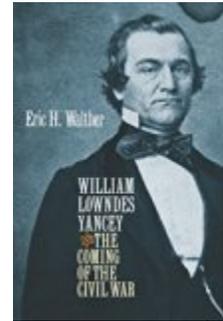


Eric H. Walther. *William Lowndes Yancey and the Coming of the Civil War*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006. xi + 477 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3027-7.

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The Fire-Eater's Progress

At last, we have a full-length scholarly biography of the famously fire-eating Alabamian, William Lowndes Yancey (1814-63). Prior to the publication of this book by the University of Houston's Eric Walther, those seeking published secondary works on Yancey could consult only an overly laudatory 1892 biography or brief sketches in various modern treatments of secession and the Civil War. Walther is well suited to pen a critical evaluation of Yancey. As author of *The Fire-Eaters* (1992), a collection of chapter-length biographies of key secessionists including Yancey, he knows his subject well. Here Walther provides a fuller and more nuanced assessment of Yancey than he could in that earlier work. Most important, Walther provides a cogent psychological explanation for Yancey's development into a fire-eater.

Yancey is best known for his strong support for southern rights and secession, beginning in the 1840s, and for his diplomatic service to the Confederacy. Walther covers this period ably, providing ample evidence from key speeches and private correspondence to analyze Yancey's role in major episodes including the Alabama Platform, the break-up of the national Democratic party, the secession crisis, and efforts to secure European recognition of the Confederate States. Less well known are Yancey's troubled childhood and his militant unionism during the Nullification Crisis. Walther does a great service by reconciling the earlier, less familiar Yancey with the later fire-eater and Confederate patriot.

Expanding on earlier analyses of Yancey by Ralph Draughon Jr. and William Barney, respectively, Walther

makes psychohistory central to his analysis of Yancey's character and politics.[1] In brief, according to Walther, Yancey's unhappy childhood powerfully shaped the fire-eating man of the 1850s and 1860s. Born in Georgia to a Federalist father who died when Yancey was but three years old, young William moved before his tenth birthday to Troy, New York, where his New England-born stepfather, the Reverend Nathan Beman, had accepted a Presbyterian pastorate. But the blended Beman-Yancey family never experienced the joys of affective kinship for which its members might have yearned. Yancey's mother, Caroline, suffered from a terrible temper and kept her children emotionally distant; Yancey's stepfather exhibited even more extreme coldness toward the children and occasionally beat them severely as well. The Reverend Beman probably beat his wife, too; he certainly engaged in shouting matches with her and once imprisoned her in a locked closet for hours and nailed shut her bedroom door. After fourteen tempestuous years, the couple informally separated in 1835.

Growing up in a highly dysfunctional family, Yancey felt unloved by both parents. Distant from his mother, Yancey absolutely despised his stepfather. He identified Beman's Finneyite style of evangelicalism and social reform with his stepfather's negative attributes. Yancey particularly focused on Beman's strong antislavery views because they fueled many of the arguments between Nathan and Caroline. Yancey also considered Beman's views frankly hypocritical. He knew, for instance, that Beman personally profited by selling (rather than freeing) his wife's slaves before moving from Georgia to New

York.

Educated at Williams College in Massachusetts, Yancey headed south in the spring of 1833, at just nineteen, to study law with Benjamin Perry, a leading attorney in the upcountry South Carolina village of Greenville, where Yancey had relatives. Walther argues effectively that Yancey, who retained only dim memories of his beloved deceased father, found in Perry the first in a series of older men who served as surrogate paternal figures. Already a nationalist in his political views, Yancey became a confirmed opponent of state sovereignty during his association with Perry, an ardent unionist during the Nullification Crisis. Yancey soon took charge of the *Greenville Mountaineer* and used its columns to challenge John C. Calhoun and other Nullifiers.

His move to Alabama in 1837 coincided with the advancement of his cultural transformation from New Yorker to southerner. Walther argues that the South, where Yancey came of age, became the loving mother he never knew, while the North took “on the exaggerated, negative characteristics of his stepfather” (p. 192). Yancey sought to prove his devotion to the South by “embrac[ing] in the extreme the most valued characteristics of his adopted frontier society: slaveholding, oratory, public affairs, and manly, honorable conduct” (p. 46).

