

Nicholas L. Syrett. *The Company He Keeps: A History of White College Fraternities.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009. xvi + 412 pp. \$30.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-8078-5931-5.



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Commissioned by Jonathan Anuik (University of Alberta)

Nicholas Syrett opens his book with several quotations from fraternity men describing their fraternity brothers. These quotes, which he deems to be representative, begin in 1847, when one fraternity man described his brother as “a man of no ordinary mold: uniting in greatest abundance the virtues and talents of heart and head. Not a man in our class is as *strong* a character as he” (p. 1). The second quote portrayed a 1924 fraternity man as a “Lothario and Don Juan put together” (p. 1). The third description is from 2000: “He was going out with jane doe for the past month but he just dumped her yesterday.... He said ‘weeeeeeee’ after he shot his gf’s pooper hence the name wiegel [nickname of the brother that rhymed with his surname].... [H]is throw up song is hava nagila” (p. 1). The quotes demonstrate not only the bastardization of language but the debasing of morals. While fraternity men in the antebellum period valued character, intellect, and talent, contemporary brothers are depicted as denigrating women and having their own “throw up songs.” Syrett’s work explores these changing gender val-

ues in the college fraternity, what he calls fraternal masculinity. Along the way, the reader learns a great deal about the development of local and national fraternity systems, campus social life, and sexuality.

In noting the difference between manliness and masculinity, Syrett uses key ideas from Gail Bederman’s *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in America, 1880-1917* (1995). Antebellum manliness encompassed intelligence, honor, independence, eloquence and confidence. In this period, manliness was set against immature boyhood. At the turn of the century, modern masculinity developed, and important attributes were virility, power and aggressiveness. In contrast to manliness, masculinity was set against femininity and homosexuality.

Fraternities are a good place to see this shift, since over the twentieth century the closeness amongst men provoked suspicion of homosexuality, creating a concern amongst fraternity men to prove their masculinity. Indeed, anxiety over

standards of heterosexual masculinity is a key idea of this study, as well as many other works in masculinity studies. [1] Syrett claims to depart from other studies by exploring how men reacted to standards. He writes, "some men may have been made anxious by standards of masculinity, but what much of the current literature ignores is that they sometimes took steps to remedy that anxiety" (p. 3). Certainly works on Muscular Christianity and physical culture have also offered numerous examples of how men actively sought to live up to ideals of masculinity. [2]

This work is organized in a loose, chronological order. In chapter 1 the beginnings of fraternities, which originated in 1825 at Union College in Schenectady, New York, are detailed. What made fraternities stand out from the numerous other campus organizations was the connection with other schools, growing exclusivity and secrecy. In this early period, fraternity men valued scholarly pursuits, as long as students did not appear to try too hard, and participated in literary activities. These groups provided a sense of camaraderie and were, in part, an assertion of independence from paternalistic administrators and faculty members who sought discipline and control over students.

In chapter 2 the author illustrates two conceptions of manliness that existed on the antebellum college campus: the sacred and the secular. Religious students tended to be poor and headed to ministries upon graduation. Even if they wanted to join fraternities, they surely could not afford it. Syrett argues that the secular men, anxious about the changing market economy, created fraternities to provide social and professional support. The nationwide expansion of these fraternities is the subject of chapter 3. Fraternities appear as the forerunners of professional networking as they created alumni organizations and nationwide directories and held national conventions. This extensive network made brothers very cautious about granting membership at less estab-

lished colleges and universities because of a concern for reputation. In this chapter, Syrett uses Benedict Anderson's "imagined communities" as well as Dana Nelson's idea of an "imagined fraternity" of white men. [3] Fraternity groups helped men to envision themselves as part of a privileged white national fraternity in a time when men were increasingly concerned about their status and prospects. Through his use of extensive archival sources Syrett is able to illuminate new aspects of this "imagined fraternity" (p. 107). Communication between fraternities even persisted during the Civil War, when brothers of a Northern chapter of Delta Kappa Epsilon wished the Southern chapters "the most fraternal feeling" during the "present unhappy strife" (p. 114).

