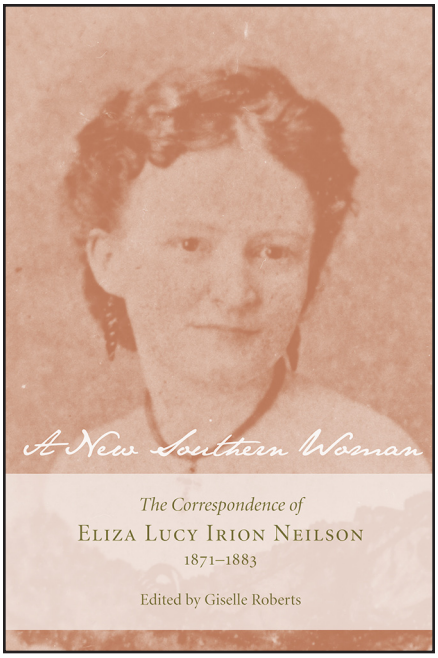
# A New Southern Woman

## *The Correspondence of Eliza Lucy Irion Neilson, 1871–1883*

### Edited by Giselle Roberts




From 1871 to 1883, Eliza Lucy Irion Neilson (1843–1913) composed and saved more than 130 letters documenting family and domestic life in Columbus, Mississippi. *A New Southern Woman* features 80 letters from Neilson's correspondence, providing readers with a glimpse into the recovery of domestic culture in postwar Mississippi, the impact of the war on marriage and education, and a reflection on family relationships after the conflict ended.

Lucy Irion married farmer John Abert Neilson (1842–1922) in April 1871, and together the couple created an agricultural partnership out of the scrimping modesty of a new Southern ethos. As Lucy built her life around visions of a domestic ideal, she also watched her widowed sister, Lizzie, her single sister, Cordele, and her schoolgirl niece, Bess, search for their own ways of becoming women of the New South. When it came to turning the war-torn vestiges of antebellum femininity into a workable postwar reality, white Southern women no longer looked to one ideal. Instead Neilson's correspondence suggests that elite white womanhood remained a fluid and negotiated territory where submissive wives, memorial crusaders, and single and self-sufficient women created a new Southern consciousness under a broader rubric of genteel postwar femininity.

Fashioning their contrasting individual stories within the collective bonds of family and community, the Irion women met and overcame the generational challenges of postwar life together—and, by celebrating both the traditional and nondependent ideals of womanhood, they made a dynamic contribution to the creation of a New South.

*Women's Diaries and Letters of the South • Carol Bleser, series editor*

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**Giselle Roberts** is an honorary research associate in American history at La Trobe University in Melbourne, Australia. She is the author of *The Confederate Belle* and editor of *The Correspondence of Sarah Morgan and Francis Warrington Dawson.*

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