

Northern Character: College-educated New Englanders, Honor, Nationalism, And Leadership In The Civil War Era

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Review

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Wongsrichanalai, Kanisorn *Northern Character: College-Educated New Englanders, Honor, Nationalism, and Leadership in the Civil War Era*. Fordham University Press, \$35.00 ISBN 9780823271825

Patrician Leaders: New England's Men of Character and the Civil War

In *Northern Character*, Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai tells the story of an influential cohort of college-educated northerners who served as Union officers during the Civil War and played a leading role in American public life during the postwar era. This generation of “New Brahmins” included the likes of James A. Garfield, Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., Joshua L. Chamberlain, Oliver O. Howard, and Charles Russell Lowell. Wongsrichanalai offers a fresh and compelling interpretation of these well-known figures by examining how their ideas about character and nationalism, forged during their college years, guided them throughout their adult lives.

Wongsrichanalai challenges scholarly narratives that portray honor culture as primarily a southern phenomenon. New Brahmins, he argues, had an honor code of their own. As young men, they internalized an ideal of gentlemanly character that emphasized independent thought, self-sacrifice, and self-control. Their identity as men of character influenced their decisions about military service, their conduct as officers, their perceptions of white southerners and slaves, and their attitudes toward Reconstruction.

Northern Character begins by examining the social and intellectual world that young men encountered at Harvard, Yale, Dartmouth, Amherst, and other New England colleges during the 1850s. Although the proliferation of colleges made higher education more accessible to northern youth during the antebellum decades, colleges continued to cultivate a fundamentally conservative and elitist worldview. Through their coursework, young men came to attribute the nation's troubles to selfish politicians, who found it all too easy to manipulate a poorly educated citizenry. In order ensure the success of America's republican

experiment, New Brahmins believed, it was imperative for men of character to take the reins of national leadership.

Northern colleges also promoted a “New England-centric vision” of America’s national character, history, and destiny (37). New Brahmins learned that Yankee industry and love of liberty had made the United States the pinnacle of Western civilization. While northern collegians were generally suspicious of radical abolitionism, they saw slavery as a blight on the nation, because it undermined the industry of slaveholders and diminished opportunities for free laborers. Only by extending free labor over the entire nation could the United States achieve its mission to promote liberty and democracy the world over.

When the Civil War erupted in 1861, Union officials faced a shortage of experienced officers. They responded by turning to college-educated men, who seemed to possess the discipline and leadership abilities necessary to prepare soldiers for combat. Although their elders often sought to dissuade them from volunteering, many New Brahmins believed that it was their duty as men of character to risk their lives to preserve the Union and advance their free-labor vision. Despite their professed commitment to self-sacrifice, however, young elites also saw military service as an opportunity to secure their rightful place as societal leaders. Intent on maintaining their class status during wartime, they often went to great lengths to secure commissions as officers rather than joining the rank and file.

On the battlefield, New Brahmins’ notions about character colored their impressions of the South and its people. While they admired the beauty of the southern landscape, they often decried the region’s untapped economic potential and the indolence of white southerners and slaves. In one of the most insightful parts of the book, Wongsrichanalai contends that New Brahmins drew a false distinction between the unseen slaveholders who led the movement for secession, and the officers and soldiers whom they confronted in battle. They blamed the former for impeding the region’s development through their reliance on slavery, and neglecting their responsibility to uplift poor whites. By contrast, New Brahmins often expressed admiration for their Confederate counterparts across the battlefield, who seemed to share their commitment to courage, self-sacrifice, and gentlemanly behavior.

As officers, genteel northerners sought to use rigid discipline to cultivate character among their troops. According to Wongsrichanalai, the hierarchy and

discipline of the Union army allowed these young elites to realize their vision of an ideal society, “in which everyday individuals obeyed orders from their social superiors” (141). Although Wongsrichanalai notes that they achieved “mixed results” on the battlefield, he presents a favorable assessment of their ability to prepare troops for battle, maintain their composure under fire, and earn the trust of their subordinates (162). For the most part, however, New Brahmins’ wartime experiences did little to alter their ethnic, racial, and class prejudices. Even as they witnessed the valor of black soldiers on the battlefield, for example, they often continued to see African Americans as innately deficient in character.

After the war, as New Brahmins assumed positions of power in government, the military, and the professions, they quickly grew ambivalent about Reconstruction. On the one hand, many supported the establishment of constitutional protections for black citizenship rights and the use of the Freedmen’s Bureau to educate former slaves. On the other hand, their aversion to radicalism, identification with southern elites, and concerns about governmental overreach led them to push for speedy reconciliation with the South’s “natural leaders” (17). Furthermore, the scandals of the Grant administration convinced many New Brahmins that the federal government had fallen into the hands of the same type of corrupt politicians who had led the nation astray during the antebellum era. Some worked to reform the Republican Party from within; others bolted for the Liberal Republican movement. Increasingly, however, New Brahmins withdrew from electoral politics altogether, dedicating themselves to founding schools, working as lawyers and judges, and participating in various reform movements.

Throughout *Northern Character*, Wongsrichanalai deftly weaves together a wealth of source material from the letters, diaries, college essays, speeches, and published writings of forty-nine New Brahmins. These sources allow him to present a rich portrait of his subjects’ views and motives, but they provide fewer insights into how other historical actors perceived and responded to these self-styled men of character. In analyzing New Brahmins’ conduct as officers, for example, Wongsrichanalai offers only one intriguing example of how a rank-and-file soldier viewed his commanding officer. Consequently, it is difficult for the reader to evaluate how New Brahmins’ assessment of their own character and leadership comported with the assessments of those who followed them into battle. *Northern Character* is nevertheless an impressive scholarly achievement. Engagingly written and convincingly argued, the book holds important insights for scholars interested in the cultural roots of sectional

conflict, the social dynamics of the Union army, and the postwar movements for reconciliation and liberal reform.

William Wagner is an Assistant Professor in the History Department at the University of Colorado Denver. He is currently completing a book manuscript titled “Composing Pioneers: Young Men and Booster Culture in the Antebellum American West.”