

Daydreams and Nightmares: A Virginia Family Faces Secession and War

Charles B. Dew

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Dew, Charles B. (2016) "Daydreams and Nightmares: A Virginia Family Faces Secession and War," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 18 : Iss. 1 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.18.1.07

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol18/iss1/6>

Review

Dew, Charles B.

Winter 2016

Tarter, Brent *Daydreams and Nightmares: A Virginia Family Faces Secession and War*. University of Virginia Press, \$24.95 ISBN 9780813937090

One Family's Experience Demonstrates Wartime Trials in Divided Virginia

If anyone is writing better Virginia history right now than Brent Tarter, I do not know who that person might be. His books and articles are must reading for all of us who are interested in the rich history of the Old Dominion, and this latest publication to come from his talented hand is one of his best.

Daydreams & Nightmares carries us into the world of searing sectional crisis and bloody civil war through the experience of a single family. George William Berlin, a lawyer, his wife, Susan Miranda Holt Berlin, and their children, lived in the small town of Buckhannon, in Upshur County, part of that area of western Virginia where Unionism was strong in 1860-61 and secessionist partisans were few. It is this local clash—between majority loyalty to the existing Federal government and minority commitment to new southern Confederacy—that gives this slender volume its power. By bringing these sweeping events down to the local, individual level, we can see and feel how communities were torn apart and understand the price that was extracted from almost everyone as the country fell into the abyss of civil conflict.

George Berlin did not start out as a disunionist. A strong Whig and a devotee of the nationalist doctrines advocated earlier by Henry Clay, he successfully stood for election in 1861 as a Unionist delegate to the Virginia State Convention and an outspoken opponent of secession. And yet, as he told his Upshur County constituents in a pre-election address in January, something had to be done to curb “fanatical abolitionism at the north.” The only way to preserve sectional “peace & harmony” was to stay “the hand of northern aggression,” he insisted. The “slavery agitation *must* cease.” But disunion, he cautioned, would inevitably bring on war, and only “fools and demagogues talk to you about peaceable Secession” (pp. 21-22). Berlin’s staunch Unionism would

soon be put to the test.

The dilemma he and so many other moderate southerners faced was clear: how to preserve the Union *and* slavery *and* avoid war. On April 12, 1861, the Confederate bombardment of Fort Sumter and Abraham Lincoln's subsequent call for troops to suppress the rebellion decided that question unmistakably in favor of armed conflict. Suddenly, the issue became, as historian William Freehling has so aptly put it, who would Virginians now point their muskets at and pull the trigger? George Berlin opted to put the Yankees in the crosshairs. When he rose on April 23, 1861, to "ask leave of the Convention to change my vote on the ordinance of secession, from the negative to the affirmative" (p. 78), he took a step from which there was no turning back. He soon became a man without a safe domestic harbor in western Virginia.

After a brief reunion with his wife and children back in Buckhannon, George returned to Richmond in June to sign the ceremonial Ordinance of Secession. This decision proved to be a costly one for him and his family. Union troops occupied his hometown later that same month, and it became impossible for him as a declared secessionist to return. Nor could his wife secure passage through military lines to bring her children and rejoin her husband. So they wrote, George from what turned out to be his place of exile in Staunton in Augusta County, Virginia, and Susan from Buckhannon and then from nearby Philippi, where she and her children had gone to stay in her parents' home. It was this separation that produced the moving correspondence Brent Tarter uses so effectively to carry us into their troubled world.

Their love, their loneliness, and their tribulations emerge clearly and powerfully in these documents. For months on end, they had no ties but the fragile link forged by letters sent back and forth through hostile military lines, and some of their correspondence has not survived. But those letters that have are eminently worth reading. On the sixteenth anniversary of their marriage, March 31, 1862, George wrote Susan that "my love for you is as constant & true as the needle to the pole," and he apologized for creating the circumstances which had allowed the "vile tongues" of local Unionists "to slander you most unjustly." Most of all, he hoped "for the speedy return of the day which will bring us together again" (p. 109).

That day did not come until later in 1862, first in the form of a brief reunion in Staunton in May and then finally a permanent family reuniting in October

when Federal troops allowed Susan to take all her children with her to Augusta County. There, the Berlin family scratched out a living as refugees until the war was blessedly over and George was able to resume the practice of law.

Brent Tarter has given us a sad and very human tale of war, separation, and anxiety, followed by an all-too-brief period of happier times. Susan died on April 22, 1867, of complications following the birth of a baby girl, their ninth child. George lived on for almost thirty years, but he never remarried. Their letters would seem to tell us why: two people, husband and wife, very much in love, whose affection and loyalty were tested, but ultimately deepened, by the circumstances war had forced upon them. I suspect readers will feel a sincere debt of gratitude to the skilled historian who has brought their moving story to light.

Charles B. Dew teaches history at Williams College. He is the author of Bond of Iron: Master and Slave at Buffalo Forge (1994) and Apostles of Disunion: Southern Secession Commissioners and the Causes of the Civil War (2001), which won the Civil War Roundtable of New York's Fletcher Pratt Award. His next book, The Making of a Racist: A Southerner Reflects on Family, History, and the Slave Trade, will be published in 2016.