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Southern Soil: Crises of Spirit in the Confederacy

Gospel of Disunion: Religion and Separatism in the Antebellum South. By Mitchell
      Snay. (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

 "Altars of Sacrifice: Confederate Women and the Narratives of War." By Drew Gilpin
      Faust. *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 76, No. 4 (March, 1990), pp. 1200-
      1228.

"For Something beyond the Battlefield: Frederick Douglass and the Struggle for the
      Memory of the Civil War." By David Blight. *The Journal of American History*,
      Vol. 75, No. 4 (March, 1989), pp. 1156-1178.

> "[W]e propose to leave our hearthstones, to endure any sacrifice, any
> privation for the ultimate success of our Holy Cause."
>
>   -Shenandoah Valley women to Confederate Secretary of War,
>   James Alexander Seddon, December, 1864.[1]

In the American Civil War, each side believed it fought to preserve its own way of life.

Men in the battle line, and women on the home front, were asked to sacrifice much,

sometimes everything. For such devotion there must be persuasion, whatever the public

or personal cause. The theme linking much present day Civil War historical research is

how the people of the North and the South, each according to his or her own beliefs,

made a personal connection with this generation of historians' consensus root cause of

the war—the moral argument over slavery. Spiritual, or moral, contradictions were rife

in the connections. Some Northerners abhorred slavery and black people equally. Many

Southerners owned no slaves, but fought to the death for the goals of the slaveholding

aristocracy. These contradictions engendered massive social transformations, from the

emancipation of African-American slaves to the obliteration of Confederate towns. After

the war, as David W. Blight writes of Frederick Douglass in "For Something beyond the

Battlefield: Frederick Douglass and the Struggle for the Memory of the Civil War," the

possession of its memory and meaning became the prize in "a struggle between rival

versions of the past" (Blight, 1159).

The second century of American Civil War scholarship displays a rigorous

attempt to probe the hearts and minds of the war's participants. This research has gone

far beyond the official reports of commanders and the self-serving memoirs of the era's

major figures. From general to private soldier, from fire-eater to hospital matron, from

president to slave, historians have sought to elaborate upon the significance of the

struggle to its contemporaries and their posterity by a thorough examination of topical

discourse and personal experience. Although the American Civil War is a virtually

infinite source of human interest, a relatively consistent account of body and soul during

wartime and its aftermath has emerged. Of primary importance in the account is the view

that slavery was at the moral center of the conflict. A frequently cited critical factor for

the Confederate defeat, given by Drew Gilpin Faust in "Altars of Sacrifice: Confederate

Women and the Narratives of War," is the collapse of "Southern morale" (Faust, 1201).

The most prominently featured key elements of recent American Civil War

historiography, then, are African-American slavery and Southern collapse. The dispute

between the Northern and Southern sections of the young United States was not therefore

based on purely political differences, and historians continue the challenging search for

deeper, ever more subtle interacting causes and effects. From this work a broad

underlying commonality emerges. Both sections claimed the revolutionary heritage of

the nation's founders. Both sides spoke the same language, held to the same religious

truths and used common political symbols, yet each side derived starkly different beliefs

about the America it shared with the other. As Mitchell Snay declares in *Gospel of Disunion: Religion and Separatism in the Antebellum South*, "the antebellum sectional controversy was a war of words" (Snay, 198).

Snay shows that the vigorous development of a Southern "religious proslavery orthodoxy" was a response to the aggressive antislavery sentiment of the Northern abolitionist movement, especially after 1835 (Snay, 54). The status of human bondage had been delicately skirted by the Constitution of 1789. The influence of the late eighteenth-century secular ideology of the American Revolution and its republican notions of liberty combined with early nineteenth-century Christian evangelicalism to create a growing desire in the North for the abolition of slavery. To the Southerners, abolition was an invasion of "Southern soil," for slavery was "the foundation of antebellum Southern civilization" (Snay, 12). The Northern abolitionist conflation of the moral with the political pushed the "Gentlemen Theologians" of the Old South to "endow the sectional conflict with religious significance by extracting and articulating the moral dimension of political issues" (Snay, 7, 10). Snay argues that vociferous Southern clergymen laid a firm if flawed foundation from which the Confederacy mounted its counter-revolution, for

> The Southern clerical critique of abolitionism explicitly if subtly suggested the idea that it was the North that was … subverting religious and political doctrine. This notion would later … shape a basic tenet of Southern nationalism: the belief that the North had departed from American values and institutions (Snay, 47).

