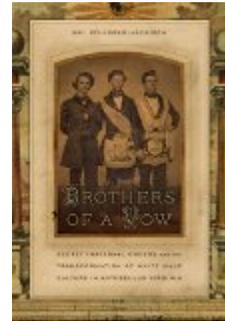


Ami Pflugrad-Jackisch. *Brothers of a Vow: Secret Fraternal Orders and the Transformation of White Male Culture in Antebellum Virginia*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010. vii + 181 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8203-3227-7.

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## Making White Culture in Antebellum Virginia

Ami Pflugrad-Jackisch's intriguing work, *Brothers of a Vow*, advances the growing historical literature on antebellum urbanization and southern notions of masculinity by examining how secret fraternal organizations shaped Virginia's masculine culture during the decisive years leading up to the Civil War. Employing an array of printed and manuscript sources, including newspapers, lodge minutes and records, and published speeches, Pflugrad-Jackisch focuses on the evolution of three secret fraternal orders—Free Masons, Odd Fellows, and Sons of Temperance—and argues that fraternal societies united white men across class and partisan lines. Additionally, orders helped members cope with the tremendous economic, political, and cultural upheavals that accompanied the market economy's development.

Paralleling the scholarship of Aaron Sheehan-Dean, Peter S. Carmichael, and Craig Friend and Lorri Glove—which challenged previous academic studies that associated antebellum southern manhood solely with a culture of violence and honor—the author posits that fraternal societies in mostly urban areas of the Old Dominion fostered a sense of “restrained manhood” among market-oriented white Virginians. This ideal celebrated self-discipline, morality, and the work ethic, and permitted white men to garner sociopolitical power without necessarily owning land or slaves. Members also redefined their civic responsibilities to include benevolence and charity, thereby marginalizing women from their time-honored altruistic responsibilities. Furthermore,

Pflugrad-Jackisch contends that fraternities' participation in public events demonstrated their moral authority and social prestige over women and African Americans.

Besides surveying the rise of fraternal orders and asserting that the majority of members were middling professionals, shopkeepers, artisans, and mechanics who espoused middle class virtues, Pflugrad-Jackisch goes on to argue that Virginia's Masons, Odd Fellows, and Sons of Temperance enhanced white members' social status by excluding African Americans. To suppress escalating tensions between freeholders and slave-owners, especially those erupting as white workingmen came into greater competition with hired-out slaves in urban areas, Virginia's secret societies deemed black fraternal lodges illegal. While African Americans may have clandestinely established lodges in Alexandria and the Norfolk-Portsmouth areas, white members insisted that the “purportedly degraded morality of slaves and free blacks warranted their automatic exclusion” (p. 44). Denying black membership in secret orders not only elevated all white members' status, but all three societies—especially the Sons of Temperance—also enhanced their social standing by restricting blacks' access to alcohol. The Sons punished white merchants who sold liquor to slaves and free blacks and even endorsed political resolutions banning all sales of alcohol to slaves. The author maintains that “the Sons of Temperance, composed of slaveholders and non-slaveholders alike, adroitly employed temperance reform to place themselves in the position of pater-

nal protectors ... [their] involvement in restricting black access to alcohol further elevated the status of all white men in their group" (p. 49). Thus, secret fraternal orders not only "reinforced white supremacy outside the realm of plantation slavery but also supplemented proslavery ideology in the places where it had fallen short" (p. 50).

Pflugrad-Jackisch also maintains that orders' codes of conduct, rituals, and fictive-kinship ties regulated members' moral conduct and helped preserve harmony among white men. The orders claimed that fraternal bonds compelled men to shun unbecoming habits and maintain their respectability. Members policed each other and were obligated to assist brothers who lapsed. As each fraternal order spurned alcohol consumption, because it fostered dependency and threatened their masculinity, the author claims, "support, encouragement, and chiding from fraternity brothers when necessary, helped men keep their temperance pledge" (p. 76). Gender notions shaped the codes of conduct and reinforced the conception of separate spheres. While antebellum society considered the ideal woman a guardian of morality, members argued that men more effectively monitored each other because they "believed that only other men could understand these types of struggles against vice ... women's 'native modesty' would cause her to shrink from the 'unpleasant labors' of fraternal orders" (pp. 76, 77).

As impersonal business transactions accompanied the rise of the market economy, fraternal orders also served to reconstruct traditional face-to-face social ties. Membership in secret fraternities helped white men establish good reputations, provide peace of mind during business travel, and gain access to a network of trustworthy businessmen. In addition to illustrating how a good reputation was necessary to secure credit during the antebellum era, the author contends that "lodge brothers often conducted business with one another" and that "the orders established a network of 'worthy' men with whom members could do business or become friends, and that promised safe passage for members when traveling" (pp. 55, 59). Pflugrad-Jackisch also underscores the significance of regalia among members. Whereas regalia worn outside the lodge helped one discern members from non-members, inside the lodge it reinforced the hierarchy of members and "promoted the idea that status and respectability were based on one's behavior" (p. 61). Furthermore, the author asserts that secret rituals "promoted social harmony and further cultivated brotherly bonds among members" and "men's observance of rituals and physical appearance demonstrated, members

claimed, the depth of a man's internal character and integrity" (pp. 63, 66).

