

Plain Folk in a Rich Man's War: Class and Dissent in Confederate Georgia

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Review

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Williams, David, Teresa Crisp Williams, and David Carlson. *Plain Folk in a Rich Man's War: Class and Dissent in Confederate Georgia*. University Press of Florida, \$55.00 ISBN 813025702

Internal opposition

Economic disparity was Confederacy's downfall

The question of Confederate unity — or the lack of it — has been the subject of a lengthy scholarly debate. Some historians, focusing on the racial and class divisions of the South, argue that internal dissent significantly undermined the Confederate war effort. Other historians emphasize that internal dissent, no matter how significant, did not prevent the outnumbered and outgunned Confederacy from putting up a determined fight that on several occasions almost won the war. Readers will have little difficulty placing **Plain Folk in a Rich Man's War: Class and Dissent in Confederate Georgia** within this general debate. The thesis is as clear and straightforward as the title indicates: Georgia's yeomen farmers and other plain folk increasingly resented the political and economic privileges of the wealthy planters, corrupt government officials, and unscrupulous speculators. The negative attitudes of southern yeomen toward the war, the authors boldly assert, contributed decisively to Confederate defeat.

Economic and class dynamics, the authors argue, drove most of this opposition. In the antebellum period, they contend, increasing economic inequality created a growing divide between wealthy planters and Georgia's plain folk. The war itself exacerbated class tensions. Plain folk angrily resented slaveholders who grew cotton rather than corn and other food for the Confederate war effort. Georgia's newspapers regularly reported corn rotting in warehouses while ordinary families went hungry because cotton speculators took up valuable space on the Confederate railway network. When the Georgia state government took half-hearted measures to relieve the suffering of poor families, corrupt government officials sometimes sold the food and pocketed the profits.

Women, often left with little means for supporting their families, rioted in the spring and summer of 1863 to protest the rising price of food and clothing. In Atlanta and other urban areas, these women openly attacked merchants and speculators accused of hoarding food.

Women did more than openly rob speculators; they also begged and pleaded for their conscripted husbands to come home. The draconian conscription policies of the Confederacy, in fact, became the central focus of Confederate dissent in Georgia and elsewhere. Especially in northern and western Georgia, plain folk protested and resisted Confederate conscription that seemed to force poor men to fight while granting numerous exemptions to wealthy and well-connected planters. In some mountain districts, it became almost impossible for Confederate authorities to enforce the conscription because juries refused to convict draft dodgers. **Plain Folk** documents how bands of deserters and draft dodgers challenged Confederate authority in several Georgia counties, sometimes choosing to align themselves with escaping slaves. In southwest Georgia, for example, as many as five hundred deserters and draft dodgers, receiving ammunition and other supplies from Union forces, became anti-Confederate guerrillas. **Plain Folk** approvingly quotes one Georgia editor who declared in 1863, We are fighting each other harder than we ever fought the enemy.

The real strength of **Plain Folk in a Rich Man's War** is the careful research that uncovered such episodes. Williams and company scoured newspapers, diaries, and letters to find numerous examples of yeomen resentment. These anecdotes bring the history of the homefront to life, offering readers an opportunity to see how the actions of numerous individuals hindered Confederate mobilization. Particularly interesting are stories of men such as John Vickery, a virtually unknown yeoman who conspired with four slaves to take and burn the town of Quitman near the Florida border. After a captured slave revealed the plot, Vickery and his co-conspirators were captured, convicted, and publicly executed. This is a grim example of what the authors call Georgia's inner civil war.

Such examples are compelling, but they often raise more questions than they answer. A key problem with **Plain Folk's** evidence is that it basically boils down to argument by example — case after case of Confederate dissent taken from primary sources. Williams and his co-authors often infer significance to such examples that may not be entirely warranted. Imprecise words such as some,

many and most fill the text. Few will deny, of course, that the Confederacy was rent with internal divisions — so, too, was the Union. Yet tens of thousands of men either gave their lives for the Confederacy or stayed true to the Confederate cause to the bitter end. **Plain Folk** gives us little insight as to why some Confederates fought long and hard while others joined the ranks of the dissenters. According to the basic logic of *Plain Folk*, nobody should have fought for the Confederacy. Wealthy planters, we are told, stayed at home to avoid the real fighting, while yeomen and other plain folk opposed the war together. Perhaps the planter politicians who controlled the Confederate government simply forced the plain folk to fight. It is hard to believe, though, that the Confederate armies who inflicted such horrific casualties to Union armies — even in battles very late in the war — were composed entirely of dispirited conscripts.

Part of the problem lies in the use of the term plain folk itself, which the authors tend to use too uncritically. Although certainly a powerful rhetorical device for antebellum writers, it serves historians less well as an analytical category because it simplistically lumps together a vast number of families who often had different economic aspirations and political outlooks. Some plain folk undoubtedly opposed the war, but other yeomen families — tied to the plantation regime through bonds of kinship, political loyalty, and economic self-interest — might very well have embraced Confederate nationalism. The authors' somewhat simplistic model of class conflict leads them to overlook questions that could have added depth and nuance to their analysis. Did yeomen who lived in plantation districts provide more support for the Confederacy than their upcountry counterparts? How did racism and the specter of northern abolitionism — a key component of Confederate nationalism — influence or fail to influence different groups of Georgians? How did kinship ties that permeated southern society influence participation in the war?

Clearly written and filled with fascinating detail, **Plain Folk** will be of great interest to scholars and general readers alike. The book's steadfast focus on class conflict, however, will hardly persuade those not already inclined to accept its central argument.

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