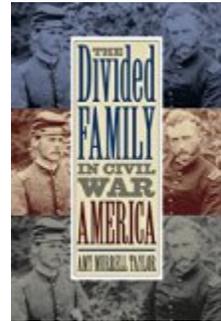


Amy Murrell Taylor. *The Divided Family in Civil War America*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005. xiv + 319 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2969-1.

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Family Divisions in a Divided Country

As Amy Murrell Taylor acknowledges in the introduction of her latest work, the notion of the divided family is very much a romantic one, a notion that has become engrained in popular culture. The traditional portrayal of “brother against brother” is very much a shorthand to illustrate the human cost of large scale conflicts, allowing us to “see the warring nation as if it were a quarreling family” (p. 1). By attempting to offer an historical study of the divided family within Civil War America, Taylor seeks to flesh out the often crude stereotypes contained within historical fiction and television dramas, attempting to provide a social and cultural history of the divided family in Civil War America (p. 2).

Taylor acknowledges that the question of how many divided families there were at the time is difficult to answer. Lack of communication between relatives, social stigma, and simple loss of records—all of these considerations make it hard to accurately state the true number of divided families. Despite this, Taylor has managed to locate a substantial number of examples, focusing primarily on 166 families who resided within the Border States and the Upper South.

Focusing on these regions is a shrewd move, with both of these areas containing a disparate mix of loyalties and sympathies.[1] Torn between North and South, with bonds of kinship and sympathy clashing with ties of commerce and trade, these states were in a unique position. Yet despite the importance of the border to the Civil War, surprisingly few historians have examined these states collectively as a region rather than individually. Taylor

does a good job of showing why the border deserves attention, emphasizing its position as a melting pot, caught between Northern and Southern influences, and being the crossroads of American travel (p. 3).

Recognizing that the divided family is a huge subject, and certainly so much more than brother vs. brother, Taylor breaks her work down into seven chapters that explore the nature of family bonds and seek to place the divided family within a larger social and historical context. Fathers and sons, sisters and brothers, husbands and wives—each conflict is examined individually and yet still related back to the whole of the divided family. Space is also extended to a discussion of the allegiance of border blacks, which seems fitting when it is considered how the border residents prided themselves on a more humane treatment of slaves, one where they were almost part of the family.

What emerges from the convincing arguments within the book is a fascinating analysis of the role of family within wartime society, and how the war challenged traditional notions of social status and allegiance. We see sons rebelling against the wishes of their fathers, wives challenging the authority of their husbands, and brothers and sisters seeking to preserve their bond in the face of differing opinions and allegiances. Yet Taylor’s examples, while showing the family unit facing all sorts of challenges, highlight how Civil War families strove to overcome such problems. Sons who joined the rebellion attempted to make a clear distinction between their actions and their love and respect for their family, while

women often kept their true feelings quiet, or expressed them according to the feelings of the present company.

One of the most fascinating chapters within the work deals with the issue of "border crossing," the passing of people, communication and ideas between North and South. The stigma attached to kinship with a treasonous relative was considerable, even if contact was minimal; travel between the two regions was discouraged, mail was intercepted, and suspicion bred. As was famously shown by the relationship between Mary Todd Lincoln and her sister, Martha Todd White, people found it hard to believe that family ties could endure between two different sides unless there was some impropriety involved (pp. 98-105). Nevertheless, many border residents strove to maintain their family ties within this oppressive atmosphere, attempting to maintain some semblance of normality.

The majority of the work's examples deal with relations between divided families in the border and the Confederacy. However, the border was an unsettled region and, despite staying in the Union, these states were viewed with distrust by many Northerners, most famously Abraham Lincoln, who was initially consumed with the prospect of border secession. The conflict between the Pratt brothers, where communications broke down between John in Boston and Jabez in Baltimore, suggests that the relationship between the border and the North could perhaps have been explored further (pp. 68-70).

One of the main strengths of this work is that, as well as providing numerous examples at a family level, Taylor succeeds in placing the divided family within American society, emphasizing how it was almost a yardstick by which to judge national reconciliation (p. 154). By never abandoning ties with their southern compatriots, border residents attempted to heal the wounds inflicted by

war, welcoming sons back into their homes and reopening communication with their Southern relatives. "Their desire to put the past behind them was shared by many other Americans in the postwar years" (p. 172).

Taylor shows how this attempt to forget the past rather than confront it was apparent on a national scale, traditional wartime fiction being replaced by tales where love and brotherhood could overcome sectional differences. A thought-provoking final chapter examines the role of black families in this context, emphasizing how their efforts to advance themselves contrasted with the desire of whites to ease the process of reunification by promoting black subordination. "The reunion of white Northerners and Southerners came first, while blacks remained dependent, subordinate members of that family, with race and slavery receding into the background" (p. 208). Blacks were secondary to the main goal of facilitating white reconciliation, highlighting their true position within the Civil War family

This is undoubtedly a valuable book on a fascinating subject, and Taylor has provided a valuable historical service by giving voice and personalities to the often characterless stereotypes of the divided family. In this well-written and well-constructed book, Taylor knows when to expand a point and when to let the participants speak for themselves, expressing their own hopes, fears and desires. What emerges is a compelling study of the divided family within American popular culture, and a testament to the importance of family within everyday society.

Note

[1]. Studies of the divided loyalties in these regions include Daniel W. Crofts, *Reluctant Confederates: Upper South Unionists in the Secession Crisis* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989); and William W. Freehling, *The South vs. the South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

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