

Confederate Minds: The Struggle for Intellectual Independence in the Civil War South

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Review

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Bernath, Michael T. *Confederate Minds: The Struggle for Intellectual Independence in the Civil War South*. University of North Carolina Press, \$39.95
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A Fresh Look at the Confederate Search for Distinctiveness

H.L. Mencken once famously derided the South as the "Sahara of the Bozart," claiming that the region lacked significant cultural, literary, or intellectual assets. Henry Adams concurred, noting that "the Southerner had no mind. ... he had no intellectual training; he could not analyze an idea, and he could not even conceive of admitting two" (6). Recent scholarship in southern intellectual history by scholars such as Michael O'Brien, Eugene Genovese, and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese have demonstrated that, contrary to the claims of Mencken and Adams, the 19th century American South had a robust intellectual and literary culture. Michael Bernath's *Confederate Minds* builds upon this scholarship, as well as the scholarship on Confederate nationalism, to examine the intellectual life of the South during the Civil War.

Bernath focuses on a group he describes as "cultural nationalists" who argued that cultural independence was fundamental to Confederate independence and nationhood. These Confederate cultural nationalists, whose ranks included editors, publishers, novelists, playwrights, and educators, derided the extent to which antebellum Southerners were dependent on northern cultural products. They argued that true Confederate independence entailed not only political independence won on the battlefield, but breaking free of northern culture and the production and support of a distinctly southern culture. While antebellum southern intellectuals had long decried the pernicious effects of northern periodicals and textbooks, with their taint of radicalism and abolitionism, secession and the subsequent deprivation of northern publications brought the first real opportunity to create a distinctly southern intellectual climate.

During four years of war, Confederate cultural nationalists rallied to build an intellectual edifice befitting the new republic. They were probably most successful in publishing textbooks, such as *The Confederate Primer* and *The Dixie Speller*, which sought to inculcate Confederate children in the values of Confederate independence. Cultural nationalists also pushed for the creation of a robust periodical literature, as dozens of new publications such as the *Southern Illustrated News* joined established journals like *The Southern Literary Messenger* and *DeBow's Review*. Editors routinely called upon nationalist sentiment to encourage readers to subscribe and authors to write for these distinctly southern periodicals. What is remarkable about the success of these publications, Bernath argues, is that they were able to survive in the face of paper and ink shortages, labor difficulties (including the drafting of editors into Confederate military service), an erratic mail service, and the threat posed by Union armies. Bernath also finds that, given wartime circumstances, the quantity of novels, plays, and poems within the Confederacy speaks to cultural nationalists' dedication.

While the quantity produced by Confederate cultural nationalists was impressive, the quality was often lacking. In an effort to flood the market with a nationalist literature, editors and publishers exercised little editorial discretion, and few works produced during the Confederacy, with the possible exception of the poetry of Henry Timrod, had any lasting literary value, leading journalist James DeBow to comment in 1864 that "little has appeared which is worthy either of the genius or attainments of our people" (268). By the end of the conflict, cultural nationalists came to question their original suppositions. Whereas in 1861 they were convinced that southern culture would flourish once freed from the shackles of northern culture, by 1865 they were unsure whether cultural independence was possible.

Ultimately, this is more of a book about the advocates of Confederate cultural independence than it is about the content of a distinct southern literary and intellectual culture during the Civil War. While southern editors and publishers were successful in establishing and maintaining the architecture for southern intellectual independence, they failed to create a distinctive Confederate culture. They failed, Bernath argues, because their vision was inchoate and amorphous. Rather than articulate a positive vision for southern intellectual culture, Confederate cultural nationalists focused on its negative criteria, defining southern culture by what it was not.

Confederate Minds provides meaningful insight into an understudied aspect of the Confederate experience. Two shortcomings of the book are worth noting. First, because Bernath focuses so much on the quest for intellectual independence, there is surprisingly little analysis of the products of that quest. While Bernath summarizes a handful of the more significant novels and plays written during the Civil War, he does not provide much by way of literary analysis of these works. Second, there is little effort to ascertain how the reading public received the novels, plays, and publications pushed by cultural nationalists. How, for instance, did soldiers and those on the home front respond to this new Confederate literature? Here Bernath could have combined the tools of intellectual and social history to illuminate how the work of cultural nationalists influenced readers. These caveats aside, *Confederate Minds* is an excellent book that deserves wide readership.

David Silkenat is an assistant professor of history and education at North Dakota State University. He is the author of Moments of Despair: Suicide, Divorce, and Debt in Civil War Era North Carolina (UNC Press, 2011).