

### A Texas-Sized Dilemma: How Did 'Passionate Unionist' Lawyer End Up As 'Diehard Confederate'?

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## Review

### A TEXAS-SIZED DILEMMA

#### How did 'passionate unionist' lawyer end up as 'diehard Confederate'?

Parrish, T. Michael

Spring 2001

**Moretta, John** *William Pitt Ballinger: Texas Lawyer, Southern Statesman, 1825-1888*. Texas State Historical Association, 2000-05-01. ISBN 876111770

A brilliant attorney and political insider, William Pitt Ballinger was one of the most powerful men in Texas during the mid-19th century. He lived and worked in Galveston, a booming city and one of the South's most prominent commercial ports. Prior to the Civil War, Ballinger practiced law with great success and served for several years as U.S. District Attorney. Most of all, he was a passionate unionist. Indeed, he was passionate in all his endeavors, as is reflected in John Anthony Moretta's excellent new biography, **William Pitt Ballinger**.

Moretta's superb description of Ballinger's painful transition from fervent unionism to equally strong pro-Confederate convictions is at the heart of the book. The major crisis in Ballinger's life came with the dissolution of the Union. A conservative Whig, he was determined to remain above the fray as the secession movement unfolded. However, he quickly became horrified at the prospect of disunion and battled to prevent it, making public speeches and issuing proclamations urging Texans to exercise moderation and restraint.

The secession of Texas in early 1861 devastated Ballinger. Yet he gradually accepted the people's decision to abandon the Union, and soon began to see the Confederate States of America as a perfectly legitimate replacement for the United States of America. Like so many unionists, as a slaveholder and racial paternalist, Ballinger had believed that slavery was safer under the strong, stable protection of the Union, and now the Confederacy took on that crucial role of authority. But there was more to Ballinger's becoming a complete Confederate.

For historians of the Civil War, one of the most difficult phenomena to understand, much less explain, is the willingness of countless professed unionists like Ballinger to shirk the Union and embrace the Confederacy so ardently. In his transformation into a diehard Confederate patriot, Ballinger typified the emotional, intellectual, and political journeys of these reluctant secessionists and their evolving ability to see the Confederacy as a cause that actually allowed them to imitate their former unionist principles. While slavery was nearly always at the root of their decisions, their stated arguments were complex, sophisticated, and rational, reflecting a full-blown sense of southern nationalism as well as a deep-seated determination to protect slavery.

Whatever historians might think about the legitimacy or illegitimacy of the Confederacy, they must take into account the increasingly obvious fact, argued by Gary Gallagher and other scholars, that Confederate nationalism was deeply felt and strongly maintained by a huge number of white Southerners throughout the war and for many decades afterward. The propaganda issued by southern nationalists proved pervasive and overwhelmingly convincing, even to southern unionists. William Pitt Ballinger grasped and absorbed the major intellectual and practical justifications for nationhood that were invoked by Confederates in 1861. He compared secession to the American Revolution, arguing that Texans simply acted upon "the same right of Revolution our Forefathers believed incumbent upon them in order to free themselves from a tyrannical Government. We are doing no less than that at this moment in history."

Ballinger rejected the notion that secession was a triumph of localism over nationalism. Like so many other former unionists, he viewed the Confederacy as the very best hope for preserving and promoting American democracy in a truly national context. Moretta asserts, "In short, Ballinger shared the hope of many Texas unionists that the Confederacy would be all the things the old Union was, and more. The new nation would protect individual liberties, guarantee law and stability, propagate the original American mission, and do so in harmony with slavery." Echoing another strain of southern propaganda, Ballinger viewed Abraham Lincoln's apparent threat to preserve the Union by force as "repugnant to the spirit of free government," notes Moretta. "He considered [Lincoln's] use of coercion more odious than secession itself."

Serving as Confederate receiver for the port of Galveston during the war, Ballinger was a special commissioner to negotiate the surrender of Texas to Federal forces in 1865. As a devoted Confederate, he exulted in Lincoln's

assassination and even advocated taking up arms again. Once the reality of final defeat took hold, Ballinger mourned for a time, but then picked up where he had left off before the war, practicing law and working his way back to prominence and prosperity by arguing cases on behalf of wealthy and influential clients-Northerners and Southerners alike. He declined appointments to both the Texas Supreme Court and the United States Supreme Court, preferring instead to remain "a simple lawyer." Yet there was nothing simple about this remarkable figure.

Based largely on the voluminous Ballinger Papers in the Center for American History at the University of Texas at Austin, **William Pitt Ballinger** will surely receive many accolades from the Texas history community, and it deserves equally high praise from southern historians as well. If there is doubt in anyone's mind that white Texans were as "southern" in their values and material interests as their fellow secessionists in the other Confederate states, this book gives potent proof to that argument. If anyone epitomized the long-enduring Texas (and southern)"establishment," William Pitt Ballinger was that person. Now he has a biography worthy of his stature.

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