

In the Shadow of the Patriarch: the John J. Crittenden Family in War and Peace

Scott C. Martin

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Martin, Scott C. (2009) "In the Shadow of the Patriarch: the John J. Crittenden Family in War and Peace," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 11 : Iss. 4 .

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol11/iss4/8>

Review

Martin, Scott C.

Fall 2009

Eubank, Damon R. *In the Shadow of the Patriarch: The John J. Crittenden Family in War and Peace.* Mercer University Press., \$35.00 ISBN 9780881461510

An Examination of Crittenden and Family

In the Shadow of the Patriarch chronicles the tale of the Crittendens, the Kentucky family prominent during the antebellum and Civil War eras. The patriarch in question, John J. Crittenden, enjoyed a long career in Kentucky politics, serving as a state representative and governor. As a force in the Whig Party, Crittenden won election to the House and Senate. In the course of his personal life, Crittenden married three times and fathered nine offspring. His family merit attention, not only for their relation to an eminent statesman, but because they highlight the internecine strains caused by sectional strife and civil war, particularly in the border states. Crittenden's three oldest children, George, Ann Mary, and Cornelia, sided with the Confederacy. George, in fact, became a Confederate general, much to the chagrin of his Unionist father. By contrast, Thomas, the senator's second son, embraced the Union cause, and also rose to the rank of general. Eubank's book aims at telling the Crittenden story, while explaining the failure of both George and Thomas to achieve military or personal success as a function of their inability to live up to their father's expectations or match his achievements.

Eubank employs letters, diaries, archival material, and abundant secondary sources to illuminate the Crittendens' experiences and family dynamics. Unfortunately, the volume sheds scant light on a fascinating family. Relatively little attention is devoted to the younger Crittenden children, and few insights emerge from discussions of the two eldest daughters. Considerably more than half of the book deals with the unsuccessful Civil War careers of George and Thomas. While this material is certainly appropriate in a family history of this sort, most of it is available elsewhere.

In addition, Eubank's interpretive strategy relies almost exclusively on two older works on birth order as a determinant of behavior. George's alcoholism, which Eubank attributed to "a firstborn's cry for attention and approval from a perfectionist father", contributed to his military incompetence (14). Thomas, on the other hand, suffered from insufficient self-confidence provoked by fatherly concern about his abilities and character. Eubank's analysis of the senator's influence on his children's personalities and experiences will strike most readers as excessively speculative at best, and overly simplistic at worst. His reliance on birth order as an analytical category of enormous explanatory power seems to undercut the historian's goal of examining the role of specific times and places as influences on individual and group conduct and behavior. This over-reliance on birth order might have been mitigated by some reference to advances in our understanding of family dynamics during the nineteenth century generated by the growing field of family history. Eubank cites none of this work, however, to the detriment of his analysis. This lapse diminishes greatly *In the Shadow of the Patriarch's* ability to contribute to current scholarly discussions of nineteenth-century American families, gender roles, or related topics. Eubank's book will appeal to students of Kentucky history, and to those interested in any of the battles in which George or Thomas fought. Others, however, will find it less useful or enlightening.

Scott C. Martin is Professor of History and American Culture Studies and Chair of the History Department at Bowling Green State University. His most recent book is *Devil of the Domestic Sphere: Temperance, Gender and Middle-Class Ideology, 1800-1860* (Northern Illinois University Press, 2008).