Yancey’s southern evolution involved adopting the sort of extreme states’ rights views he had earlier derided. The reason, Walther makes clear, was his increasing commitment to the peculiar institution, especially after acquiring thirty-five slaves through marriage into a wealthy family. He kept vigilant for any threat to slavery, particularly from abolitionist-tinged Whigs and meddling northern evangelicals like his stepfather. In Alabama, a new father figure, the Calhounite politician Dixon Lewis, helped convince Yancey that unionism too easily led to submission to antislavery northerners. By the early 1840s, Yancey embraced the belief that only a firm commitment to state sovereignty—and a state’s right to secede from the Union—could protect slavery. He then took up leadership in advocating for southern rights, a euphemism for the right to take slave property into federal territories, and eventually secession.

Walther’s contributions in tracing and explaining Yancey’s shift from unionism to secessionism are among the most illuminating in the book. But the book is richer than a brief review can convey. Not only do we learn about the origins of Yancey’s personal secessionist impulse, but Walther also treats us to detailed descriptions

of Yancey’s strategies at the various key moments of the sectional conflict as well as of his role in the Civil War. Beyond politics, we find out about his relatively good relationships with his wife and children (influenced by his striving to avoid the problems of his childhood household) as well as how religion altered his views on dueling. Hence Yancey appears as more than just a fire-breathing secessionist.

Despite its overall high quality, the book does have some minor problems. Sometimes Walther uses imprecise language that could lead a reader astray. For example, he states that the Confederacy’s “Twenty Negro Law” “exempted [from military conscription] one white man for every twenty slaves on plantations” (p. 348; also see p. 352). Actually, it exempted one white man on every plantation with at least twenty slaves. So a plantation with forty slaves received only one exemption, not two, as Walther’s wording might suggest.^[2] More troubling is Walther’s precision in insisting that the three-fifths clause decreased rather than increased southern political power (p. 67), a subject on which there is no objective position. One’s view depends on what population one considers deserving of representation in a republic: all persons (including those held as property) or simply free persons. One could make a very good case that only free persons, not chattel slaves, should be represented in Congress or state legislatures. Moreover, contrary to Walther’s implication, it was not unfair that the full number of northern free blacks counted for representation purposes while southern slaves counted only according to the famous fraction; after all, southern free blacks counted in full, too. (Had southern states emancipated their slaves during the early years of the republic, those freed persons would have counted fully, increasing the number of southern congressmen—as happened during Reconstruction.)

Small complaints aside, Walther delivers an insightful and convincing examination of William Lowndes Yancey that students of the antebellum South and the Civil War will greatly appreciate.

Notes

[1]. See Ralph B. Draughon Jr., “The Young Manhood of William L. Yancey,” *Alabama Review* 19 (1966): 28-40; and William L. Barney, *The Road to Secession: A New Perspective on the Old South* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1972), especially pp. 86-89.

[2]. For the Twenty Negro Law, see George C. Rable, *The Confederate Republic: A Revolution against Politics*

(Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 156. Another example of imprecision, admittedly not about a central point to Walther's story, is the statement that "Jefferson and Madison agreed that each state, by its own authority, could nullify acts of Congress they [sic] deemed unconstitutional" (p. 57). While this statement holds true for Jefferson's draft of the Kentucky Resolutions, it does not for Madison's Virginia Resolutions. Rather than asserting the right of nullification, Madison declared a state could "interpose" its authority to protect its people from an unconstitutional federal law. He left unclear precisely what that meant. As one scholar has noted, Madison's resolutions were "more cautious and less forceful" than Jefferson's; "their inconclusiveness expressed Madison's doubt about the legality of the stronger argument." Adrienne Koch, *Jefferson and Madison: The Great Collaboration* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950), 192. See also Drew R. McCoy, *The Last of the Fathers: James Madison and the Republican Legacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 143-144.

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