

Civil War Dynasty: The Ewing Family of Ohio

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Recommended Citation

Johnson, Fred (2013) "Civil War Dynasty: The Ewing Family of Ohio," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 15 : Iss. 4

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DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.15.4.06

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol15/iss4/6>

Review

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Fall 2013

Heineman, Kenneth J. *Civil War Dynasty: The Ewing Family of Ohio*. New York University Press, \$35.00 ISBN 978-0-8147-7301-7

Bringing an Important Family to the Forefront

In describing Dr. Kenneth J. Heineman, the *Gale Literary Database: Contemporary Authors Online* states that he “has dedicated his life to the past” by demonstrating “how history is constantly influencing the present.” The consistency of Heineman’s dedication is substantiated by his prior scholarship which includes titles like *Put Your Bodies Upon the Wheels: Student Revolt in the 1960s* (2002), *A Catholic New Deal: Religion and Reform in Depression Pittsburgh* (1999), *God is a Conservative: Religion, Politics, and Morality in Contemporary America* (1998), and *Campus Wars: the Peace Movement at American State Universities* (1993).

In *Civil War Dynasty: The Ewing Family of Ohio*, Heineman examines the involvement and impact of this prominent family during the turbulent era of America’s nineteenth-century geographic and socioeconomic expansion. Employing a refined combination of expository skill and analytic precision, Heineman deftly examines the confluence of forces that produced the American Civil War. As with most of the nation, the human and material resources of the Ewing family were stretched thin as family members were pulled into the vortex of bloody conflict.

Along with the vaults of data in the *Official Records of the War of the Rebellion*, personal papers, diaries, newspapers, journals, and Internet sources (like Bioguide.congress.gov), Heineman makes good use of information from repositories as diverse as the Kansas State Historical Society, the Library of Congress, and the University of Notre Dame Archives. He weaves the material from these locales into an engaging narrative, tracing the Ewing family’s rise to power. Starting with, Thomas Ewing Sr., Heineman quickly verifies the broad influence of the elder Ewing who routinely interacted with imposing figures like

Senator Henry Clay of Kentucky. Likewise, the Ewing children and the extended family, inclusive of powerhouse personas like William Tecumseh Sherman, became people of great stature.

The Ewing family's residing in the state of Ohio placed them at the geopolitical crossroads of some of the most vexing controversies of their day. This was especially true where it concerned blacks and slavery, and the family's commitment to their Catholic faith. Much of Ohio's population, especially people in the southern portion of the state, hailed from the South. Those transplants had not been able to "compete with slave labor," so they not only possessed "more hatred for African Americans than for white planters" but viewed blacks as the "carriers of crime, disease, and moral debasement" (7.)

The perspective regarding Catholics was little better and reflected sentiments shared by many across the nation. Even the new Republican Party that emerged in 1854 was not immune. For as Heineman points out, although the new political entity had sought to fuse "Whig economic principles with a more moderate version of Free Soil abolitionism," Ohio's "nativist voters . . . had supported the so-called Know Nothing — or American — Party" and they believed that "Ohio's Catholics were criminals and drunkards from birth" (81).

Confusion abounds in the narrative where Heineman seeks to trace the lines of the Ewing family's genealogy. Except in the case of Ellen Ewing's marriage to William Tecumseh Sherman, the convolutions of lineage are compounded when discussions of the family tree expand to include the numerous relatives who joined the family by way of matrimony. The text becomes much more lucid and accessible when Heineman examines the fierce closeness between immediate and extended family members.

That protective fierceness roared into action in late 1861 when rumors circulated in newspapers about the alleged mental and physical instability of William Tecumseh Sherman. The "wrath of the Ewing family fell upon the news media" (132) and Ellen was incensed enough to vow that the family would punish those, including Union General George McClellan, who were responsible.

Heineman's careful treatment of the potent divisions rending the state of Ohio and, by extension, the nation before and during the Civil War, and then afterward during the delicate period of Reconstruction, highlights the grim

sectional discord that dominated the era. Chasms of disagreement narrowed considerably, however, when concerns turned toward the subject of African Americans. During the February 1861 Washington, D.C. Peace Conference — a last desperate attempt to avoid hostilities — delegate and family patriarch Thomas Ewing Sr. spoke plainly when he said, “I do not want Negroes distributed through the North. We have got enough of them” (107). Further explaining himself, Ewing asserted that “Ten Negroes will commit more petty thefts than one thousand white men,” so he [Ewing] emphatically did not want “them to come into Ohio” (107).

