

Class Warfare: Did Socioeconomic Divisions Undermine The South?

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Review

CLASS WARFARE

Did socioeconomic divisions undermine the South?

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Williams, David *Rich Man's War: Class, Caste, and Confederate Defeat in the Lower Chattahoochee Valley*. University of Georgia, ISBN 820320331

There is no mistaking the theme of this passionate book: the Confederacy lost the Civil War because of the arrogance and avarice of the planter class. The planters started a conflict that they alone wanted, contends David Williams, and they did nothing during the course of the rebellion to win the loyalty of the South's black or poor white populations.

To make his case, Williams explores the course of the war in 13 Georgia and eight Alabama counties that sat, cheek by jowl, along the southern border of those two states. "Perhaps nowhere can the decisive role of the economic class system and the caste system of slavery be viewed more clearly," he asserts in explaining his choice of location, "than in the lower Chattahoochee River Valley of Georgia and Alabama." It is not an entirely new proposition.

A region awash in class conflict

Other historians have stressed class divisions in the Confederacy, but none has done so more fervently or relentlessly than Williams. He draws a portrait of a region awash in class conflict and caste divisions.

By "caste" Williams generally means racial divisions, but he also believes that the "South's socioeconomic hierarchy was so rigid that even the white social structure might be more accurately defined as a caste system in which yeomen and poor whites had little chance for upward mobility."

Few Southern yeoman, poor whites, or other "plain folk," a group that, for Williams, also includes small merchants and skilled artisans, thought they had anything to gain from a war. As increasing numbers of white plain folk and

slaves turned against the rebel cause, Williams says, the Confederacy faced certain doom.

The grumbling of soldiers while on campaign, the discontent of their families at home, the defiance of Confederate deserters, and the expectations of slaves all convey the mood and emotions of an escalating cycle of rebellion. Conscription, high taxes, starvation, homelessness, and every form of physical suffering destroyed whatever vestige of loyalty plain folk may have felt for the government, especially when they saw planters protecting themselves from these hardships through hoarding, speculation, and draft evasion. Williams carefully and convincingly shapes every variety of unhappiness to buttress his interpretation of a disenchanting region seething with resentment against the slaveocracy.

There is some truth in all this. As far back as Ella Lonn and Albert B. Moore, writing in the 1920s, historians have pointed to fissures of discontent and alienation within the Confederacy. A consistent parade of scholars, including Frank L. Owsley, E. Merton Coulter, Bell I. Wiley, David H. Donald, and Richard E. Beringer, et al., in *Why the South Lost* (1986), have suggested that the Confederacy may have collapsed as much from lack of unity on the home front as from battlefield defeats. Still, Williams has gone a step beyond all of them, even advocates of the class conflict thesis, in stressing the definitive impact of the rebellious plain folk. Unhappily, his argument is weakened by a number of unresolved questions and contradictions.

Most obviously, Williams overgeneralizes to a precarious degree. Rather than sticking to events on the lower Chattahoochee and restricting his conclusions to that region, he makes sweeping statements about the entire South -- even the North, on occasion -- that he cannot justify. Thus the battle between union and secession, he says, hinged on class conflict not only along the Chattahoochee, not only across the entire South, but in the North, too. "The side that could most successfully, within its own socioeconomic confines, suppress or redirect class antagonism would emerge the victor," Williams asserts. "It was the most important challenge faced by either camp."

Williams creates a similar problem when he combines examples of class conflict from other parts of the South with his analysis of the Chattahoochee. Even when dealing with Georgia and Alabama, he occasionally strays to towns and counties that were very different in geography, economic interests, and

social composition from his region. The impression thus created, whether accurate or not, is that he must rely on evidence from other areas in order to make a substantial case for his own counties.

The next most vulnerable spot in Williams's argument concerns the prevalence of class conflict. Having insisted that class divisions were the most important factor in Confederate defeat, it is incumbent upon him to provide absolute connections between the two. Yet Williams too often assumes that anyone who complained about the Confederacy must necessarily have done so for reasons of class. This is evident when he discusses desertion and draft resistance.

Many men deserted, as Williams demonstrates, because of heart-wrenching appeals from scared and hungry families. But desertion, even when inspired by such entreaties, cannot automatically be taken as a sign of class resentment, and desertion did not necessarily mean disloyalty to the Confederacy. Williams also attributes draft resistance, especially after passage of the twenty-slave law, to class conflict, even though he acknowledges the deep political resentments conscription caused and quotes opponents of the draft who spoke in terms of "the people of Georgia" and "every body," not just poor people.

Confusing class conflict with Unionism

Confusing class conflict with Unionism does not help matters. In describing the anti-war activities of a local peace society, Williams asserts that "active membership clearly numbered in the thousands, and thousands more were sympathetic to the peace movement." Yet this peace society kept no records and held no regular meetings, which, besides leaving the numbers in doubt, makes it difficult to attribute conscious class motives to its members.

Similarly, Williams attributes the Confederate election results of 1863, which saw many pro-secession legislators replaced by anti-war and Unionist candidates, to "class-based political consciousness." He supports this contention, in part, by pointing to the success of the Mechanics' and Working Men's ticket in the city elections of Columbus, Georgia. Yet Columbus had the "largest concentration of Unionists" in the valley, and half of the city's skilled workers -- who, one assumes, would have formed the core of the Mechanics' ticket -- had been born outside the South. Consequently, class may have had something to do with political opinions in Columbus, but other factors were clearly at work too.

Chattahoochee is overshadowed

In tying racial caste to Confederate defeat, Williams sides with those historians who believe that slaves played an active role in liberating themselves, a not unreasonable assertion within certain constraints. Williams relies heavily, as do most historians who discuss this elusive subject, on the WPA slave narratives, and he feels confident enough in his findings to assert that "the black caste's collective antagonism contributed as much as that of whites to Confederate defeat."

Yet this conclusion, even more than his emphasis on class antagonism, seems strained. Large parts of his argument -- those dealing with runaway slaves, insubordination toward masters, and the role of blacks in the Union army -- have little if anything to do with events in the lower Chattahoochee.

All this is not meant to disparage the obvious diligence of his research or the clarity of his writing, only to warn readers that in his enthusiasm to draw meaningful -- not to say controversial -- conclusions Williams sometimes claims too much. He uses a sledgehammer where finesse is required, and the consequences too frequently batter the more praiseworthy aspects of his work.

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