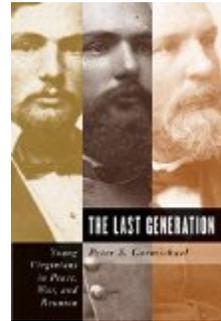


Peter S. Carmichael. *The Last Generation: Young Virginians in Peace, War, and Reunion*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005. xiv + 343 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2948-6.

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Parents Just Don't Understand

This book is a most interesting study in generational relations. Peter S. Carmichael concentrates on the generation of males born in Virginia between 1831 and 1843. This generation came of age during the 1850s, and was the last generation born before the Civil War, thus giving Carmichael the inspiration for his title.

Carmichael focuses his study on a group of 121 men, all of whom hailed from the slave-owning classes of Virginia. A few died young, i.e., before the onset of the Civil War. Some 26 subjects of Carmichael's study, such as Greenlee Davidson and Willie Pegram, would not survive the war; Davidson was killed at Chancellorsville and Pegram in the final days of the war. The rest survived, and many lived well into the postwar period.

The young men profiled here manifested both conflict with their parents and other members of the older generation, as well as concern for their own future. Raised in an educational system that reminded them of Virginia's glorious past and critical role in the American Revolution, these young men were troubled by what they regarded as the backward condition Virginia found itself in the 1850s.

The last generation, many of whom were educated at colleges such as the University of Virginia, were great believers in the idea of "progress," particularly as manifested in economic development. The fact that this did not happen was blamed on Virginia's political leadership, whose immoral and corrupt conduct in office supposedly wasted Virginia's resources. These men, often noted for

their political and economic caution, were derided by the last generation as "old fogies." For their part, the "old fogies" considered many members of the last generation immature and shallow youths who spent far too much time engaging in all manner of frivolous activities.

Contrary to the thinking of the elder generation, the young Virginians were indeed worried about their adulthood. They desired to make names for themselves in various professions, while living in the manner expected of Christian gentlemen. The problem for the last generation was that they saw Virginia as a place where all of the good positions and possibilities for advancement were taken. Older, established men had already availed themselves of these opportunities and were not about to surrender them. Inability to secure a respectable and proper position would make it difficult for the younger men to secure wives of the appropriate social status.

Of course, there was not always disagreement between the generations. Like their elders, the last generation embraced the "peculiar institution." Coming from slave-owning families, the vast majority of Carmichael's subjects regarded the maintenance of slavery as critical to the sustaining of their own social and economic status. Where they did break with some members of the older generation was over the issue of disunion in the aftermath of Abraham Lincoln's election. The youths profiled here were contemptuous of the cautious rhetoric of old fogies such as Jubal Early. They were, as Carmichael calls them, eager Confederates.

Serving in the Army of Northern Virginia benefited the last generation, assuming they survived the perils of the battlefield, in two critical ways. First, active military service comported with the image of “manliness” these young men had cultivated in their formative years. Service in the Confederate Army, especially as junior and eventually field grade officers, was also a great way to show that, far from being the callow and frivolous youths as described by the older generation, these young men were indeed adults. As such, they had every right to lay claim to the mantle of leadership and social status that the old fogies had thus far denied them.

As military officers, Carmichael suggests that the last generation played a critical role in the management of the Army of Northern Virginia. As junior and later field grade officers, according to Carmichael, these men were a crucial bridge between the army’s rank and file and the senior officers. Their upbringing and the mores they embraced compelled them to lead their men with a type of bravery that at times seemed almost suicidal. If Robert E. Lee was the brain of the Army of Northern Virginia, these men to some degree constituted an important part of the nervous system that kept the army in operation.

In many ways, the young men Carmichael profiles in this book resemble the young men of Imperial Germany in the generation born between 1871 and 1900. They too, like Carmichael’s last generation, thought they were coming of age in a Germany that was sated. Like Carmichael’s subjects, they too sought to find a place for themselves in the German Kaiserreich, worried that they would not get the opportunity to prove their mettle either as men or as Germans, as their fathers had done in the

wars of German unification. For many, especially those born after 1885, the outbreak of war in 1914 would give them that opportunity.

With the close of the Civil War, Carmichael’s last generation was faced with the bitter circumstances of a lost war and a destroyed state. Having served in the Confederacy’s only successful army with considerable distinction, the last generation was now able finally to grasp the mantle of leadership they had long desired. Once in such positions, the last generation eagerly embraced the idea of the “New South.” They also thoroughly approved the eventual suppression of the political rights of the Freedmen. One aspect of this that Carmichael does not go into in any detail was any kind of involvement the subjects of his study may have had with extremist groups such as the Ku Kux Klan that regularly directed violence at blacks and Republicans.

As the last generation passed into middle and then old age, many of the last generation came to reject in revulsion what they perceived as the excesses of the Gilded Age. This brought them into conflict with the generation of Virginians born after the Civil War. In the book’s supreme irony, the last generation eventually became the “old fogies” they themselves had derided so many years earlier.

Carmichael’s book is a fine addition to the literature on the Civil War. It would be most interesting to see a study comparative to that of Carmichael’s looking at another state in the Confederacy. In any case, if there is one thing Carmichael’s book affirms, it is the immortal words of rappers The Fresh Prince (a.k.a. Will Smith) and D. J. Jazzy Jeff, namely “parents just don’t understand.”

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