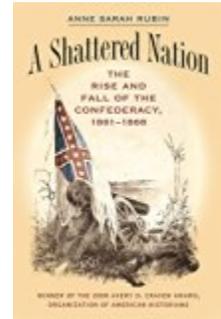


Anne Sarah Rubin. *A Shattered Nation: The Rise and Fall of the Confederacy, 1861-1868*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005. 336 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2928-8.

Reviewed by Michael Perman (Department of History, University of Illinois at Chicago)
Published on H-South (December, 2005)



Confederates and Confederate Identity

A Shattered Nation: The Rise and Fall of the Confederacy is not what its title indicates. Rather than a study of the rise and fall of the Confederate government, this book is actually an examination of Confederate national identity and its persistence after the Confederacy ceased to exist. The phrase, “A Shattered Nation,” is also inappropriate because the author’s intent is to show how Confederate identity was forged and actualized, despite the shattering of the Confederate experiment itself. That is, Confederate identity was not shattered, even though the nation was.

The subject matter of Anne Sarah Rubin’s book is national identity. In choosing this term and in her approach to the topic, she makes clear that two issues will not be discussed. First, she will not try to define or categorize the nationalism of the Confederacy and relate it to the many recent studies of the concept of nationalism, most notably Liah Greenfield’s *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* (1992) and Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* (2nd ed., 1991). Second, Rubin opts to remove her study from the ongoing question of whether the Confederacy lost because it lacked a sense of distinctiveness and nationality sufficient to sustain a new and independent nation. Instead, she takes the approach of George Rable in *The Confederate Republic* (1994) and Drew Faust in *The Creation of Confederate Nationalism* (1988) which is to identify Confederate identity and describe it as accurately as possible without comparing it to other nationalities or assessing its adequacy as an atavistic ideology capable of holding together a nation-state. In her own words, she will treat Confederate identity on its

own terms and without judgment as “a guiding ideology” for the emerging Confederacy (p. 5).

Since “identity” is a less precise and less controversial concept than “nationalism” or “nationality,” taking this approach makes Rubin’s task considerably less complicated or open to objection. Nevertheless, she adopts two perspectives on her topic that are novel and challenging. Previously, historians who ventured into the thicket of Confederate nationalism ended their investigation with the end of the Confederacy itself. But Rubin continues beyond 1865 to see how well established Confederate loyalty and identity were. To find out, in other words, how enduring Confederate identity was and whether it was tied exclusively to the Confederate state. Usually, studies of Confederate nationalism have emphasized the role that a pre-existing southern distinctiveness played in producing secession and a drive to create a new nation. Rubin, however, focuses on its persistence after the Confederacy.

A second, and more significant, innovation in Rubin’s study is her search for Confederate identity, not among the usual suspects—statesmen, intellectuals, opinion-makers, and generals—but in “the broader population of civilians and soldiers” (p. 6). These people communicated with each other between the home-front and the battlefield and “imagined the nation together and engaged in conversations about what it meant to be first a Confederate and then, later [after 1865], a Southerner and an American” (p. 3). So, private diaries and letters, rather than speeches, pamphlets and platforms, provide the ev-

identity base for such a study, and these are supplemented by newspapers and popular literature, songs and poems, primers and schoolbooks. In essence, Confederate identity is to be discovered through “countless personal exchanges” (p. 6) in the private sphere and the public arena. How the Confederacy was perceived and how Confederateness was experienced by the citizenry, rather than how both were formulated and promoted, is therefore the subject matter and approach of Rubin’s investigation. Not really a formal, official construct or ideology, Confederate identity is instead to be seen as a cultural phenomenon. This book is therefore a work of cultural history.

A Shattered Nation is divided into two parts, with four chapters on Confederate identity during the war and three chapters on its reformulation during the policy-making phase of Reconstruction, 1865-68. Between each chapter, the author splices in a series of brief “Interludes,” a sort of sidebar treating some specific aspect of the process of identity-formation. The upshot of this investigation is that Confederate identity is very loosely coordinated and seems to consist of a number of basic elements, or perceptions. First of all, people who identified themselves as Confederates considered the experiment of 1861 to be the fulfillment of the nation-creating movement of 1776, a continuing, or perhaps a second, American Revolution. This established the legitimacy of the Confederates’ bid for independence, since it was in direct line with the founding and was intended to save the beliefs and values of the American nation from their northern betrayers. The Confederacy’s conservatism and legitimacy was therefore established from the outset. Furthermore, a patriotic educational effort was now needed to instill this understanding into the children through Confederate textbooks and primers. And, of course, God was on the Confederacy’s side, thereby sanctioning it as a godly enterprise.

A second perspective emerged as the war proceeded. Confederates believed that northerners considered the South indolent and averse to work. And so the new nation needed to arouse its sense of duty and honor as well as its willingness to work and suffer for this worthy cause. But selfishness on the home-front and shirking and desertion among the soldiery began to undermine these claims and values, and so they had to be countered vigorously by loyal Confederates.