Most of the Ewing family sought to remain moderate relative to slavery, but this was doomed to failure. The extreme perversions of law, economy, and social conscience that had been necessary for the initial establishment of slavery required greater testaments of fidelity as the sectional crisis worsened. Heineman notes that once emancipation became a reality, the reaction of northern whites was ferocious. In Illinois a majority of voters “approved . . . a ballot measure . . . to ban future black settlement” (167). An Indiana regiment “patrolled the Ohio River, shooting runaway slaves fleeing Kentucky,” and “Pennsylvania Democrats charged Republicans” with insulting their manhood “by placing them on an equality with Negroes” (169).

Subsequent to the April 12, 1861, firing on Fort Sumter, South Carolina, and the start of civil conflict, the Ewing sons and daughters continued the legacy of public service established by their father. Their actions were often guided by the prominent place of Catholicism in their lives. This was mostly due to the example of devout consistency they had seen modeled by their mother, Maria. Such spiritual devotion occasionally caused tensions in the family such as when one of the Ewing sons, Hugh, prevailed upon his father to modify his stance and attitudes toward slavery and blacks.

For Hugh, the experience of “fighting Confederate guerillas in western Virginia” and “seeing the wretched living conditions of slaves, and serving with courageous abolitionists” had changed his mind “toward the peculiar institution” (145). He subsequently asked his father to help fugitive blacks in Ohio find jobs. The elder Ewing agreed and, in doing so, contradicted his earlier impassioned pronouncement at the Peace Conference.

Writing with a delicacy that honors the relationship between father and son, Heineman explains the cause of Thomas Sr.’s altered behavior toward blacks.

Quite simply, he “had never been able to say ‘no’ to his most idealistic son” (145). Even so, as a precautionary to protect Hugh from the poisonous passions of fellow Ohioans, he insisted that Hugh “not to reveal his abolitionist sentiments outside the family” (145).

Exemplary of Heineman’s robust research capabilities and his creative skills of exposition, he occasionally references obscure personalities who might have remained so except for their connection with luminaries of the era (or in the future). Out in Kansas, for example, another Ewing son, Thomas Jr., or Tom, sparred with the mayor of Leavenworth Daniel Anthony, the brother of suffragist, Susan B. Anthony. While his sister was “back east crusading for women’s voting rights” Daniel Anthony “was trafficking in stolen cattle” and “justifying it on the grounds that he was punishing Missouri slaveholders” (192). Then there was the young woman who possessed “a burning hatred of the Yankees” that “she later conveyed . . . to her grandson, Harry S. Truman” (199).

The fury of Truman’s grandmother was caused by the forced removal of “ten thousand Missouri residents,” (198) from their homes as a result General Order No. 11, issued by Thomas Ewing Jr. This extraordinary measure was meant to deny civilian support to the loathsome guerillas whose actions had profoundly worsened the already intolerable deprivations of war. The Order succeeded, but it also underscored the degree to which the Civil War’s violence had fallen upon civilian populations.

Such sobering battlefield realities of America’s civil conflict are emphatically driven home through Heineman’s examination of William Tecumseh Sherman’s evolution into an architect of modern war. A stark assessment of the man’s mindset and the lethality by which he conducted his enterprise is offered through the recounting of an incident during the siege of Atlanta. The ferocity of Union bombardment moved a Southern cleric to complain about the excesses of the attack. Sherman answered that if God was truly offended by his actions, then he [Sherman] “could wait to receive divine chastisement after his death” (222).

The typographical error in the chapter “Reaching Up Into the Blue Ether . . .” and the missing word in the chapter “Forlorn Hope,” are not enough to detract from the research excellence and superior writing in this work. The New York University Press, publisher of *Civil War Dynasty: The Ewing Family of Ohio*, is spot-on accurate when it asserts that the book “brings to life this drama of

political intrigue and military valor – warts and all," adding that it's "a military, political, religious, and family history, told against the backdrop of disunion, war, violence, and grief."

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