

Beleaguered Winchester: A Virginia Community at War, 1861-1865

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Review

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A Community in Constant Conflict

The Civil War in Winchester, Virginia

In *Beleaguered Winchester*, Richard R. Duncan, professor emeritus of history at Georgetown University, and author of *Lee's Endangered Left: The Civil War in Western Virginia, Spring of 1864* (2004), focuses his attention on the Civil War experience of the town in which he grew up—the once-thriving, strategically located community of Winchester, Virginia. Perhaps no town in America suffered the ordeals of military occupation more than Winchester, which changed hands more than seventy times during the war. Duncan examines the experience of local men and women, rich and poor, white and black, and how the competing loyalties of the region's inhabitants, the influx of blue and gray armies, and increasingly harsh measures taken by both the Union and Confederate authorities changed the social, economic, and physical landscape of the region. Duncan mixes some analysis in his largely chronological narrative, but his approach is more one of thick description than of thematic determinism. He desires to make the reader understand the trials, tribulations, and immense sufferings of the local residents, without asserting any overarching thesis.

Duncan begins his narrative in October 1859 with John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry, and the outrage and alarm created 30 miles away in Winchester. Brown's audacious raid, and the seeming northern sympathy for his act, inflamed the local community. However, despite taking vigilant precautions against future raids, the residents of Winchester did not immediately tilt toward the radical southern position of immediate secession. While sentiment in the community was split—rival groups held meetings both supporting and denouncing secession—the majority were conditional Unionists who opposed the immediate

dissolution of the Union. In the special election held on February 4, 1861, to elect delegates to a state convention to discuss secession, three out of four Winchester voters cast their ballots for the Unionist candidates. Much like the state as a whole, the citizens of Winchester, though not denying a state's right to secede, did not believe circumstances dire enough to warrant such an action. However, Lincoln's call for troops after the firing on Fort Sumter in April 1861 dramatically altered local sentiment. Unionists muted their opposition as Confederate supporters mobilized to take control of the town.

Confederate armies entered Winchester in the summer and fall of 1861, setting up camps, and establishing hospitals and training grounds. The presence of such a large force strained local resources. While farmers and merchants initially welcomed the economic benefits the influx of soldiers brought, they soon came to lament the army's presence. Wagons, horses, homes, and barns were pressed into Confederate service. Fences disappeared, outside trade dried up, and foodstuffs and supplies quickly became in scarce supply, which drove inflation up and caused much hardship on the locals. These problems would materialize every time an army—regardless of the color of its uniform—came to stay for an extended period in Winchester. When Stonewall Jackson's army evacuated Winchester in March 1862, allowing Union forces to take control of the town, it began a process of retaliation that would occur several dozen times throughout the war. Each time a Confederate or Union army entered the town, their supporters singled out sympathizers from the opposite side, which frequently led to personal arrests, property confiscation, or physical injury for those named individuals.

Duncan illustrates, through his numerous examples and anecdotes, that as the war progressed, both sides practiced an increasingly harsher form of war. The Union armies retreated from a relatively gentle policy of conciliation by the late summer of 1862, exemplified in the minds of local residents by the oppressive rule of Union General Robert Milroy, which began in January 1863. Duncan argues that Milroy was on the leading edge of the Federal hard-handed policy, as his actions were directed at individuals, not at devastating the Valley as a supply base for the Southern army (135). However, Duncan also reveals that Confederate armies also exacted retribution from individuals when they took control in the summer of 1863 and 1864. These reprisals would continue to plague local residents throughout the rest of the war, and the tenuous control that either side exercised over the region only exacerbated the division of local loyalties.

Duncan has conducted an impressive amount of research, utilizing hundreds of manuscript collections at over twenty repositories, plus hundreds of published primary accounts. He uses these sources often to stunning effect, especially in putting a very personal face on the hardships and capricious nature of life in the region for the inhabitants. His many vignettes, backed by well-chosen quotations, paint a moving and clear, though painful, portrait of the inhabitants' experiences in their beloved Winchester. However, the book does have a few shortcomings. The mass of detail begins to overwhelm the reader by the second half of the book. Duncan probably should have focused on fewer individuals that epitomized the varying experiences in the region, rather than try to tell such a comprehensive story. Duncan also mentions in the preface that, though not many people owned slaves, slavery was still an integral part of the community's social fabric. Yet, though free blacks and slaves composed nearly one-third of the population of Winchester, and 21% of the population of Frederick County, he dwells little on the experience of these African Americans. A greater focus on how slaves and free blacks reacted to the different occupations, and how their actions affected local whites would have made this a better work. The amount of racial antagonism that undoubtedly existed as a result is only hinted at in this book.

Despite these few flaws, Duncan's book is an entertaining read, and a useful contribution to the literature of the effects of war on individual communities. Duncan's work adds more depth to the richly-varied literature on the effects of the war on individual communities, much of which has emerged in the last year, including Jonathan Sarris' *A Separate Civil War: Communities in Conflict in the Mountain South* (2006) and Brian D. McKnight's *Contested Borderland: The Civil War in Appalachian Kentucky and Virginia* (2006). Like these books, Duncan gives us a more sophisticated picture of how the Civil War caused significant divisions between friends and family, and changed the political, economic, social, and physical dynamics of local communities.

*Dr. Judkin Browning, assistant professor of history at Appalachian State University, has published *Removing the Mask of Nationality: Unionism, Racism, and Federal Military Occupation in North Carolina, 1862-1865*, in the August 2005 issue of the *Journal of Southern History*. His book manuscript on the effects of Union military occupation in eastern North Carolina is currently under review by an academic press.*