The Southern clerical critique was firm in that it demonstrated with considerable internal consistency that the revealed truth of the Bible, taken literally, sanctioned slavery. Both sides generally accepted the Bible as the just and moral word of God. When abolitionists insisted that the peculiar institution "was repugnant to the whole tenor and spirit of the Bible" by citing the Golden Rule (Matt 7:12), they were forced to acknowledge that Jesus "never explicitly condemned slavery" (Snay, 58, 69). Southern clergymen and their congregations came to see the abolitionist attack on slavery as heresy and the Northern enemy as infidels. This view was reinforced by a conservative interpretation of natural law that promulgated a social order of patriarchal domination and conceded a variety of forms of submission, for example, by women and slaves.

The flaw in the Southern clerical critique was that it fostered the cultural strains that ultimately led to the collapse of the Confederacy. Ironically, to the extent that slavery's sanction by the Bible was irrefutable, the abolitionist antislavery movement sought new sources of moral authority. The antebellum sectional split over denominational differences was forcibly amplified by slavery as the schism between Scripturalists and Rationalists confronted the profoundly modern question of the relationship of individual conscience to divine revelation. As the war intensified, so would the debate "around conflicting interpretations of the role of conscience" (Snay, 60). In the South, moreover, some yeoman farmers and others outside the slaveholding elite reacted against the continuation of the patriarchal planter aristocracy at any cost, for within living memory Jacksonian democracy had "stressed a radical ethic of subsistence, liberty, and a fear of manipulation and dependence" (Snay, 72). Finally, the

sanctification of slavery imposed the Christian duty on the master to teach the slave "'the

genuine precepts of religion'" (Snay, 88). This "Christianizing" was intended to

enlighten the master and pacify the primitive impulse of the slave. The religious mission

of the slaveholding ethic implicitly validated the humanity of the slave, and

acknowledged "the slave as a moral and spiritual being in full possession of a conscience

and a soul recognized by God" (Snay, 98). This was as true for the slave's faith as it was

for the master's faith. While each side saw itself in the biblical history of Israel, we can

infer from Blight's commentary on Frederick Douglass that the story of Exodus must

surely have had a special meaning to Southern slaves.

In *Gospel of Disunion*, Mitchell Snay effectively portrays the central religious

component in both key elements of the Civil War account in recent historiography.   He

demonstrates that as shareholders in the planter aristocracy, the Southern clergy's effort

to establish "the sanctification of slavery affirms the centrality of slavery in explaining

the coming of the Civil War." Also, he shows that "the disparity between the ideals of

Christian slaveholders and the actual practice of slavery itself" led inexorably to the

dissolution of "one of the ideological bonds that held the Confederate South together"

(Snay, 215, 218).

The mobilization of Southern women by Confederate ideology (the word appears

23 times) and their evolving disillusionment as the Southern Cause was lost is the subject

of Drew Gilpin Faust's essay. Faust explains that white Southern women on the home

front "had to be enlisted by persuasion" to sustain Confederate armies in the field. Faust

traces how the "exemplary narrative" of the Southern white female was "designed to

ensure her loyalty and service." In the early years of the war, the Confederate "rhetorical

attempt to create a hegemonic ideology of female patriotism and sacrifice" largely

succeeded in creating the "archetypal 'Confederate woman'" who has been the cultural

icon of her gender and era ever since. Faust complains that this "false consciousness"

masked social and economic differences among Southern women, but her argument runs

counter to her own portrayal of the role accepted by articulate Southern women to be the

"custodian of … culture in the wartime South" (Faust, 1201, 1207).

When the war began, aristocratic Southern women led the search for "active

means of expressing their commitment," but as the war drew more blood and treasure, it

demanded greater contributions by "women from a much wider social spectrum" (Faust,

1206, 1209). Now the sacrifice included husbands, fathers, brothers, and sons: "the

relationship of women to the Southern Cause" erased class distinctions, as felt by these

women, on a profoundly personal level. At the level of public discourse, too, the duty

allotted to women to maintain moral order was similar across classes. As she had been in

antebellum society, each and every Southern woman was expected by Confederate

ideology to occupy "her accustomed spiritual role" to strongly influence the "'moral

condition'" of the war effort (Faust, 1204). There are powerful contemporary statements

by Southern women that testify to their determination to fulfill this role for as long as it

took. Phoebe Yates Pember, to whom Faust refers as the matron of Chimborazo Hospital

in Richmond, recorded in 1866 that

> The women of the South had been openly and violently rebellious from
>
> the moment they thought their states' rights touched. They incited the

men to struggle … and … sustained them to the end. They were the first

to rebel—the last to succumb.[2]

That Pember was Jewish does not detract from the point that the commitment and

sacrifice of Southern women to the Confederate war effort rested on the foundation

Christian belief and devotion discussed by Mitchell Snay. "Moral service to God would

now be paralleled by morale service to the state" (Faust, 1207).

