

Maryland, My Maryland: Music and Patriotism During the American Civil War

Catherine Bateson

Durham University, UK, s1257777@sms.ed.ac.uk

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

Recommended Citation

Bateson, Catherine (2019) "Maryland, My Maryland: Music and Patriotism During the American Civil War," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 21 : Iss. 3 .

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol21/iss3/4>

Review

Bateson, Catherine

Summer 2019

Davis, James A. *Maryland, My Maryland: Music and Patriotism During the American Civil War*. University of Nebraska Press, 2019 \$55.00 ISBN 9781496210722

The Cary sisters Jennie and Hetty, and their cousin Constance, were so popular within their social and Confederate circles in Maryland and Virginia that they were “granted honorary ranks in the army” in the early years of the American Civil War (75). It was an impressive accolade for the relatives responsible for the initial success of the Confederate anthem *Maryland, My Maryland*. Jennie and Hetty set the song’s words to the familiar tune of *O Tannenbaum (O Christmas Tree)*, while Constance aided the promotion and performance of the ballad alongside them. The story of their military promotions is just one of many captivating tales found within James A. Davis’s newest work *Maryland, My Maryland: Music and Patriotism During the American Civil War*.

On the surface, this study appears to be solely about the famous Confederate song. Its lyrics were taken from a poem, written by “a loyal Marylander” James Ryder Randall, who was teaching English literature in Louisiana at the outbreak of the war when he penned his stanzas in response to the news of the April 1861 Baltimore/Pratt Street Riots. Encouraged by his students, Randall sent his composition to a local newspaper. Within a month, the *South* printed it in Maryland and thus “introduced *Maryland, My Maryland* to the people of Baltimore” (33). This included the Carys, who quickly added an extra “Maryland, my Maryland” refrain and set it to pre-existing music. It spread rapidly, with numerous lyrical productions, contrafactum, parodies, instrumental and adapted versions printed in the warring nation. These cemented the piece into the wartime anthem musical lexicon. Much of the work details the extensive development of Randall’s poem into the Carys’ song, and how quickly it was adopted not only within Maryland but also the wider Confederacy and Union. Alongside this initial growth in the song’s popularity, the Carys and Randall’s

histories appear in this work and offer a personal biographical side to the ballad's story.

In this regard, *Maryland, My Maryland* differs from Davis's other work on aspects of Civil War music and song. The SUNY Fredonia musicology professor has written previously on the role of gallantry in wartime music, studies of military band music, and more recently on the role of music and musical performance during the 1863-1864 Rapidan encampment. These studies have, for the most part, been broader musicological and nuanced assessments of various wartime music aspects, song performances and military aural climates. This latest work continues a narrower focus – ostensibly this is a study of one song in the war-torn state at the centre of its lyrics – but Davis goes further this time to situate his study within Civil War history. As its subtitle alludes to, this is also a work on wartime *Music and Patriotism*, and thus Davis does not just give a history of *Maryland, My Maryland's* poem and song development. He also offers interwoven commentary about the role of nationalism in the conflict and the Confederacy especially, and the way in which national songs and patriotism's meaning evolve. Unlike his work on the musical climate of mid-wartime Virginia, a more theoretical and methodological framework is employed that seeks to understand song and music meanings, interpretations, adoptions, spread, usage, and their relevance to wider themes and expressions of nationalism and patriotism.

Davis traces *Maryland, My Maryland's* dissemination inside Maryland's own wartime history and beyond its state borders to the north and south. The ballad is situated within the context of Maryland's Civil War military and political events. Indeed, this cultural study also serves as a social history of Maryland and the surrounding border region, highlighting how the song was circulating within the milieu of internal tensions and pressures in its Union, Confederate and slave communities across the state and its towns. This offers an interesting cultural comparison to David K. Graham's new work *Loyalty on the Line: Civil War Maryland in American Memory* (University of Georgia Press, 2018). The work is full of stories, accounts and recollections of soldiers and civilians performing the song and hearing it across conflict settings. Davis notes how *Maryland, My Maryland's* reception not only altered during the war but also depended on when and where it was heard. This includes moments where pro-Confederate supporters would sing it to defy the Union Army, including Confederate spy Belle Boyd who allegedly sung it while at Old Capitol Prison (173-176). He also details many mentions of the song in letters

and diaries that referred to its lyrical elements as loyalties to the Confederacy and Union waxed and waned during and after the fighting, and vice versa. These personal recollections about hearing, playing and performing the song and instrumental variations of its music add a greater resonance to understanding how Civil War songs impacted contemporary society.