Pflugrad-Jackisch goes on to illustrate how secret fraternal organizations cultivated philanthropic and benevolent impulses among white Virginians. Since members associated poverty with male immorality, intemperance, and lack of discipline, they fashioned a system for the distribution of charitable funds to "worthy" members and to deserving poor, widows, and orphans. The fraternal benefit systems not only redefined men's masculine civic responsibilities, but members also claimed that benefits shielded white men from the shame of becoming dependent on public charity. Pflugrad-Jackisch argues, "members who encountered financial trouble would not need to submit themselves to the will of another or become obligated to a creditor.... [T]he benefit system reinforced the ideals of restrained manhood emerging in Virginia by emphasizing upright moral character and the importance of a man's ability to support himself and his family" (p. 79). Members of secret fraternal orders also claimed that the funds benefited their entire communities. According to Pflugrad-Jackisch, orders claimed that they aided the public because "they reduced taxes and crime by minimizing the number of men relying on the state for charity" (p. 81). Fraternal aid to white victims of circumstance also reinforced Virginia's slave society. Orders shored up proslavery ideology and "helped to maintain the herrenvolk myth that even the poorest whites were above blacks economically and socially in a slave society" (p. 79).

The author also examines how fraternal orders' increased participation in antebellum public ceremonies during the 1840s not only allowed members to demonstrate that they were stewards of American republicanism, but also legitimated the moral authority of every white man. Throughout antebellum Virginia, controlling public spaces conveyed power. Consequently, members constructed highly visible lodges and increasingly oversaw public Fourth of July festivities, anniversary celebrations, and cornerstone-laying ceremonies. The author posits that "fraternities' colorful parades and newly constructed buildings confirmed the orders' role as protectors of civic virtue and reinforced the notion that charity, benevolence, and partisan harmony were male civic responsibilities.... [J]oint participation of white men from different economic backgrounds at these public commemorations softened class distinctions, creating a civic brotherhood among white men" (p. 100).

Secret fraternity members also demonstrated the

prestige of all white men by participating in public commemorations with other masculine organizations and allowing members of varying socioeconomic backgrounds to give highly visible public speeches. In particular, the author emphasizes the significance of fraternal members' involvement in the 1850 cornerstone-laying ceremony for the George Washington statue in Richmond. She argues, "the grand welcoming of white fraternity members, alongside the militia, the city's firemen, and some of the most important [politicians] in the state, then, signified the public's confidence in the orders and, by extension, in white men's ability to uphold social order" (p. 116). The author further maintains, "in the face of social and economic forces that pulled white men apart, secret fraternal orders established a new era of white male solidarity.... [F]raternal orders constantly reminded other Virginians that they were the worthy guardians of public virtue and civic responsibilities" (p. 119).

As fraternity members participated in popular commemorations, they increasingly closed off women's and African Americans' access to public spaces. Pomp and circumstance surrounding funerals reflected one's social prominence and elevated class status in antebellum Virginia and Pflugrad-Jackisch argues that membership in fraternities entitled all members—prominent and humble—to ostentatious funeral displays. Since fraternity members took a central role in brothers' interment ser-

vices, women gradually refrained from attending burial ceremonies or accompanying the corpse as the funeral party paraded it through the streets to the gravesite. The author argues that like women, "the lack of respect for black funeral rituals and black bodies further highlighted the status of the orders' funeral ceremonies imparted to members, living and dead.... [F]raternity funeral processions, public resolutions, and ceremonies publicly displayed the new confidence white men had in one another, effectively softening class distinctions" (p. 110). She goes on to conclude, "in thousands of ceremonies that excluded women and blacks, yet gave equal billing to even the lowest white male, fraternal orders left no doubt about their influential role as protectors and leaders of their communities" (p. 119).

Pflugrad-Jackisch's *Brothers of a Vow* advances scholarly understanding of antebellum urbanization and masculinity. Yet, her work is not without shortcomings. Pflugrad-Jackisch briefly summarizes secret fraternity members' indecisiveness and conflicted sentiments during the secession crisis and leaves readers thirsting for more detail about their perceptions of secession, the Civil War, and Reconstruction. Perhaps this merely forms the foundation for her next study. Overall, this work will certainly engage students and scholars of antebellum masculinity and urbanization, and will likely spark lively discussions in both undergraduate and graduate classes.

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