

### All That Makes a Man: Love and Ambition in the Civil War South

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## Review

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**Berry, II Stephen W.** *All That Makes a Man: Love and Ambition in the Civil War South*. Oxford University Press, \$26.00 ISBN 195145674

### Gender Analysis

Text interprets the driving forces behind the Confederate male

Stephen Berry, an assistant professor of history at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke, has mined surviving letters and diaries to give us a rare gender study of mid-nineteenth-century southern males. Roughly half of **All That Makes A Man** is devoted to vignettes drawn from the private writings by six men: Laurence M. Keitt, Henry Craft, David Outlaw, Harry Dixon, Nathaniel Dawson, and Theodorick Montfort. Although the book is happily devoid of socio-psychological jargon, Berry does put his subjects on the couch and even interprets the dreams that young Harry Dixon recorded in his diary (Note to self: destroy your letters and diaries or make sure that your executor does).

The objective underlying this apparent voyeurism is to understand what made white southern men tick. In direct response to a major question in the Civil War literature — why did men fight? — Berry poses another question that establishes the agenda for his study: Why did men of the period ever do anything?

Berry's answer is summarized in his subtitle: love and ambition. The ideal for southern men was not just to be civilized, but also civilizing — not merely to embody civilization, but to cause it. Love and marriage did not contradict or undermine this aggressive masculine impulse, but were an integral part of southern men's empire building. Berry asserts that through marriage men achieved the most basic, the most primal, of empires.

Students of the Civil War, strictly defined, may wonder what all this has to do with anything. Indeed, despite its subtitle, two-thirds of the book has no direct

connection to the Civil War South. But in the last third, Berry returns to the question about soldier motivation and provides a tantalizing answer: For any still curious as to why young men fought in the Civil War, they need look no farther than this — they fought because they were young.

The men in the first two-thirds of Berry's study suffered from a growing chasm between the ideal civilizing southern man and the reality of an increasingly mundane life. The war helped bridge that chasm. It provided what Berry described as a celebration of the opportunity God occasionally gave a man to rise and be counted.

The pages that follow offer a barrage of insights that link Berry's gender analysis of southern manhood to some of the salient issues in recent Civil War historiography. Readers will find provocative, but unspoken, connections with the works of James McPherson, Reid Mitchell, and Gerald Linderman.

Consistent with his promise to give us a gender analysis from the male perspective, Berry analyzes the changing relationships between Confederate soldiers' attitudes toward their women and toward their fledgling nation. Initially, southern men's consuming passion to win the love of their chosen women reinforced their patriotism. As William Dorsey Pender wrote to his wife early in the war, I would like to be a great man for your sake. A soldier's love for his woman, Berry argues, was the foundation on which he could build and rebuild his love of country.

Berry's subsequent analysis provides a new perspective in support of the loss of will argument for Confederate defeat. Beginning in 1864, Confederate males began en masse to experience a sort of unconversion experience — they registered their varied dissents and reclaimed the project that was themselves from the project that was the Confederacy. As in their conversions, men bound women up in their unconversions, using them to explain to themselves why they wanted no longer to be soldiers.

For better or for worse, Berry lobbs this grenade into the historiographical debate, and then declines to charge into the fray. Because his study is dedicated to the inner experience of masculinity, to the private landscapes men negotiated in their confrontation with what society claimed a man should do and be, Berry does not endeavor to test empirically the effect of these inner experiences on the outcome of the war. He also devotes relatively little attention to the importance

of slaveholding — of mastery — to the mindset and experience of Southern men.

Nonetheless, for readers looking for unconventional Civil War history, this book is seductive in many ways. It features sustained narratives about real people told largely in their own words. It offers lucid and often pithy observations and conclusions. And the prose is almost *too* beautifully written.

But how much substance is there behind the beauty? Doesn't this book distill down to the commonsense observation that men fought to impress women and out of a spirit of adventure? Is it necessary and useful to employ gender analysis to tell us this? I think we are undoubtedly richer for Berry's fresh perspective, in-depth analysis, and crystal-clear insights, but non-academic readers may finish this book and ask, so what?

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