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The Great Catastrophe of My Life: Divorce in the Old Dominion (Studies in Legal History)

Thomas E. Buckley S.J.

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From the end of the Revolution until 1851, the Virginia legislature granted most divorces in the state. It granted divorces rarely, however, turning down two-thirds of those who petitioned for them. Men and women who sought release from unhappy marriages faced a harsh legal system buttressed by the political, religious, and communal cultures of southern life. Through the lens of this hostile environment, Thomas Buckley explores with sympathy the lives and legal struggles of those who challenged it.

Based on research in almost 500 divorce files, *The Great Catastrophe of My Life* involves a wide cross-section of Virginians. Their stories expose southern attitudes and practices involving a spectrum of issues from marriage and family life to gender relations, interracial sex, adultery, desertion, and domestic violence. Although the oppressive legal regime these husbands and wives battled has passed away, the emotions behind their efforts to dissolve the bonds of marriage still resonate strongly.

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