

Take Care of the Living: Reconstructing Confederate Veteran Families in Virginia

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Review

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McClurken, Jeffrey W. *Take Care of the Living: Reconstructing Confederate Veteran Families in Virginia*. University of Virginia Press, \$39.50 ISBN 978-0-8139-2813-5

A New View into Confederate Veteran Families

In 1895, Confederate veteran W.H. Power submitted a pension application to the Commonwealth of Virginia. "There are many things I can't do now," he explained. Wartime wounds to his right arm and leg had rendered him lame and prevented him from performing tasks "which are necessary and...I used to do in laboring," (p. 143). Unable to work, he desperately needed financial assistance to ensure his livelihood. In the latter nineteenth century, Power and thousands of other Confederate veterans turned to their respective states first for artificial limbs and subsequently commutations, pensions, and Confederate homes for assistance. But such was not the only option available to impoverished or disabled veterans and their families, as Jeffrey McClurken's new book so poignantly argues.

Numerous scholarly works have addressed the issue of the federal pension system for Union soldiers, most notably Theda Skocpol's landmark study, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers* (1995). But until recently, relatively little work has been done on the ways in which Confederate veterans ineligible for the federal pension system (for obvious reasons) attempted to cope with their inability to perform manual labor or provide for their families. McClurken's work seeks to redress this gap in the literature.

In this deeply-researched account, McClurken delves into the social and cultural experience of Confederate veterans and their families and the strategies they employed to adjust to life after defeat in Pittsylvania County, Virginia. Disabled or impoverished Confederate veterans sought out a variety of different means to secure their livelihoods. Utilizing letters, diaries, church minutes, and

military and state records, he reveals a complicated and wide-sweeping set of options for dealing with poverty, physical disabilities, and even mental illness. For many, this meant resurrecting antebellum avenues of assistance, as was the case for those who turned to local churches for both spiritual and economic support or others who requested assistance or jobs from the community's elite. But the war prompted some veterans and their families to turn increasingly to the state for support. For at least some veterans, this meant sending psychologically damaged family members to a state-run asylum. Others sought out state assistance in the form of replacement limbs for amputees, commutations, pensions, and eventually, state-supported homes for aged soldiers and widows thereby helping to inaugurate a social-welfare system in Virginia meant to compensate "worthy" veterans and their families for their wartime service.

Reviewers inevitably ask authors to offer more scrutiny of some particular aspect of the work, and in this regard, I wish that McClurken had provided a broader social and political context. For instance, how did Virginia compare to other former Confederate states in terms of facilities for the mentally ill? Likewise, was its aid for prosthetics and pensions in line with other states? In terms of religious assistance, were the Baptists more or less likely to emphasize paternalistic aid than other denominations? On a more specific note, I was curious about McClurken's statement on page 108 that few veterans seeking assistance from local elites chose to emphasize their status. His rationale that many veterans wanted to put the war behind them evidenced by the lack of Confederate veterans organizations until the 1880s does not make sense. Moreover, it seems to undermine his argument that elites felt compelled to assist veterans because of their sacrifice and service to the cause.

Despite these minor qualms, McClurken has written an engaging book that explores the postwar period on an intimate, personal, and often-tragic level. His careful analysis will be integral to historians of the Civil War, the postwar South, and social welfare.

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