The discussion of sexuality is understandably scant for the antebellum period, due to a lack of sources. The reader does get some glimpses of men having innocent courtship with women of their own class while resorting to prostitutes for sex. Most disturbingly, Syrett recounts the rape of a slave on the University of Mississippi campus in 1859. Sexuality has a larger role in chapters 4 and 5, which cover the period from the 1870s to the 1920s. It is in this period that the shift from manliness to masculinity takes hold, and fraternity men appear to epitomize the new masculinity, seen in increasingly extreme forms of hazing as well as in competition over women. Fraternity men also dominated campus seats of power and excelled in athletics, which had supplanted academic achievement as the chief marker of status. Practices of exclusion also became more severe as campuses became a bit more diverse. Restriction codes were passed to keep out new immigrant groups, which were often Roman Catholic or Jewish, and African Americans, however small their numbers were on campus. Fraternities were also increasingly aware of homosexuality, and there were instances where men suspected of homosexuality were kicked out. As campuses became coeducational, fraternity men ostracized fellow female students yet often dated women from other col-

leges, whom they saw as less threatening. The 1920s saw more sexual permissiveness, and brothers took part in a culture that valued a man's ability to attract numerous dates and seduce women of his own social class.

Chapter 6 shifts to the post-World War II period. The 1930s and 1940s receive scant coverage in this study. Although this is reasonable, Syrett does briefly bring up some fascinating ideas that could have been more fully explored. For instance, he writes that returning veterans, many attending college on the G.I. Bill (Servicemen's Readjustment Act), were usually older and were more serious about their studies. How important was this veteran culture to fraternal masculinity? It would have been interesting to see this further explored.

Syrett described postwar fraternities as elitist and conservative, with members leading the campus in athletics and social drinking. Although some of the northern fraternities were ahead of their national headquarters in terms of integration in the 1950s and 1960s, most fraternity men were opposed to New Left radicalism. In terms of social life, many of the trends of the 1920s continued into the post-World War II period as fraternity men proved their masculinity through toughness, drinking, and seduction. Yet, Syrett claims that fraternity brothers' loyalty and intimate commitments were increasingly becoming associated with homosexuality. He writes, "In order to compensate for this, fraternity men had to prove they were heterosexual. The only way to do this and at the same time not betray their commitment to their brothers, was through the sexual denigration of willing, and increasingly not-so-willing, women" (p. 282). This trend would only become worse later in the century.

After a fairly balanced treatment of fraternity activities throughout the book, the conclusion shifts the focus to sexual assault. This makes current fraternities appear extremely unsavory in comparison to antebellum and early-twentieth-century fraternities. As women and homosexuals

gain rights, fraternity men's reactions against them only become stronger. Syrett concludes, "The story of fraternities, then, is the story of men who have most relied upon their whiteness, their maleness, their class status, and their heterosexuality to assure their continued prestige and power. Indeed, in banding together, they helped in part to create, or at least to reinforce, those very categories" (p. 305).

The introduction warns the reader that Syrett focuses on "the seamy underside of fraternity life" (p. 6). Yet this focus seems most pronounced in his conclusion, which examines contemporary sexual assault and rape. This is the choice of the author, who admits that he became intellectually engaged with this subject when he read about 1980s and 1990s gang rapes portrayed in Peggy Reeves Sanday's *Fraternity Gang Rape, Brotherhood, and Privilege on Campus* (1990). It leaves me to wonder how this study would look if Syrett had included more on sexuality outside the campus in the antebellum period. Considering life outside of colleges could have added important context to his discussion of sexuality.

Syrett has used a variety of sources to create this well-researched book. He relies on archival records of numerous fraternity chapters from across the country, from which he is able to delve into the emotional lives of his subjects. This use of archives is particularly rich in the first half of the book. Syrett also makes a great use of the "college novels," which were often semi-autobiographical accounts of college life written in the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For the later chapters, published sociological surveys serve as useful sources for exploring social life.

I was left with a lack of clarity on two minor points. First, what was the status of fraternal secrecy? Fraternities appear to have been secret in the antebellum period. When did they cease being so? I was also unsure of the ages of the fraternity members, which likely varied over the course of two centuries. Data regarding the age of fraternity

members would have added an important detail to this well-researched and readable study.

By researching fraternities found throughout the country and over two centuries, Syrett is able to make a comprehensive and important contribution to the history of sexuality, social life, and gender on college campuses. In addition, he also illustrates how closely intertwined the history of fraternities has been with the history of higher education. He has helped to open the door for scholars to research fraternities and parts of extracurricular life as worthy historical topics.

Notes

[1]. Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York: Free Press, 1996); and Bryce Traister, "Academic Viagra: The Rise of American Masculinity Studies," *American Quarterly* 52, no. 2 (2000): 274-304.

[2]. Clifford Putney, *Muscular Christianity: Manhood and Sports in Protestant America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); and John F. Kasson, *Houdini, Tarzan and the Perfect Man: The White Male Body and the Challenge of Modernity in America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001).

[3]. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1983); and Dana D. Nelson, *National Manhood: Capitalist Citizenship and the Imagined Fraternity of White Men* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998).

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