a nationalist but soon joined the ranks of the states' righters. As a delegate to the state nullification convention in 1832, he preferred to secede from the Union rather than to submit to Federal authority. After the adoption of the compromise tariff, he reluctantly agreed to Calhoun's desire that South Carolina follow a moderate course. In later years McDuffie frequently intervened in state affairs to prevent adoption of extreme states' rights measures opposed by Calhoun.

In Congress, McDuffie proved a sensational speaker whose appearances filled the galleries with spectators. His speeches did not conform to the popular florid mold but were frenzied affairs, extravagant in language and furious in tone. In private he was a reserved and unsmiling figure whom many, like John Quincy Adams, found grim and repellent. As he grew older, chronic illness (he had received a spinal injury in a duel shortly after entering Congress) made him subject to fits of depression and irritability. Throughout his congressional career he was one of the most radical opponents of the protective tariff, which he condemned as an unfair, direct levy on the Southern cotton grower for the profit of the North.

Originally a supporter of Andrew Jackson, McDuffie had followed Calhoun in his break with the President in 1832. Following his two terms as governor, he was elected to the U.S. Senate in 1842, where he was a leading advocate of the annexation of Texas. However, failing health compelled him to resign from the Senate in 1846. He died on March 11, 1851.