

Confederate Phoenix: Rebel Children and Their Families in South Carolina

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Review

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Drago, Edmund L. *Confederate Phoenix: Rebel Children and Their Families in South Carolina*. Fordham University Press, \$45.00 hardcover ISBN 97800823229376

Children and the Civil War

In *Confederate Phoenix: Rebel Children and Their Families in South Carolina*, Edmund L. Drago convincingly argues that “children played a critical role in the Civil War drama” (2). Using letters, diaries, memoirs, organizational records, service records, church minutes, and newspapers from throughout the first state to secede from the Union, he demonstrates that children were involved in—and affected by--every aspect of the conflict.

Children—who made up 40 percent of South Carolina’s white population in 1860--were both actors in and victims of the Civil War. As Drago demonstrates in his first chapter, “Confederate leaders made children central to why they seceded and went to war” (5). For their part, white children in the Civil War South supported the Confederacy by fighting on the front lines and by raising funds for the cause. The daily lives of children changed as fathers went to war, families suffered war-induced poverty, and soldiers invaded homes.

The process of coming of age itself changed when the Confederacy’s conscription programs formally defined adulthood and boyhood by forbidding males under the age of seventeen to enlist without parental consent. Important coming of age rituals, including school attendance and courtship, took on new significance during the war. Confederate leaders and educators targeted children for the project of nation-building. Indeed, Confederate leaders regarded education as so critical to the preservation of the Confederacy that teachers were exempt from the draft. Despite their elders’ best efforts, young people often defied adult authority; young men abandoned their classrooms for the front lines, while young women ignored or evaded courtship conventions such as adult chaperonage and parental consent. The Civil War thus “weakened the

patriarchy" (49) and ushered in "a cultural war . . . between generations" (66) of white South Carolinians.

Although for some children, "the excitement of war," including close encounters with danger, became "the highlights of their lives," ultimately, Drago argues, "the Civil War was a lingering catastrophe for South Carolina's children," (96, 109) who struggled to assist their shattered families to rebuild their lost fortunes after the war. Children performed important cultural work as well as wage work during Reconstruction and beyond. Just as they had played a key role in wartime propaganda, white children now starred in postwar efforts to justify the Lost Cause.

In taking as his subject rebel children and their families, Drago casts his net wide – perhaps too wide at some points. He offers a detailed analysis of Confederate conscription practices, including communities' wartime losses of skilled workers, desertion from the army and demoralization at home, and draftees' appeals for exemption and discharge, which seem only tangentially related to children. The inclusion of blacks in the chapter on Reconstruction, including black children's encounters with the Ku Klux Klan, appears out of place in a book primarily devoted to white South Carolinians. Nonetheless, Confederate Phoenix has much to offer students and scholars of the Civil War, the history of families and children, and the American South. The wealth of detail—including both statistical information and personal anecdotes—about civilian life is especially impressive. Anybody interested in knowing more about daily life in the Civil War South should read this book.

Anya Jabour is professor of history at The University of Montana. Her most recent book is Scarlett's Sisters: Young Women in the Old South (University of North Carolina Press, 2007). Her study of black and white children in the Civil War South, tentatively titled Children of the Confederacy, is forthcoming from Ivan R. Dee in the "American Childhoods" series.