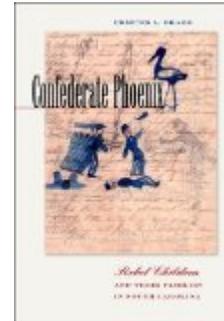


Edmund L. Drago. *Confederate Phoenix: Rebel Children and Their Families in South Carolina*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2008. Illustrations. x + 204 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8232-2937-6.

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Published on H-CivWar (November, 2010)

Commissioned by Hugh F. Dubrulle



Adapting to Destruction: The Experience and Legacy of Civil War Childhood in South Carolina

The constant reassessment of the Civil War too often inspires redundancies, but Edmund L. Drago's *Confederate Phoenix* reminds us that an innovative approach can still yield fresh insight about the impact and echoes of that terrible conflict. Inspired by a rising historiographical trend that emphasizes the importance of children and childhood in American history, and in particular by Steven Mintz's *Huck's Raft: A History of American Childhood* (2004) and James Marten's *The Children's Civil War* (1998), Drago carefully and successfully details how South Carolina's white children and families endured—and were redefined by—the crucible of the Civil War.

Drawing on a remarkable variety of archival sources, Drago is at his best in this book as he assesses the variety of ways that South Carolina's children experienced the war. Young boys were expected to learn “the training” of horseback riding at an early age, and many, excited by the prevailing values of “honor and courage,” refused to wait for adulthood before enlisting in the Confederate army (pp. 38, 9). This willing sacrifice reinforced the cherished Southern belief that “children became an underpinning for a sustained war effort” (p. 11). Young girls became symbols of Confederate patriotism by generously donating on behalf of causes ranging from the “Ladies Gunboat Campaign” to the “attempt to aid poor families” (pp. 12-13). Although these examples illustrate how the Confederacy drew on and amplified traditional Southern values, the war also necessitated alteration of other childhood customs. Even as young women retained, for ex-

ample, their “fashion consciousness,” many saw the tradition of elaborate wedding ceremonies give way to “elopements and secret engagements” (p. 69). This disruption of the normal modes of upbringing, Drago argues, contained grave implications for the postwar lives of Carolina's children. While an undeniable humor exists in the fact that the wartime generation of children learned math by calculating the rate at which Fort Sumter's garrison would run out of supplies and be forced to surrender, or by exchanging differently priced commodities like butter and tea, the destructive nature of the Civil War permeated and transformed the world these children knew (p. 61). As Drago reveals, this “baptism by fire” etched permanent memories of the Confederacy's bitter defeat that would linger after 1865 (p. 92).

Beyond reshaping the lives of individual children, the war powerfully altered family patterns, and the story of this phenomenon stands as the other major strength of Drago's work, as he engages in a multidimensional analysis of how families dealt with the trauma of the war. The narrative found in chapter 4 follows the stories of three Carolina families as they struggled with the “quagmire” of absent husbands and sons. Drago also explores the increasing “competition between the home front and the battlefield” as the deterioration of South Carolina accelerated and defeat became inevitable (p. 79). The desperate—and usually unrewarded—pleas for exemptions from active military service, as well as the ensuing rise in desertion rates among South Carolina soldiers, indicated

the bitter choices made by men forced to grapple with their loyalty to the Confederate cause and the need to attend to the precarious situation of their families. Perhaps the most sobering aspect of how the war ripped families apart came in the form of the thousands of children orphaned by the violence. With little organized relief for these orphans available, Drago reminds us in disturbing fashion that “how many poor were without aid is impossible to determine” (p. 107). By the time Drago recalls in chapter 8 the devastation created as General William Tecumseh Sherman completed his march through South Carolina in early 1865, his readers understand that far more than mere physical damage threatened the survivors of the conflict. With the traditional social customs of childhood and family in tatters, the resulting instability caused among South Carolina’s white population would cast a shadow for generations to come.

To his credit, Drago attempts an investigation of how the indelible memories of the Civil War continued to haunt white Carolinians during Reconstruction and throughout the twentieth century. Unfortunately, however, these last two chapters of the work blunt the momentum created earlier. Part of the relative disappointment created by this concluding section stems from its ambition—Drago attempts to outline the impact of Civil War memory in South Carolina from 1865 to 2007 in just two brief chapters totaling less than thirty pages. This leaves little space for the author to do more than rehash already established concepts, for example, that “South Carolina remains paradoxical about its collective past” (p. 135). Combined with Drago’s natural (and quite

welcome) tendency toward short, direct sentences, this overview of the war’s legacy results in an incomplete sketch, especially when compared with the rich intricacy with which he presents the wartime material. Perhaps the brevity of the analysis simply reflects the interpretative difficulty of assessing the contemporary impact of childhood remembrance given that the wartime generation eventually went to their graves by the early 1900s. Finally, while the “phoenix” metaphor that inspires the book’s title recurs frequently during the last twenty pages, Drago never provides clarification as to what exactly it was that white Carolinians envisioned rising from the ashes of the Confederacy (pp. 116, 121, 123-124, 132). Such confusion may have been a natural byproduct of the chaos of Reconstruction (and beyond), and no reader expects a monolithic imposition of a unified white Southern intent during a time of political, cultural, and social upheaval. But based on Drago’s premise that the unique cauldron of the Civil War irrevocably transformed generations of South Carolinians, a stronger, more expansive discussion of the impact of those memories seems appropriate.

The frustration caused by the concluding chapters on Civil War memory should not deter potential readers from recognizing the value of Drago’s book. The combination of unique primary source material, relative brevity, and clear prose make this work quite suitable for assignment at the undergraduate level for those teaching Civil War classes. And all readers will close this book with a deeper appreciation for how the destruction of the Civil War only began on the battlefield.

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Citation: Benjamin G. Cloyd. Review of Drago, Edmund L., *Confederate Phoenix: Rebel Children and Their Families in South Carolina*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. November, 2010.

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