

Fusillade Of Words: Secessionists Spoke Of Nature, Slavery, And Chivalry

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Review

FUSILLADE OF WORDS

Secessionists spoke of nature, slavery, and chivalry

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Fritz, Karen E. *Voices in the Storm: Confederate Rhetoric, 1861-1865.* University of North Texas Press, ISBN 1574410776

In the months leading up to the War and indeed through the duration of the conflict, one heard speeches everywhere in the South, according to **Voices in the Storm**, a short volume by historian Karen E. Fritz. Speechmaking at first created, then sus-tained, and in the end reflected, the mood of the Confederacy as the War progressed from its euphoric beginnings to its bitter denouement.

In **Voices in the Storm**, Fritz argues that neither the War nor the life of the Confederacy can be understood without understanding how oratory became a "common cultural expression, a medium through which Southerners interpreted their surroundings, and described their fellow citizens." Given the prominence of oratory in the 19th century South, its role in the war effort is not surprising. Fritz describes in the introduction how, when chronicling speeches on the southern home front throughout the conflict, she arrived at the unexpected conclusion that "Southerners, engulfed in turmoil of war, listened as orators gradually shaped them and their nation into rhetorical facsimiles of their enemy. This suggests that separation at some level effected reunion." Thus, the radical dichotomy depicted by speechmakers between the South and the North helped prosecute the war, but it ultimately turned reactionary and unwittingly formed a bridge to reunification.

Fritz's approach is thematic as well as chronological. She shows how radically three principal themes in speeches -- nature, slavery, and gentlemanly character -- shifted between 1861 and 1864-65 as the War increasingly disrupted and dispirited Southerners at home. Portrayals of the landscape evolved from God-given grandeur to desolation and grim, antagonistic elements. Discussions of slavery were generally avoided by speechmakers except in the War's earliest and latest stages, but images of slaves also shifted from being "happy laborers"

to "savage enemies" whose distrust of their masters hindered the war effort. The attributes of the gentleman were extended in early speeches to men of all ranks (especially to the common soldier), but this evocation of chivalry would be undermined at home by profiteering and self-interest, qualities previously reserved for Northerners.

Using modern rhetorical analysis, the author penetrates the ebullience of early speeches, which aimed to instill confidence and instruction, to find that many were preoccupied with defining basic concepts such as *nation* and *liberty*, a rhetorical strategy that addressed uncertainty and doubts about the new nation's resolve. Indeed, this implicit soul-searching facilitated a shift in perception that by 1864 had brought many to self-condemnation for the South's destruction.

In addition to rhetorical analysis, Fritz uses content analysis, based largely on the terms and descriptions Southerners used for themselves, to develop her arguments. These methodologies are used successfully and satisfyingly, in that they are unobtrusive, unencumbered by technical terminology, and aptly supported by excerpts. But they are inevitably handicapped, as the author indicates, by reliance on printed sources: texts that were probably revised after oral delivery, belated and often indirect reports of audience reactions, few indications of the elements of delivery, and so forth. Some readers will miss the lack of scholarly apparatus, even in the footnotes, that would provide quantitative support for the author's arguments. This absence will not concern most, however, who will find **Voices in the Storm** an insightful and in some ways provocative work.

Michael Montgomery, emeritus professor of English at the University of South Carolina, was consulting editor for language in the Encyclopedia of Southern Culture. He currently is working on a book about the Scottish and Irish roots of American English.