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Aaron Sheehan-Dean. *Why Confederates Fought: Family and Nation in Civil War Virginia.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007. xvi + 291 pp. $34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3158-8.

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It Is All in the Title

The title of Aaron Sheehan-Dean's new book, *Why Confederates Fought: Family and Nation in Civil War Virginia*, captures both its strengths and weaknesses. On the broadest level of analysis, this work continues the ongoing debate over what inspired Confederate soldiers to fight what proved to be a long and destructive war. The author's answer to the question raised by his short title is that Confederate Virginians fought to protect their families and secure their fledgling nation. In particular, Sheehan-Dean stresses the importance of soldiers' families in holding men in the ranks against mounting adversity. Such an argument clearly reflects current debates over the extent and nature of Confederate nationalism, namely, that it was an ongoing process fraught with difficulty. His treatment of the subjects in his subtitle, however, demonstrates the limits of his study.

Virginia is fertile ground for Sheehan-Dean's study of Confederate voluntarism. It exceeded all other Southern states in terms of numbers of soldiers in Confederate armies, and it achieved a truly remarkable mobilization rate–roughly 90 percent of its military-aged white men. An impressive statistical analysis informs Sheehan-Dean's view of Confederate soldiers. His numbers challenge claims of deep class divisions within Confederate ranks, revealing that regiments from all across the state served in the Southern military. The author compares county and enlistment data to assess the backgrounds and context of Virginian men's enlistments as well as their desertion. Sheehan-Dean's data reveal that nearly 60 percent of Virginian soldiers, from all social classes and all sections of the state, volunteered to fight within the war's first five months. Although the future state of West Virginia failed to provide the Confederacy with troops comparable to its eligible manpower, other sections of the state contributed more soldiers than their white military-aged population suggested was possible. In terms of desertion, Sheehan-Dean also finds that most Virginians who fled the army did so in 1862. These statistics augment his criticism of the "rich man's war, poor man's fight" thesis, which faulted sagging morale among lower-class Southerners for Confederate defeat.

Virginia's Confederate soldiers are the true focus of Sheehan-Dean's book. Like Gary W. Gallagher in *The Confederate War: How Popular Will, Nationalism and Military Strategy Could Not Stave Off Defeat* (1997), William A. Blair in *Virginia's Private War: Feeding Body and Soul in the Confederacy, 1861-1865* (1998), Anne Sarah Rubin in *A Shattered Nation: The Rise and Fall of the Confederacy, 1861-1868* (2005), and others, Sheehan-Dean argues that white Virginians fought doggedly for a separate Confederacy and clung to that ideal to the end of the war and beyond. As is true of the best recent scholarship on Confederate nationalism, Sheehan-Dean carefully delineates the evolution of Virginian soldiers' national commitment amid the bloody crucible of the Civil War. Confederate nationalism was not a natural spring pouring forth from all white Southerners' hearts; it took time to create. Sheehan-Dean follows David M. Potter in defining nationalism as a composite of familial, communal, state, and sectional loyalties, but he demonstrates that the war created additional meaning to the Confederate nation.[1] In particular, he argues that a hardening Yankee war effort intensified Virginian soldiers' will to resist. Confederate Virginians' anger grew as they struggled to relieve the residents of Fredericksburg after battle seriously damaged their town in December 1862, to stifle the restlessness inspired among their slaves by Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, and to resist the hard war waged by Philip Sheridan in 1864. The source of Confederate troubles, they felt, could be easily located north of the Mason-Dixon Line. Such a high demand for sacrifice and endurance made it clear to the soldiers that their nation was unlike the Northerners they now abhorred.

A significant component to this evolving nationalism, as described by Sheehan-Dean, was the development of a new masculinity. Drawing heavily on the work of

Stephen W. Berry II (*All That Makes a Man: Love and Ambition in the Civil War South* [2003]), Peter S. Carmichael (*The Last Generation: Young Virginians in Peace, War, and Reunion* [2005]), and others, the author contextualizes Virginian soldiers within a world in which white men coveted their family's emotional rewards as much as economic success. The idea of defending their families, especially after the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation, invigorated Virginian troops. As Confederates gave ground in Virginia and settled into a siege around Petersburg in 1864, Virginian soldiers experienced a crisis in morale. Soldiers worried that they no longer fulfilled their patriarchal responsibility to their families. According to Sheehan-Dean, Virginian soldiers emerged from this crisis as both stronger Confederates and hardened soldiers. Animosity toward their Yankee antagonists strengthened soldiers' bonds of affection with their families. Sheehan-Dean's argument that men rededicated themselves to staying in the army as a means to protect their families partially responds to Drew Gilpin-Faust (*Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the Civil War* [1996]) and other historians who have suggested that women withdrew their support as the war escalated in terms of destruction and sacrifice. Virginian soldiers convinced themselves that they could only protect their families from their posts within Southern armies. In other words, it was no longer a matter of physically protecting their homes; Virginia's Confederates determined that only ultimate victory and independence could secure their families in the future.