The centerpiece of Faust's essay is an examination of feminine morale service in

Confederate nursing, education, and popular literature. "Women … became … creators

and custodians of public … culture in the wartime South, exercising their power over

communal sentiment" (Faust, 1207). The theme of an inverse *Lysistrata* appealed to

belles to receive only military suitors. With good reason, Faust has drawn the title of her

essay from Augusta Jane Evans' 1864 novel, *Macaria; or, Altars of Sacrifice*. One

poignant passage from the book captures the entirely modern connection between

devotion and conscience in the Confederate woman: "'I belong to God and myself'"

(Faust, 1219).

But the "reciprocal obligations" of the Confederate social order were not fulfilled

by Confederate woman's devotion, or by Southern women's sacrifice. Their men still

died in camp and battle. The "ever-expanding dimensions of required sacrifice" became

too great to bear (Faust, 1213, 1212). The early war's material self-denial "had been

transformed even for the most privileged women … into the possibility of starvation for

themselves and their families and the likelihood of death … for a husband or child"

(Faust, 1213). By such dire prospects, even the strength of a classless icon could be

broken. "As the emotional and physical deprivation of Southern white women escalated, the Confederate ideology of sacrifice began to lose its meaning" (Faust, 1225).

Faust acknowledges that her thesis of Confederate defeat as a direct result of the collapse of morale caused by defeatism among Southern women risks contradiction on this very point. "To suggest that Southern women … subverted the Confederate effort is to challenge a more than century-old legend of female sacrifice" (Faust, 1203). Faust's essay does more to substantiate the legend than challenge it. Robert E. Lee could not have had only the sad women of the Confederacy in mind when he spoke of "'useless sacrifice'" at Appomattox. In its descent, Southern morale matched the trajectory of the Southern Cause, but did not bend its final phase. Spiritual defeat on the home front followed military and political defeat on the battlefield.

In the decades that followed the Confederate defeat, observes David Blight, the loss of ideological meaning was what Frederick Douglass most feared. Douglass's late nineteenth-century description of how the Civil War ought to be remembered is highly coherent with many current historians' account of the event, for "Douglass viewed emancipation as the central reference point of black history." In emancipation, a just moral order had crystallized from "a vast wilderness of thought and feeling" (Blight, 1158).

By the 1880s, Douglass had become concerned with what lessons were to be taken from the meaning of historical memory. Just as a score of years earlier common symbols had been used to compose different, opposing beliefs, it now seemed that the common experience of the Civil War fed different memories, nourishing divergent meanings. Douglass realized that the "legacy of the Civil War for blacks—freedom,

citizenship, suffrage, and dignity" was jeopardized by the indifference, or outright

hostility, of the Gilded Age. He saw resurgent white racism in national policy enunciated

in Supreme Court decisions that led to Jim Crow laws in the South. "'It is the old spirit

of slavery,'" he said, "'and nothing else.'" Douglass believed that "those who could best

shape interpretations of the war" would win the "struggle of moral will and historical

consciousness." The outline of the future was "a question … of power, of persuasion"

(Blight, 1159).

Beyond the old spirit, a new spirit of sectional reunion was reshaping the legacy

of the Civil War. The spirit of reconciliation recast much of the home front spirit

generated on both sides by the warring ideologies, but without the ideology. For veterans

like Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., the experience of battle held primacy, without regard to

why it was fought. The moral cause that had fueled four terrible years of murderous

combat was submerged by the "passion, devotion, and sacrifice of the generation whose

'hearts were touched with fire'" (Blight, 1162).

Frederick Douglass would have none of it. This was exactly the mutation of

historical memory he vehemently rejected. "'Death has no power to change moral

qualities,'" Blight quotes Douglass in 1894. Even while the great issues of the Civil War

receded from memory as the nineteenth century drew to a close, with new wars on the

horizon, "Douglass never softened his claim that the Civil War had been an ideological

conflict with deeply moral consequences" (Blight, 1178, 1162).

Blight offers his own keen insight into the mind of the elder Frederick Douglass.

"Douglass may never have fully appreciated the complexity of the experience of the Civil

War … for whites" (Blight, 1173). Douglass's own ruminations were part of the same

mass psychological and spiritual process as reconciliation.   Yet his sense of history was in tune with what was to come. His foreboding that celebrations of "the soldiers' experience buttressed the non ideological memory of the war" was justified. The historiography of the American Civil War up to its Centennial is filled with white battles and leaders; the civil rights fight of black former slaves filled the newspapers. Douglass fought to the end of his days "using the power of language and historical imagination" (Blight, 1167, 1178). For nearly another century the battle for freedom that lived in the moral center of the Civil War and brought emancipation to his generation would continue, beyond the battlefield.

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[1] Elizabeth D. Leonard, "To 'Don the Breeches, and Slay Them with a Will!'" *The Civil War Soldier*, edited by Michael Barton and Larry M. Logue. (New York: New York University Press, 2002), pp. 70.
[2] Phoebe Yates Pember, *A Southern Woman's Story*. (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2002.), pp. 2.