

### The Last Fire-Eater: Roger A. Pryor and the Search for Southern Identity

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## Review

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**Link, William A.** *The Last Fire-Eater: Roger A. Pryor and the Search for Southern Identity*. Louisiana State University Press, 2022. HARDCOVER. \$30.00 ISBN 9780807178218 pp. 136

William A. Link, a renowned historian of the American South, concisely and critically documents the career of Roger Atkinson Pryor, fire-eater, Civil War general, and postwar advocate of reconciliation in *The Last Fire-Eater: Roger A. Pryor and the Search for Southern Identity*. Rather than offer merely a biography, Link examines Pryor as a “representative figure” during a crucial period of Southern history (2). Before the War, Pryor served as a hotheaded editor at the *Richmond Enquirer* and *Richmond South* before taking his “combative” states’ rights style to the halls of Congress in 1859 (23). By the onset of the Civil War, Pryor’s aggressive defense of the South would be put to the test. His checkered military service as a colonel and a general and the chaotic brutality of Civil War combat ultimately “undermined his assumptions about honor, manhood, and the value of war” (1). This crucible of combat left an indelible mark on Pryor and helped shape his complicated and diverse postwar career as a celebrity lawyer and outspoken advocate of sectional reconciliation. Link demonstrates how Pryor’s remarkable—and at times contradictory—transformations mirrored the puzzling journey of the South before, during, and after the Civil War.

Link masterfully situates his case study of Pryor within scholarly discussion on southern honor, antebellum gender dynamics, and Civil War trauma. Pryor’s aggressive political style, which instigated at least eight duels between 1854 and 1860, was firmly grounded in the South’s politics of honor. His actions, moreover, reflected a generational shift that, as Pete Carmichael effectively illustrated in *The Last Generation* (2009), saw young southern men drift from conservative restraint towards a rash rebelliousness that seemed to embody 1850s southern thought and action. Pryor embodied this shift and the culture in which it was rooted; he embraced the Old South’s honor-bound impulse by liberally partaking in the *code duello*. Link’s added insight into to this aspect of Pryor’s life and personality bolsters not only Carmichael’s

generational study of the coming Civil War, but also reinforces both Bertram Wyatt-Brown's study of southern honor and Amy Greenberg's study of competing expressions of manhood in nineteenth-century America. The differing notions of manhood Greenberg and others have highlighted in the North and South become increasingly stark in Link's accounts of Pryor's dueling attempts upon his arrival in the Thirty-Sixth Congress. Republican unwillingness to partake in the *code duello* and their outright mockery of Pryor's rash aggression underscores the North-South divide over "restrained" versus "martial" manhood. Careful attention to the unrestrained masculine conduct that guided the South's system of honor enables Link to use Pryor as an archetypal figure of white male identity in the antebellum South. Careful attention to Pryor's political antics and contemporary newspaper descriptions of him being a "striking figure" with a sexually commanding prowess akin to a "young Hercules," as well as his engaging, yet vitriolic, oratory, adds weight to Link's analysis of southern identity and lends further credibility to the importance of examining gendered dimensions of honor and politics in antebellum southern society (4).

The emphasis on Civil War trauma and its impact on Pryor's life during and after Reconstruction, however, falls short. While Link is successful in detailing the uniqueness of Pryor's evolution from fire-eater to advocate of reconciliation and the "New South" creed, his desire to connect Pryor's postwar remembrance to wartime trauma is less convincing. This point partially rests on the way Pryor and his family engaged with various postwar reports questioning his military exploits and eventual capture at Petersburg in 1864. According to Link, this postwar debate "illustrates the difficulty of a veteran remembering and explaining wartime trauma" (68). Yet this appears to reflect more of a desire to retain some semblance of honor and sense of manhood in the face of military defeat and Southern reconstruction. Link, however, maintains that personal honor dissipated as a "guiding principle," arguing that the infamous Tilton-Beecher trial, which Pryor partook in as a leading attorney, represented a marked shift in Pryor's Southern identity (79). Although not entirely convincing, Link makes a better case for this shift by highlighting Pryor's attempt to counsel Paul Octave Hébert from partaking in a duel in 1874. The remarkable transformation reflected in the Hébert episode comes into even greater focus as Link documents Pryor's postwar life in New York City and his subsequent willingness to lay down his rebel past and cultivate friendships with former Union military commanders like William Tecumseh Sherman and Benjamin F. Butler.

In the end, one of Link's crowning achievements is the way he uses the example of Pryor to carefully recount the complicated and diverse nature of postwar reconciliation. This offers an important addition to David W. Blight's *Race and Reunion* (2001). Reconciliation took many forms. Similar to former Confederates like Joseph E. Brown and James Longstreet, Pryor embraced Henry W. Grady's "New South" and advocated both accommodation and reconciliation. However, unlike Brown and Longstreet, he refused to champion Reconstruction, which he interpreted as an unjust "northern occupation" (90). In fact, Pryor willingly promoted the Lost Cause. Nevertheless, and quite ironically, Pryor was more than happy to denounce "the evil" he contributed to bringing about the war, and he even counseled his fellow southerners to accept the results of the war and recognize the political and civil rights of Black Americans (71). His willingness to advocate for disgruntled laborers in the aftermath of the 1877 Haymarket riot, furthermore, underscores Pryor's unique transformation from shrewd defender of labor exploitation to ardent proponent of workers' rights. The complicated nature of Pryor's identity as a reconstructed white man in the aftermath of war underscores the diversity of postwar memory and sectional healing and opens the door for additional individual studies of southern identity before, during, and after the war.

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