

### William Lowndes Yancey and the Coming of the Civil War

Ben H. Severance

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## Review

Severance, Ben H.

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**Walther, Eric H.** *William Lowndes Yancey and the Coming of the Civil War*. University of North Carolina Press, \$39.95 hardcover ISBN 9780807830275

### Alabama's Leading Fire-Eater

William Lowndes Yancey of Alabama is probably best known for orchestrating the destruction of the Democratic Party in 1860. In leading the southern delegation out of the Charleston Convention that year, Yancey helped ensure the election of Abraham Lincoln to the presidency, an outcome that precipitated the secession of the Deep South. How could one man have had such a dramatic effect on the fate of the nation? In his meticulously researched biography, Eric Walther answers this question, presenting a nuanced image of a leader who exemplified the core values of the antebellum South: honor, white supremacy, and states' rights. Having studied the secessionist mentality in his book *The Fire-Eaters* (1992), Walther considers Yancey perhaps the most important southern radical of the 1850s. As an active, pro-slavery politico who excelled at oratory, Yancey not only kept his fellow southerners constantly apprised of a looming northern threat to slavery, but excited his listeners with visions of an achievable southern nation.

In his first chapters, Walther describes Yancey's upbringing and stresses its impact on the man's eventual radicalism. The tale here is a formative competition between two patriarchs: Benjamin Yancey, the loving biological father of Yancey's preadolescence in Georgia, whose heroic exploits in the navy epitomized southern valor; and Nathan Beman, the stern, abusive stepfather of Yancey's teenage years in New York, whose seemingly self-righteous abolitionism personified a hypocritical North. The combined influence produced an adult who was highly opinionated yet privately insecure. In editing newspapers, pursuing law, and engaging in politics, Yancey sought public venues where he could express his ideas with boldness and receive immediate feedback.

The bulk of Walther's biography examines Yancey's role as the chief architect of secession. A nationalist in his youth, Yancey eventually embraced the ideology of states' rights. This transformation occurred after he moved to Alabama, where that state's defiant individualism appealed to Yancey's militant sense of honor. Like other ambitious Southerners, Yancey realized that in the land of cotton states rights and slavery were intertwined: to extol one was to defend the other. As a Congressman in the mid-1840s, Yancey wholeheartedly supported American expansion as imperative for the continued power of the slave states.

According to Walther, Yancey's secessionist outlook really began in 1848. Convinced that the Wilmot Proviso (which called for the prohibition of slavery in all territory acquired during the Mexican War) was the opening salvo in an emergent northern campaign to destroy the peculiar institution, Yancey promulgated his so-called Alabama Platform. This manifesto essentially both rejected the authority of the Federal government to ever interfere with slavery and proscribed politicians who thought otherwise. As Walther points out, the platform became for Yancey the key to southern salvation (106). When southerners repudiated the platform as uncompromising, an angry Yancey supported in 1850-1852 a stillborn effort at secession. In the aftermath of these setbacks, he changed tactics. Rather than coerce his reluctant southern brethren with diatribes, Yancey would educate them with reasoned appeals, thereby spreading what Walther describes as the Leaven of Disunion. By the election of 1860, growing tension over slavery had so polarized the political atmosphere that Yancey now enjoyed a win-win situation: either the Federal government endorsed the Alabama Platform or the South would secede. At Alabama's secession convention in January 1861, Yancey dispensed with his didactic methods and excoriated those delegates who still hesitated; the marginalized voice in 1850 now expressed the popular will.

The last chapters discuss Yancey's contributions to the Confederacy. As the head diplomat to Britain and France in 1861, Yancey tried to gain recognition for his new country, performing credibly at what ultimately proved a futile task. And as a senator in the Confederate Congress, Yancey strived to balance the people's liberty with military exigency, as demonstrated by his qualified support for conscription.