This broader analysis and assessment of *Maryland, My Maryland's* importance is not only reflected in primary source examples. Davis ties much of his analysis to existing historiography and musicology on various aspects of popular and specific wartime songs. For example, he makes regular direct reference to the work of Christian McWhirter (*Battle Hymns: The Power and Popularity of Music in the Civil War*, Chapel Hill, 2012) and draws on John Stauffer and Benjamin Soskis's study about *The Battle Hymn of the Republic: A Biography of the Song That Marches On*, (Oxford University Press, 2013) (xviii). His discussion of wartime patriotism and Confederate nationalism is interjected with references to scholarship on these topics, which makes this work more than the study of one Civil War song. To some extent, the wider patriotic discussion and nationalism exposition pulls the focus away from discussion of *Maryland, My Maryland's* impact. However, while useful for seeing how song culture played into some discussion of nationalist identity in the fledgling Confederacy, it does raise the question of whether *Maryland, My Maryland* is atypical amongst Confederate and Civil War anthemic ballads. For wartime song scholars, this work posits the issue of whether Davis's approach can be mapped onto other studies of individual song and genre groups of ballads, including other Confederate and Union examples, pieces centring on ethnic and regimental experiences, or those focusing on sentimental and home-front views. Some of the conclusions here are specific both to *Maryland, My Maryland* as a song and Maryland as a state torn constantly on the border between Union and Confederate loyalties, troop encampments and fighting.

That being said, Davis himself notes that this work is not "an epic history of a song" but is instead "a musical microhistory" of *Maryland, My Maryland* in the war years (xviii). Thus it is not concerned with the way the song sits within the scope of approximately eleven thousand wartime ballad compositions. In this he succeeds, as the book divides into chapters focusing on season-by-season, year-by-year, from spring 1861 to fall 1863, and the years 1864 and 1865 in their entirety. Davis tracks the song's shifting "creation, dissemination and reception" (301) and the varying

contexts of its usage. It started as a rallying cry for pro-Confederate secessionist Marylanders, before becoming a statement of defence when the realities of war reached the divided region of loyalties after the Battle of Antietam in September 1862. Within these sections, Davis also focuses on the way in which the song was used within different groups, including prisoners of war, women and wartime nurses, and – albeit to a lesser and underdeveloped extent – slaves. This chronological approach reveals how a song about one state broke its lyrical confines, and how Maryland came to represent the Confederacy as a whole through its circulation. While Union examples and appropriations developed by comparison, the concluding sentiment is that *Maryland, My Maryland* remained a Confederate song at its core. Davis ends with some discussion about the song’s long-lasting legacy and its now-controversial continual use as Maryland’s official state song. Surprisingly, there is very little discussion of whether a song that once defended slavery’s continuance has a place in anthemic ballad discourse today. This work is more of a history of *Maryland, My Maryland*’s wartime history and not its memory to any great extent (again differing from Stauffer and Soskis’s total song and music biography approach).

Maryland, My Maryland is therefore a welcome addition to song and music history, not only offering interesting and engaging insights into the song’s development and the cultural climate of Maryland, but moves some of the musicological and historiographical discussion along within the field. It raises approaches that could be mapped onto further research that showcase how important and engrained lyrical and musical culture was to American Civil War society. As the original lyrics sang: “From hill to hill, from creek to creek – Potomac calls to Chesapeake” (37) and *Maryland, My Maryland* continues to impact and draw attention nearly one hundred and sixty years on from its first iteration in a Louisiana classroom. Davis’s work showcases how and why its entrenchment in American musical culture should not be sung quietly in wartime musical studies.

Dr. Catherine Bateson AFHEA, is an American history tutor, lecturer and research assistant at Durham University, Vice-Chair of the Scottish Association for the Study of America and co-founder of the War Through Other Stuff Society. Her research focuses on the culture and sentiments of Irish American Civil War songs and music, and she has recently written about the way these lyrical productions sung about the concept of ‘home’ during the conflict in the Journal of History and Cultures (Issue 9, February 2019).