

Shifting Grounds: Nationalism & the American South, 1848-1865

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Review

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Quickley, Paul *Shifting Grounds: Nationalism & the American South, 1848-1865*. Oxford University Press, \$34.95 ISBN 978-0-19-973548-8

Exploring Southern Nationalism

Shifting Grounds is a valuable study of nationalism in the South as a concept, an emotion, and a problem. The book is both theoretical and practical, balanced and insightful. Its author, Paul Quigley is a Lecturer in American History at the University of Edinburgh who earned his doctorate at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He displays a sure grasp of essential background information while approaching his subject with a perspective informed by broad comparisons and specific developments within the South. Aware of the problems and internal divisions that plagued southern nationalism, Quigley traces the influence of the American Revolution, the sectional crisis, and the forces that were “especially important bridges between the individual and the nation.” These proved to be “gender, religion, and death and suffering” (10). Quigley rightly emphasizes the importance of victimhood and wartime suffering in binding white southerners together. After the war, as racism became the currency of reconciliation among whites, the “central strands” of “shared victimhood and suffering” from Confederate nationalism helped whites “fashion a new kind of regional identity” (217).

This study begins by acknowledging and analyzing the nationalism that flourished among southerners before the sectional crisis. Honoring the American Revolution and what they saw as a unique mission for the United States, southerners shared in “the emerging transatlantic model of romantic nationalism” (13). They believed that the United States’ model of democratic citizenship was vital to the world’s future. They honored the founding fathers and saw themselves as part of a community ordained by the Christian God whose members had duties to the nation. At the same time, the fact of federalism and state loyalties was a qualification or challenge to complete identification with the

nation.

The men Quigley describes as dreamers were the early fire-eaters, the spokesmen who favored secession and a southern nationality before the final crises in the sectional conflict. These dreamers aided the development of nationalist ideas by going beyond the defense of slavery to develop ideas of a distinctive southern identity. More importantly, they emphasized the idea that the North was abandoning true principles that the South should reclaim, and they implanted the idea that northern fanatics were persecuting and victimizing the South.

As separation occurred, taking leave of the Union proved challenging in most slaveholding states, in large part because American nationalism and identification with George Washington and the Revolution were so strong. Quigley agrees with earlier studies about southern whites' basic solution to this dilemma. Pushed into secession by what they saw as northern attacks and opposition to slavery, whites in the seceding states embraced the idea that they were the true American patriots, continuing and purifying the Revolutionary tradition. By establishing their own government and striving to create their own literature and publications, white southerners asserted their nationality. In gendered terms they emphasized southern manhood in opposition to northern effeminacy and celebrated the traditional role of southern ladies versus northern women who had forgotten their sex. Secessionists worked to inspire citizens' loyalty, but also compelled it where possible – and in some regions and border areas that was not possible.

The Confederate experience deepened the sense of alienation from northern enemies and made harsh new demands on southern citizens. The huge losses and massive suffering caused by the war greatly intensified that important sense of victimization, and white southerners followed their leaders in demonizing the foe. The northern threat was often seen in gendered or sexual terms, as a threat to southerners' homes, families, women, and racial order. At the same time religious beliefs sanctified the suffering and losses, driving southerners farther apart from those who had been their northern brothers. Quigley notes that defeat caused religious southerners to question the rightness in God's eyes of their cause, but he adds that southerners felt that believers were supposed to suffer and be chastised by their God – a logic that could strengthen their ties to the Confederate nation despite defeats. Overall, the rivers of blood unleashed by the war tended to unite southerners in suffering and their sense of victimhood. Such

“bonds of blood and sacrifice . . . Would form the foundations of Lose Cause mythology” (213).

Quigley’s study contributes in ways that are both specific to events and illuminating as to themes. He is aware of dedication and dissension, commitment and resistance, within the Confederate South, but he asks new questions. Rather than debate about the strength or weakness of Confederate nationalism, he looks at how it was expressed, shaped, and affected by events. Best of all, he draws sound conclusions about the way the South’s failed experiment with separate nationality affected its culture and self-image for decades to come.

Paul Escott is Reynolds Professor of History at Wake Forest University. One of his recent books is The Confederacy: The Slaveholders’ Failed Venture (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2010).