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Michael T. Bernath. *Confederate Minds: The Struggle for Intellectual Independence in the Civil War South.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010. xii + 412 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3391-9.

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The Rise and Fall of Southern Intellectuals on the Confederate Home Front

In the face of the virtual cottage industry that the study of Southern intellectual history has become over the past few decades, it is difficult to believe that Henry Adams, or any other Yankee for that matter, could have ever had the temerity to declare "the Southerner had no mind."[1] Sometimes it seems this observation, along with the more important regional prejudice it illustrates, has launched countless investigations of the Southern mind. Titles that examine aspects of Southern intellectual history and Confederate nationalism study the "Mind of the Antebellum South," discuss "Thinking Confederates," examine the "Mind of the Master Class," or focus upon "the Dilemma of the Intellectual in the Old South." Of course, W. J. Cash's flawed masterpiece, *The Mind of the South* (1941), looms over all post-World War II studies of Southern intellectual history. Students of history understand the cast of the Southern mind, at least the elite, white, Southern part of it, better than ever.[2] That said, if Michael T. Bernath's recent study, *Confederate Minds: The Struggle for Intellectual Independence in the Civil War South*, is any indication, there is still much to learn about intellectual life in the nineteenth-century South.

Bernath examines cultural nationalism during the Civil War. While not an entirely neglected topic, the antebellum and Reconstruction periods have received far more attention from scholars interested in the development of Southern nationalism. Specifically, Bernath analyzes the "cultural production" of writers, editors, educators, and other intellectuals on the Confederate home front. It was these people, he argues, who attempted to "bolster the Confederacy's claim to nationhood by providing the intellectual and cultural foundation necessary to sustain it," that an "enduring nationality–must be rooted in culture" (pp. 2, 4). In newspapers, textbooks, and other publications, these people set about self-consciously creating what they expected would be the foundation for a new society in an independent state that would stand the test of time.

The number of newspapers, pamphlets, sermons, books, and other "literary production" that informs Bernath's analysis is formidable. He claims that these publications actually increased in number during the war, and his case is a strong one. The list of publications Bernath consulted, particularly those in the upper South and Southeast, is close to definitive. This achievement is all the more impressive in that he does not neglect manuscript evidence. This material infuses this study and further bolsters his analysis.

The first half of *Confederate Minds* details how Southern writers rallied to the standard of the newly established Confederate States of America. This is hardly surprising in light of the fact that many of them had been proponents of secession for a number of years before the war. What Bernath makes clear is just how many of them came to view cultural and political independence as one and the same. Many of these writers and educators believed that to overthrow Northern oppression, soldiers had to defeat the enemy on the battlefield while the South as a whole, led by its intellectuals, had to "trample under foot those mental shackles" of Yankee culture that had cast a pall over Dixie (p. 15). The first order of business was to end the stream of Northern periodicals that had long served as the textbooks and magazines of first choice for so many Southerners. While this fairly successful campaign was underway, thanks in large part to the Union blockade, Confederate nationalists attempted to build a viable publishing industry to produce the educational, religious, and other literature that would not only give the Confederacy legitimacy in the eyes of its own population, but in Europe as well.

In several tightly argued chapters, Bernath details how Southern intellectuals went about their project. They emphasized what they viewed as the many virtues

of a conservative, religious, stable Southern society while at the same offering a searing indictment of Northern society. As Bernath acknowledges, these arguments were hardly novel. Southern thinkers had been denouncing an imperious Northern "fanaticism," be it for abolition, women's rights, free soil, and so on, for years if not decades. What did seem new, however, were the sheer volume and, arguably, greater coherence, of these charges during the first years of the war. These self-styled cultural warriors attempted to define the Confederacy both by its commitment to slavery and by what it was not–mainly the North. The fact that literally dozens of new papers, pamphlets, and books appeared while at the same time paper, ink, and other supplies became increasingly difficult to obtain, underscores the zeal with which these Confederate nationalists embraced their cause.

Two of the stronger chapters in *Confederate Minds* outline the "campaign" for educational independence in the Confederacy and the effort to find the new nation's "literature of power." The former shows how educators promoted regional and national organizations in an attempt to build an apparatus both to instruct future Confederate citizens and prove their new country's viability. An ambitious goal, the results during the war were not impressive. Nevertheless, Bernath's sophisticated treatment that often focuses more on the aspirations of school presidents than substantive results in curricula or textbooks, clearly establishes the significance many intellectuals attached to education as a means of inculcating nationalism during the war and for the future. Bernath's chapter on the quixotic pursuit of a "literature of power," meaning a great national literature, reveals that for intellectuals, the "quality of Confederate literature increasingly became their primary concern, rather than the mere origin of its production" (p. 215). By 1863, men like Henry Timrod feared that it would take years, even generations, before Confederate writers could develop their own style and not merely echo the literary voice of the North and Europe. Bernath argues persuasively that the more critical reviews written by editors of various literary magazines in 1864-65 were a concerted attempt to improve the quality of Confederate letters by culling the number of would-be writers in the young nation.

The final chapters of *Confederate Minds* examine how the champions of Confederate cultural nationalism contended with losses on the battlefield, deaths in their families, and such home front issues as shortages in food, lack of publication supplies, inflation, a collapsing transportation network, and other afflictions. The reappearing themes of denial, resilience, depression, and apathy will be familiar to most Civil War historians. For these men, the failure of the Confederacy not only destroyed their hopes for political independence, but it also raised fundamental questions about the very nature of Southern civilization. Some writers concluded that the South was neither prepared for nor deserving of cultural independence. In the end, Confederate cultural nationalism failed to cohere into an intelligible whole because, according to Bernath, "it could not demonstrate the fundamental and unmistakable differences between northern and southern cultures that they believed their nationality required" (p. 290).

An in-depth investigation of Confederate nationalism, *Confederate Minds* is also a surprisingly wide-ranging book that encompasses more subjects than can be addressed adequately in a single review. For example, Bernath's discussion of certain themes appearing in Confederate publications raises several important questions about the degree of cultural continuity between the antebellum and Reconstruction South. This study also suggests a divide between self-appointed cultural leaders, their reading audience of indeterminate size, and a broader white Southern public that still remains amorphous and begs for more scholarly attention. Good books like this one stimulate debate and further research. Bernath's study will be required reading for historians of the Confederacy and nineteenth-century South.

Notes

[1]. Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams (*New York: The Modern Library, 1931), 57-58.

[2]. See Herbert J. Doherty, Jr., "The Mind of the Antebellum South," in *Writing Southern History: Essays in Historiography in Honor of Fletcher M. Green*, ed. Arthur S. Link and Rembert W. Patrick (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1965); Dan R. Frost, *Thinking Confederates: Academia and the Idea of Progress in the New South* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2000); Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene Genovese, *The Mind of the Master Class: History and Faith in the Southern Slaveholders' Worldview* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, "The Fettered Mind: Time, Place, and the Literary Imagination of the Old South," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 74 (Winter 1990), and Drew Gilpin Faust, *A Sacred Circle: The Dilemma of the Intellectual in the Old South, 1840-1860* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977).

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