

The Enigmatic South: Toward Civil War and Its Legacies

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Review

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Hyde, Samuel C. *The Enigmatic South: Toward Civil War and Its Legacies.*
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A Tribute to the Career and Scholarship of William J. Cooper, Jr.

In more ways than one, William J. Cooper, Jr., stands tall among historians of the nineteenth century South. In this collection of essays, well-edited by Samuel C. Hyde, Jr., Cooper's former students and colleagues express their gratitude to him and also demonstrate the remarkable range of his influence.

The volume's subtitle is "toward civil war and its legacies," and it is evenly divided into three sections. Part One treats "Politics, Education, and Secession" and includes essays by Christopher Childers on the Missouri controversy; Sarah Hyde on educational developments in the Gulf South; and Julia Huston Nguyen on the role of Louisiana clergy during the secession crisis.

Part Two addresses "The Diverse Challenges of War." Contributors include George C. Rable on Clement Vallandigham; Paul F. Paskoff on the social background of Mississippi Confederate fighting men; and John M. Sacher on Jefferson Davis and conscription.

Part Three considers "The Legacy of War and its Memory." Richard Follett examines the career of Pierre Champonier; editor Hyde traces the fortunes of a Wilkinson County, Mississippi planter through the Civil War; and Eric H. Walther shows how William Lowndes Yancey has been treated by a succession of biographers.

A personal tribute to Bill Cooper by Gaines M. Foster concludes the volume. It captures well the personality and the achievement of the man to whom the book is dedicated.

Carefully chosen case studies are often the best way to consider, or reconsider, larger questions. That approach constitutes the chief value of these essays, each of which, through examination of a particular place or individual, contributes to many of the debates that have long engaged historians.

For example, Sarah Hyde takes on the conventional wisdom about the state of education in the Old South, “punctuated progress” as she calls it. She convincingly argues that “the importance of learning to all white southerners ... undermines the assumption that wealthy planters led an ignorant mass of poor white trash into a war in defense of slavery”(43).

Paul Paskoff challenges the “rich man’s war, poor man’s fight” description of the Confederate war effort. Using quantitative analysis yet writing in clear, straightforward prose, Paskoff demonstrates that, at least for Mississippians, rich as well as poor bore the military burden.

If this was indeed so, then Jefferson Davis’s administration of Confederate conscription policy must, as John Sacher argues, have been effective. Indeed, his “plain and simple method ... should be assessed as effectively balancing the needs of the battlefield and the home front” (147).

Of course the continuity or discontinuity of Southern history remains a matter of debate. In a gem of an essay Samuel Hyde concludes, based on the experience of Edward McGehee and Bowling Green plantation, that – no surprise – elements of both can be discerned.

Eric Walther’s study of Yancey’s place in historical memory shows how “postwar southern political correctness” (215) tempted many historians to posit a monolithic Confederate South “that never existed” (215). The “orator of secession” died at the age of 49 in 1863, but his reputation led a Montgomery editor to write that “what ‘Stonewall’ Jackson was to the army in the field” Yancey was “to politics of the country” (198). Yet his treatment by historians over the next 150 years has not yet fully established the Alabamian’s place or prominence in either the secession movement or the early years of the Confederacy.

To single these several contributions out is not in any way to diminish the rest. Taken together, this collection is a work of which Bill Cooper ought to be proud. Well-written, carefully researched, and Cooperian in the vigor of their

arguments, these essays are a fitting tribute to a master teacher and scholar, and – not incidentally – friend.

John M. McCardell, Jr. is Vice-Chancellor at Sewanee, The University of the South and president emeritus of Middlebury College. He is author of The Idea of a Southern Nation as well as many essays, chapters, articles, and book reviews.