Third, Confederate identity was defined by two negative reference groups. Externally, there were the Yankees who were cruel, destructive and oppressive, as their

conduct during the war confirmed. Internally, Confederates encountered their opposites in the form of their own slaves who, despite being essential to Confederate life and nationhood, were members of an inferior race who needed to be kept subordinated and unfree, in contrast with the liberty, independence and superiority of the white people of the Confederacy. Rubin considers that the eleventh-hour decision to enlist the slaves in order to save the Confederacy showed how strongly they held to their Confederate identity.

Fourth, throughout the war, as the series of “Interludes” reveals, Confederate people were always hopeful and refused to consider defeat or surrender, even after Gettysburg and later the fall of Atlanta. This offers convincing evidence, so Rubin claims, that their identification with the Confederacy was not shallow and could not be undermined by hard times or even seemingly obvious military defeats.

And finally, their Confederate identity was so strong that, when the war ended, they were unwilling to believe it was all over and they continued to treat what they learned about the victor’s terms with suspicion and also defiance.

With the elimination of the Confederacy itself in 1865, Confederate identity did not disappear but metamorphosed into a renewed southern identity that was “quasi-ethnic.” The Confederates’ reluctance to take the required oath of loyalty in order to regain their property and their political rights, as well as their disdain and uncooperativeness toward the Yankee troops and officials based in the post-war South showed how attached they still were to the Confederacy. Nevertheless, their concern to be active and rebuild the South required them to encourage northern investment. At the same time, they began to develop southern cultural independence through regional journals like *De Bow’s Review*, *The Land We Love*, *Southern Opinion*, etc. Thus, the author argues that a public accommodation to the Union, and even eventually to northerners, coexisted with a private, distinctive, and more defiant identity as southerners. Meanwhile, as Rubin shows in her final chapter, gender relations resumed their pre-war, and therefore southern, form. No longer were women relied upon to take responsibility for maintaining the household and its economy or to encourage their husbands and sons to leave home and enlist in the army. Instead, they were to be restricted to the domestic sphere and to the memorialization of the Confederate war dead. Men resumed their public and work-related responsibilities, confining women to the

arena of emotion and family. By 1868, however, men's southern identity became more defiant as they fought to regain political and racial control after their former slaves were enfranchised, the ultimate stimulus to their emerging sense of themselves as southerners.

Professor Rubin's depiction of Confederate nationalism as a cultural phenomenon revealed in private correspondence and public exchanges offers a new approach that is most welcome. Moreover, the book is engaging and well-written. But there are limits to what it can achieve. In the first place, this concept of Confederate identity is quite imprecise and loosely constructed. It amounts to a series of attitudes, notions, and feelings that are laid out almost in chronological sequence but are not particularly coherent and articulated. Consequently, this mosaic of values and notions falls short of becoming an ideology or world-view that guided the people of the Confederacy, as the author claims.

A second problem is that the elements in the citizens' identity are neither new or unfamiliar in themselves nor are they coordinated or prioritized in a convincing or intriguing fashion. Was the 1776 analogy, which is already well known to historians of the Civil War era, just one of several aspects of Confederate identity or was it the defining element? Without a more integrated treatment, Confederate identity remains a list of notions that offers few fresh insights or challenging interpretations.

A third observation is that the protagonists in this

study do not represent a cross-section of the population of the Confederacy. They are men and women who are literate and well educated, and they are clearly members of the economic and social elite. One suspects that they supported the Confederacy because its failure would result in their own downfall and ruin. As the author readily acknowledges, her book is not about the Unionists because they opposed the Confederacy. But neither is it about the many millions of plain folk and foot-soldiers, the vast majority of the population. Some readers, however, may approach this book thinking erroneously that, since all the people who lived in the Confederacy were by definition Confederates, this study includes them all.

And finally, the postwar chapters on the shift from Confederate to southern identity raise a question that is not really answered. If Confederates became southerners, and also Americans, after the war, does this really demonstrate that Confederate identity persisted beyond the existence of the Confederacy itself? A sense of "different-ness" and the hostility that accompanied it may have endured, but in what way could it be considered a persisting "Confederate-ness"?

A Shattered Nation is a well-researched and lively account of an intriguing and significant aspect of Civil War history. But the historical problem of nationalism and national identity is a tricky and complicated one, and any historian who engages it has to be prepared to define, categorize and systematize, and to take an approach that goes beyond the descriptive and the narrative.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-south>

Citation: Michael Perman. Review of Rubin, Anne Sarah, *A Shattered Nation: The Rise and Fall of the Confederacy, 1861-1868*. H-South, H-Net Reviews. December, 2005.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10971>

Copyright © 2005 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.