The main strength of Walther's biography is the author's careful analysis of Yancey's rather sophisticated political outlook. Yancey was not only a great

speaker, but a skillful essayist; through both mediums he was often acerbic and bombastic, but he was no mere demagogue. Rather, Yancey was a shrewd propagandist whose public discourse presented a compelling rationale for southern revolution. Playing to notions of honor, Yancey consistently reminded Southerners that the North was the principal aggressor through its unwarranted scrutiny of southern culture, which he claimed it deemed inferior, and through its imperious demands for the South to change. In short, Yancey deftly reversed the abolitionist rhetoric about a slave power conspiracy by proclaiming the rise of an anti-slave power, particularly the nascent Republican Party, which sought to subvert the South's equality within the Union. Similarly, Walther emphasizes Yancey's steadfast defense of slavery from a standpoint of power, not morality, a practice that kept the focus on the South's supposedly precarious political future. In fact, Yancey refused to address the moral question, partly because white supremacy rendered the matter irrelevant, but primarily because he rightly understood that doing so allowed abolitionists to define the terms of the debate. Finally, Yancey frequently invoked the Founding Fathers in the context of an oppressed minority and the right of revolution. As the author notes, Yancey reassured uncertain southerners that the Union was a means to protect their liberty, but not an end in itself (144). Thus, Yancey candidly let everyone know that rebellion was an acceptable course.

Another noteworthy feature of Walther's work is its portrayal of Yancey as a multi-dimensional figure. Too often the fire-eaters are viewed as mean-spirited extremists. But Walther's Yancey comes across as a doting family man, whose concern for his sons during the Civil War is touching. Yancey also displayed a laudable progressive streak, promoting public education and prison reform. Though hardly a gender egalitarian, he evinced respect for women who spoke their mind. Yancey even condemned the xenophobic Know-Nothing movement in Alabama, arguing that hostility toward Catholic immigrants was antithetical to religious freedom. Still, Yancey was a slaveholder, one who viewed blacks not from the familiar perspective of paternalism, but from a purely utilitarian point of view: slaves were obedient chattel that both served a vital labor function and preserved the social order of racial hierarchy.

There are two matters of concern with Walther's appraisal of Yancey. The first is the author's awkward caveat on page 2 of his intention to use modern psychology to explain Yancey's rebellious behavior. Everyone knows that childhood experiences shape personality; a biographer need not draw undue attention to those times the main character is on the couch, so to speak. Walther's

references to Yancey's search for an approving father figure, for instance, unwittingly suggest that the man was driven more by his neuroses than by his principles. And Yancey's specific state of mind does not account for the motivation of those secessionists who grew up under different circumstances. It would have been better had Walther simply integrated his psychoanalysis into the narrative without advertising the practice.

The second concern is one inherent in any study of a famous person, namely the extent to which an individual influences surrounding events. Walther clearly insists that Yancey played a decisive role in shaping the climate of secession, yet hundreds if not thousands of other southerners in and beyond Alabama were similarly inclined toward radical action. Historian William L. Barney, in *The Secessionist Impulse: Alabama and Mississippi in 1860* (1974), barely mentions Yancey in his persuasive socioeconomic explanation for why Alabama seceded from the Union. Rather than steering the South toward secession, perhaps Yancey is significant because he articulated more cogently than any of his peers the nature of a revolution already in motion. Still, in a crisis all people look toward their leaders for guidance and hope; and Yancey certainly provided both.

These criticisms in no way undermine the value of Walther's scholarship or the importance of his book. *William Lowndes Yancey and the Coming of the Civil War* is an outstanding work that illuminates in thorough detail, and with insightful commentary, the life and times of man who stood at the center of the sectional conflict. Eric Walther has established Yancey as a champion of southern rights second only to John C. Calhoun.

*Ben H. Severance is an assistant professor of history at Auburn University Montgomery. He is the author of Tennessee's Radical Army: The State Guard and its Role in Reconstruction, 1867-1869.*