Just as the strengths of Sheehan-Dean's book flow from his short title, his subtitle encapsulates many of its weaknesses. While he addresses the important role of familial responsibility and Virginian soldiers' commitment to defend their loved ones, he relates few voices from the home front. This omission constitutes a troublesome tension within the author's argument. He places Virginia's Confederate soldiers within a world in which emotional bonds with their families were central parts of their lives, yet those homes remain peripheral to the story. Sheehan-Dean seems to suggest that while the men in the ranks worried endlessly about their families and longed to be with them, many Virginian soldiers apparently grew detached from the home front. The Union's hard war tactics reaffirmed their commitment to fight and defend their loved ones, but Sheehan-Dean offers little insight into the families they vowed to defend. As these soldiers experienced a crisis of morale, many of their families confronted Union soldiers and otherwise embattled communities. The impression given by the author's conceptual structure is that the home front mattered solely as an ideal, which is an unsatisfying depiction of an important component of the masculinity Sheehan-Dean presents.

Most historians will concede that the Confederacy existed as a nation, but the inner workings of that nascent nation remain hotly contested. It is for that reason that Sheehan-Dean chose to study Virginia. According to the author, Virginia's location "along the border with the Union" and its "large number of diehard Unionists" made it "an ideal place to examine questions of loyalty" (pp. 7-8). This study only partly realizes that promise. Sheehan-Dean defines Virginia in such a way that he sidesteps the state's internal divisions. He argues that military events defined the physical confines of Virginia and focuses on largely Confederate areas–but even in these pro-Confederate regions, he neglects Unionists, such as David Strother of the Shenandoah Valley and James Hunnicutt of Fredericksburg. Defining Virginia in this way sloughs off West Virginia and the northern neck, which allows the author to avoid many messy issues. By eliminating areas troubled by occupation, desertion, guerrilla violence, and peace organizations from his study, the author violates his first stated principle for selecting Virginia. The result is a neat version of Virginia within which the author explores strictly Confederate loyalty without confronting the conflict and messiness that defined not only parts of Virginia but also Southern states like Tennessee, North Carolina, and others.

While Sheehan-Dean's short title asks a question familiar to Civil War historians, the limits of his work should help steer us toward important new questions. There were areas of Civil War Virginia that render some of his conclusions problematic. Both Kenneth Noe, in his *Southwest Virginia's Railroad: Modernization and the Sectional Crisis in the Civil War Era* (1994), and Brian D. McKnight, in his *Contested Borderland: The Civil War in Appalachian Kentucky and Virginia* (2006), have found significant divisions within southwestern Virginia. In addition, in *The War Hits Home: The Civil War in Southeastern Virginia* (2001), Brian Steel Wills has argued that a "no-man's land" existed in southeastern Virginia late in the war. More broadly, William W. Freehling has asserted, in *The South vs. The South: How Anti-Confederate Southerners Shaped the Course of the Civil War* (2001), that a major failing of the Confederacy was its inability to unite all white Southerners behind the cause. Focusing solely on Virginia's Confederate soldiers prevented Sheehan-Dean from fully capturing both the commitment of the soldiers and the tribulations of their families, which points to a troublesome dilemma in terms of the Confederate nationalism debate. That tension is a great opportunity to consider where next to take these issues. The seeming

disconnect between the soldiers and their families that developed late in the war reveals the need for a reassessment of day-to-day life within the Confederacy. Historians must account for all Southerners whether they opposed the Confederacy, supported it, or simply longed to survive the exigencies of war with as little sacrifice as possible. Sheehan-Dean's struggle to connect the challenges facing soldiers and their families reminds us not to lose sight of the broader social and political issues confronting common citizens throughout the Confederacy. Perhaps, Sheehan-Dean's study will prompt a new wave of much-needed scholarship that grounds these loyalties within Confederate daily life.

Note

[1]. David M. Potter, "The Historian's Use of Nationalism and Vice Versa," *The American Historical Review* 67 (1962): 924-950.

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