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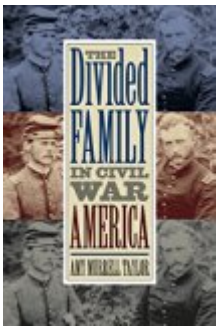
Amy Murrell Taylor. *The Divided Family in Civil War America.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005. xiv + 319 pp. $39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8078-2969-1.



Reviewed by Michael E. Smith

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Amy Murrell Taylor's fine book treats divided families during the Civil War as both metaphor and reality. She finds this protean concept critical to understanding the meaning of national identity in the nineteenth century and to comprehending the nature of the conflict itself. The divided family phenomenon, of course, was found most often in border states, where the author particularly focuses her attention, although she notes it also commonly occurred in other parts of the South that had significant pro-Union populations, including western North Carolina, and less commonly elsewhere throughout the country.

While the war is often remembered as a conflict pitting brother against brother, and was so conceived at the time, Taylor illuminates the manner in which the conflict created or revealed fractures in a much wider variety of familial relationships: parent against child, brother against sister (the Union General George H. Thomas, a Virginia native, was disavowed by his sisters during the war and never spoke to them again), and husband against wife. Divided allegiances among spouses were complicated by popular notions of the obedience that wives supposedly owed to their husbands. Kentucky Unionist Cassius M. Clay, fascinatingly prioritizing male dominance and privilege over national allegiance, wrote that a female relative should not be faulted for supporting secession, as she was simply supporting her husband's decision. But not all women, educated in the tradition of republican motherhood and used to taking responsibility for the political as well as moral education of male family members, acted with such deference. In a further complication, some women chose to honor their allegiance to their fathers rather than their husbands, in cases where such differences existed. Taylor sensibly speculates that younger, childless women were more likely to go this route, as they had not yet fully crafted family identities separate from those of their childhood households. She argues that women could often freely hold and express opposing loyalties to those of their husbands, as long as such differences did not become publicly known, and thus cause embarrassment for the husband and invite community scrutiny. Hopefully, Taylor or some other equally perceptive scholar will build on her insights and speculation

about the complex dynamics at work in marriages during the Civil War, about which much more surely remains to be said.

The nuclear family, idealized in Victorian America as a refuge from the strife-torn, stressful world of business and politics, itself became a battleground during the rebellion. Generational and gendered conflicts, always simmering beneath the superficially placid surface of domestic harmony, exacerbated the situation. The author astutely traces the fuzzy, indistinct boundary between public and private worlds, which, as her study reveals, was often no boundary at all. Family relationships were strained and sometimes broken during the war, providing a metaphor for understanding the conflict, as well as one that made it possible to subsequently heal such wounds and make peace. Both the Union and Confederate authorities recognized divided families as a fundamental security risk, and strove through legislation and policing to limit cross-border contacts between members of such clans. Safety and order seemed to depend on rooting out and controlling dissenters within the national family in a real, not metaphorical, way.

The author draws on wartime fiction as well as diaries, letters, and other sources to tell her complex story. Her primary base of evidence consists of the writings and correspondence of 166 border families. Compiling this data represents an impressive research accomplishment, and provides much rich material. As the author realizes, given that this source base likely represents such a small (and probably relatively well-educated) portion of the overall phenomenon, it is doubtful that firm conclusions about the prevalence and nature of actual family divisions can as yet be drawn. Certainly, the results are interesting and suggestive and the author's speculations well reasoned. Taylor wisely carries her narrative forward into the postwar years, and finds that the bitterness and strained relationships engendered by the war were not to be easily, or sometimes ever, mended. The cherished ideal of national reconciliation was in practice grudging and incomplete for years and decades to come. The author is also attentive to the role of race, noting, for instance, that African American slaves who embraced emancipation rebelled against the white-dominated extended families to which they theoretically belonged. In choosing to build separate, self-sufficient families, African Americans demonstrated the interconnectedness of social and political independence. This critical process, she contends, was almost totally ignored in contemporary white literature and memoirs, which focused instead on the romantic glorification of the reunification of white families and citizens.

Taylor neatly handles literary as well as more traditional historical sources, despite the inherent risk of making her work overly diffuse and losing focus on the real social dynamics at work. But surely such sources are too valuable to be abandoned entirely to that other discipline, and the sure sense of historical context that Taylor brings to their analysis justifies her decision. In the context of the author's larger narrative of real domestic turmoil, Ambrose Bierce's harsh and horrifying tales of families broken apart by conflicting political views, and subsequently by savage violence and spiritual ruin, take on a new and even more disturbing dimension, as she aptly suggests.

In sum, Taylor's book is an ambitious and successful attempt to integrate the cultural history of the Civil War with more traditional disciplines, such as political history, and does justice to an important and previously ill-understood subject.

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