

Diane Miller Sommerville. *Aberration of Mind: Suicide and Suffering in the Civil War-Era South.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018. 448 pp. \$34.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-4696-4330-4.

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Scholars of the Civil War and post-Civil War South know of the suffering experienced by the southern people during those periods: the stress of war, the loss of loved ones, the sting of defeat, the difficulties in recovering from the destruction of war. In *Aberration of Mind*, Diane Miller Sommerville seeks to understand the impact of the war on the South through suicide, the effect of that suffering turned inwards. As she says in her introduction, historians of the South often look at the violence endemic in that society, but usually in outward expressions. Suicide is an expression of violence, but inwards onto oneself, and an analysis of this form of violence can tell us about the political, social, and economic pressures experienced by southerners, social responses to personal suffering, the changes wrought by emancipation (for both black and white southerners), concepts of gender, and changes in medical care and the perception of mental illness. Sommerville breaks her analysis into three sections: first she looks at Confederate men and women during the war, then suicide and suffering for African Americans in slavery and after emancipation, and finally southern men and women dealing with the aftermath of the Civil War.

Sommerville jumps boldly into a methodological debate circling the field in recent years. Looking at a topic that many would label part of the

“dark turn,” she is also looking at the mental effects of the war, research that poses many methodological challenges and has been questioned by other scholars in the field who claim that attaching modern understandings of PTSD on the past is anachronistic. Sommerville acknowledges that the study of mental health in the nineteenth century is imperfect and that historians must be willing to rely on conjecture, but she argues that the benefits outweigh the challenges. A study of southern suicide, she argues, tells us about the pressures on southerners during and after the war, how the society reacted to suicides, and how the war itself changed the South. While historians can never say with 100 percent certainty that Civil War soldiers experienced PTSD as it is currently understood, there is certainly enough evidence to show that soldiers and civilians experienced strains on their mental health, and studying that can tell us much about nineteenth-century America. Sommerville states that her research is grounded in modern theory, but that is not heavy within the body of her work; her analysis is grounded deeply in the primary source material. She is, however, willing to make that strong leap of conjecture to connect the actions of southern men and women to trauma caused by the Civil War.

One of the strengths of Sommerville's work is how comprehensive it is. She tried to look at suicide in the South through the broadest lens possible, looking at white and black, men and women, during and after the war. Instead of focusing on just one part of the southern population, she looks at as many factors as possible to analyze why people committed suicide and how that fit into the society of the South. She was also able to show change over time and examine how the war changed southern culture and society, through the lens of mental illness and suicide. Another strength of this work is that it is supported by thorough primary source research, utilizing diaries and letters, pension and military records, asylum and medical records, and periodicals to examine the experience of suicide in the South. This allowed her work to be rich in descriptions of suicides and the words and reactions of those who ideated or committed suicide and those in society who commented on it. It is a well-researched, thoughtful monograph in which the historical actors take center stage.

The only criticism I have of this work, and really this is just a major challenge in this field of research, is a question of how representative these experiences are. Because of the lack of sources and how suicides/trauma/mental illness was reported in the nineteenth century, there is no good way for historians to quantify this experience. It is likely that we will never be able to give accurate statistics on how many soldiers experienced trauma or how many people committed suicide. Sommerville acknowledges this challenge within her discussion of methodology but does not talk about how representative these experiences might be. If suicide was a minority experience in the South, a discussion about why that research is still valuable to understanding nineteenth-century society would be helpful to support the methodology. In addition, Sommerville makes some claims about numbers or the rise of suicides without these statistics. In my opinion, this criticism is minor in comparison to the strengths of

the work. However, it is a part of the methodology of this type of research that scholars must continue to discuss.

In conclusion, Sommerville gives a well-researched, powerful monograph that paves the way for other historians doing research in this field. She presents the experience of suicide from many angles and grounds that examination in the words and experiences of southerners themselves. The resulting analysis is a valuable contribution to our understanding of nineteenth-century American society, the impact of the Civil War on the South, and the understanding and treatment of mental illness in the Civil War era.

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