

Family Matters: Essayists Look At Slavery, Marriage, Religion, And Southern Culture

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Review

FAMILY MATTERS

Essayists look at slavery, marriage, religion, and southern culture

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Clinton, Catherine *Southern Families at War: Loyalty and Conflict in the Civil War South*. Oxford University Press, 2000-06-01. \$35.00 ISBN 195136837

In the spring of 1998, dozens of scholars gathered at the University of Richmond to examine the social history of the Civil War era. As Catherine Clinton, the organizer of that conference and editor of **Southern Families at War**, declares in her introduction to this anthology, Civil War history "once . . . might have been viewed as a fortress, the gates open only to students of military history and militants." However, with the "seismic changes" within the last generation of historians, "the field seems to have been invaded by . . . a diversity of disciplines, pursuing multiple and competing agendas with zeal and abandon."

Clinton herself has been responsible for much of this development, as author and editor of several other volumes of essays on the Civil War home front. Even books of essays in well-known and martial-sounding series do not always restrict themselves to military topics. Gary Gallagher, editor of UNC Press's Military Campaigns of the Civil War series, says the field is a "big tent" that has room for historians with many points of view, historiographical agendas, and approaches to research.

"Families at war" is used by Clinton partly as a metaphor for the War itself, but most of the essays in this collection actually do explore how warfare affected southern families. The battles all occur offstage, but they clearly alter the trajectories of individual Southerners and of the South as a whole. Some essays describe the experiences of individual families, such as Daniel W. Stowell's Fains of East Tennessee; Anne J. Bailey's German-speaking Texans, the Coreths; and Judith Lee Hunt's Middletons of Charleston, South Carolina. The majority, however, explore issues that divided families, challenged prewar values and assumptions, or reflected the deep emotional impact of the War on Southerners.

The chief strength of this engrossing and important anthology is its diversity and its attempt to show that, for most Southerners, the Civil War was just a part of the larger narrative arcs of their lives. For instance, the first three essays deal with the black experience during and after the War. Michl P. Johnson shows the heartbreaking attempts by former slaves to find lost relatives after emancipation. Michelle A. Krowl examines the ways that black women pressed U.S. government officials and army officers for various forms of aid and education. In the third piece, Donald R. Schaffer suggests that slave marriage customs - the practice of common-law marriage and, in a sense, common-law divorce - continued long after the Civil War, at least among black veterans and their significant others.

It is impossible to describe each of the 12 pieces in detail here, but readers will be rewarded with essays by Amy E. Murrell and Jennifer Lynn Gross on the ambiguity with which wives and widows of Confederate soldiers conducted seemingly strained relations with their southern governments. Also, E. Susan Barber examines the effect of the War on marriages in Richmond, where nuptials were hurried during the War and where, afterwards, gender imbalance and the presence of large numbers of widows changed the face of society.

Familiar themes appear throughout **Southern Families at War**: honor, patriarchy, evangelicalism, the "Lost Cause." But at least two essays offer stories and approaches that are quite original. Lauren F. Winner writes of conversions of southern Jews to Christianity, which typically occurred when Jewish husbands away at war or wives back home were swept up in local revivals. Winner focuses on the disruptions those conversions created in the lives of Jewish families already marginalized in the Protestant South. In another essay, Christian beliefs - specifically beliefs concerning salvation and the afterlife - are examined by Ted Ownby, who argues that the War could sometimes inspire religious fervor in soldiers, causing them to write about their images of heaven, which were without strife, patriarchal relationships, or slaves.

Inevitably, there are omissions: more might have been included on subjects such as veterans, children, the changing nature of wartime slavery and relationships between masters and slaves, and the effects of the War on family-oriented institutions like churches and orphanages. However, the listing of these neglected topics is not meant to be a criticism, but rather a recognition of current Civil War social historians' creativity and excellence, the very

characteristics abundantly displayed in this fine collection.

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