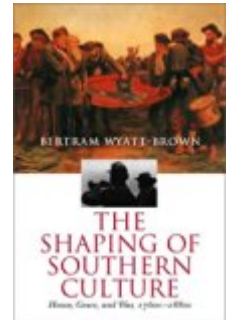


Bertram Wyatt-Brown. *The Shaping of Southern Culture: Honor, Grace, and War, 1760s-1880s.* Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2001. xix + 412 pp. \$55.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8078-2596-9.



Reviewed by Robert H. Gudmestad

Published on H-South (December, 2001)

Reckoning with Honor

Bertram Wyatt-Brown is most closely associated with introducing and explaining the concept of honor to the current generation of scholars. In fact, as Wyatt-Brown notes in his latest work, *The Shaping of Southern Culture: Honor, Grace, and War, 1760s-1880s*, there were few bibliographic entries for the subject when he first began to explore it in the late 1970s (p. 296). That situation changed following the publication of Wyatt-Brown's highly acclaimed *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* in 1982. In many ways, *Shaping of Southern Culture* is a continuation and refinement of Wyatt-Brown's earlier work. In twelve related essays, five of them published previously, the author looks closely at how honor shaped "the world of public performance" in "governance, religious leadership, and war" (p. xviii).

The three essays that comprise the book's first section deal with how southern males displayed honor in social, institutional, and political settings. This section is the least cohesive of the three, and each essay will be considered separate-

ly. Wyatt-Brown reconsiders Stanley Elkins' thesis and concludes that slaves, like their owners, had a sense of honor that bounded their world. While he does not defend all of Elkins' conclusions, Wyatt-Brown points out that the analogy to a Nazi concentration camp has some usefulness in explaining the psychology of enslavement. The constant dehumanization, shaming, indifference, and neglect were common to both experiences. This continual degradation forced African-Americans to modify the concept of honor and choose between compliance and resentment. For those slaves who chose the former, they inhabited a world of "legalized anarchy" (p. 21). Those who chose the latter remained truer to their inviolable self.

Slaves, of course, chose both on different occasions, as the example of Frederick Douglass indicates. At one point Wyatt-Brown points out that frequent beatings made Douglass often cower before white men. He could have also noted that Douglass also decided to resist Mr. Covey, the "nigger breaker." The incident revived Douglass' manhood and he vowed that "the white man who ex-

pected to succeed in whipping [me], must also succeed in killing me." [1] Wyatt-Brown's excellent discussion about the honor of slaves serves to illuminate the fact that the peculiar institution was lived out in individual ways. Slaves, although they shared the same general attitudes, applied honor in different ways in various situations.

The second chapter of the book discusses how honor informed colonial decisions to rebel against England. Colonists decided to defend their character against real and imagined British challenges to honor. Wyatt-Brown describes how "anger, a sense of insult, and outrage against arbitrary and arrogant behavior" combined with republican ideals to fire a revolution (p. 53). This sense of honor permeated all of the colonies and it only later faded in the North. For this reason, the war for independence resonated longer in the South and explains why Confederates were so quick to draw comparisons between their cause and the American independence movement.

Wyatt-Brown next moves to Andrew Jackson and the rituals of dueling. In this brilliant chapter he shows how politics, honor, and ambition combined to produce a fierce adherence to the code duello. These ideas explain why Jackson was so fantastically popular in the South. Old Hickory's famous duels "channeled his emotions in conventional, conservative rituals" that helped produce his popular acclaim (p. 74). Jackson becomes a means to understand why intense passions smoldered under the surface of the conservative and hierarchical South. When John Brown raided Harper's Ferry or Charles Sumner insulted Andrew Pickens Butler, southerners took such incidents as personal assaults on their honor. The ferocity of their response is explained, in part, through a dedication to their reputation.

The book's middle section explores the intersection of honor and religion (or grace, as Wyatt-Brown uses the term) in southern society. It is here that Wyatt-Brown has most difficulty reconciling two seemingly contradictory ideologies.

Honor demanded fidelity to an aggressive mentality while Christianity demanded meekness and the ability to turn the other cheek. Salvation, moreover, was open to all, no matter their position in the social order, so women and slaves were equal to white males in God's eyes. Wyatt-Brown argues that southerners essentially modified Christianity to fit the dictates of honor. At first they were able to harmonize grace and honor by stressing the need to control passions, but as the southern church grew in authority, southern clergymen were more likely to support the social order. An uneasy truce meant that Christ became "the Ruler of Honor, Pride, and Race" (p. 104). This reconciliation meant that southern intellectuals and clergy couched their defense of slavery in terms of Christian patriarchalism. Once they did so, it became much easier to southern Christians to accept secession because they were defending God's design for society.

War and its aftermath is the subject of the third section of the book. Wyatt-Brown makes the salient point that slavery "came to symbolize all that was right or wrong about Southern race relations, culture, politics, and livelihood" (p. 177). The elaborate synthesis of grace and honor needed to be defended; it was the duty of southerners to preserve their honor in the face of northern challenges. Any northern action or statement that implied the moral inferiority of the South had to be answered. Since honor was virtually inseparable from white freedom and racism, that southerners resorted to violence in 1861 is understandable. Defense of slavery was tantamount to protection of family and community. For these reasons, southern soldiers were ideologically driven to preserve individual and collective honor. Wyatt-Brown explains that this ideology sustained the southern war effort. What is not so clear is how he would explain the huge numbers of deserters within the Confederate ranks. A recent study of the Stonewall Brigade - one of the South's fiercest fighting units - concludes that sixteen percent of the unit's soldiers were permanent desert-

ers. That figure is higher than the brigade's casualty rate during the war. [2] It seems that the war challenged southern honor in a way that needs further explanation.

The postwar years in the South were a time when southerners sought to restore the place of honor. While dueling became an anachronism, another type of violence was closely associated with the honor code. Lynchings were a tangible reaction to the reminders of defeat that were everywhere. African-Americans who walked the streets as free people, northerners who moved south, and the physical destruction of the land were all pungent examples of Confederate inadequacy. Such day-to-day experiences grated upon southern sensibilities and created a rage that propelled southerners to the extreme violence associated with the Ku Klux Klan. Wyatt-Brown poignantly captures the bitterness, anger, and despair in the South that expressed itself in mob violence against African Americans. Since honor was closely associated with white supremacy, the incredible number of lynchings in the South should come as no surprise. While Wyatt-Brown effectively captures the rage in the wake of the war, he might have done more to link the Lost Cause to a reassertion of Southern honor. Although he makes passing references to the rituals created by the Confederacy's adherents, it seems they expressed themselves in non-violent ways as well.

Wyatt-Brown has done what most historians dream about doing: produce a graceful, thoughtful, and important book. His *Shaping of Southern Culture* significantly contributes to our understanding of how honor animated behavior and helped create a southern ideology. The depiction of honor in the book is often unflattering. As Wyatt-Brown acknowledges, "Honor has caused more deaths than the plague" (p. 295). It is with this idea, one that is so great and terrible, that historians must reckon.

Notes

[1]. Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, (New York: Anchor Books, 1989), p. 74.

[2]. Jeffrey D. Wert, *A Brotherhood of Valor: The Common Soldiers of the Stonewall Brigade, C.S.A., and the Iron Brigade, U.S.A.*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999), p. 314.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-south>

Citation: Robert H. Gudmestad. Review of Wyatt-Brown, Bertram. *The Shaping of Southern Culture: Honor, Grace, and War, 1760s-1880s*. H-South, H-Net Reviews. December, 2001.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=5739>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.