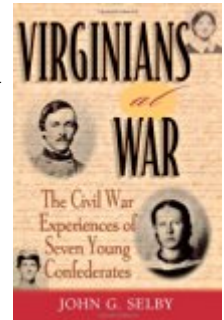


John G. Selby. *Virginians at War: The Civil War Experiences of Seven Young Confederates*. Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 2002. xlv + 264 pp. \$25.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8420-5055-5.



Reviewed by Matt Speiser

Published on H-CivWar (June, 2003)

In *Virginians at War*, John G. Selby examines the American Civil War through the eyes of seven young Confederates, four men and three women. By skillfully melding together evidence from diaries, letters, memoirs, and the works of other historians, Selby pieces together the lives of Susan Caldwell, a struggling young mother; Amanda "Tee" Edmonds, a "stereotypical Southern belle"; Lucy Buck, a reflective young woman who lived on the Bel Air plantation; Sergeant John Worsham of Richmond, who was injured at the Battle of Winchester in 1864; Private Henry "Robin" Berkeley, who ended the war as a prisoner at Fort Delaware; Alexander "Fred" Fleet, a student at the University of Virginia who joined the Confederate Army in 1861; and William Pogue, a twenty-six-year old Lexington lawyer and by war's end a well-known lieutenant colonel (pp. xxi-xxiv). *Virginians at War* follows the lives of these seven individuals, from the late antebellum years to well into the twentieth century. Selby examines their wartime experiences and seeks to understand the meaning of the war for its participants. This is a difficult endeavor, since it is always a challenge to explore the minds of others; but Selby presents a

compelling and comprehensively researched account of how seven Confederate Virginians perceived the Civil War. In the process, John Selby delivers a narrative of the war itself.

At the start of *Virginians at War*, Selby cites historian Gary Gallagher, who stated that historians have not adequately "examined Confederate nationalism from a generational perspective." [1] Selby hopes that *Virginians at War* can help "shed light on this important subject." In its examination of Confederate nationalism, the book also fits into a historiography that seeks to identify Confederate wartime motivation. In his introduction, Selby also cites historians Bell Wiley's conclusion that Confederates desired "adventure," Reid Mitchell's analysis of Confederate family and honor, Gerald Linderman's emphasis on homeland defense, Drew Gilpin Faust's focus on Southern women and their role in forging a common Confederate cause, and Gallagher's exploration of Confederate "Popular Will" and "Nationalism" (p. xx). By quoting these historians, Selby places his own book within the context of their work, as he joins them in "wrestl[ing] with the question of

motivation" in the Confederacy (p. xx). Selby argues that the seven individuals in *Virginians at War*, as survivors of the war who recorded their experiences, present a valuable perspective on the motivation of individual Confederates. Selby sees Virginia as the most representative Confederate state, the "South writ large" (p. xli).[2] He chooses his characters because they represent the Southern white, loyal Confederate population, the social elite of the Confederacy, and because they all belong to a "Civil War generation" born between 1827 and 1845 and coming of age during the war (pp. xviii, xxii, 235).[3]

Virginians at War brings the Civil War period and its participants to life. Though Selby offers us only an elite slice of Confederate society, he does so presumably because they most embodied the Confederacy's professed values and nationalism. Selby writes with a compelling and usually fluid style, and he brings the "characters" and their thoughts off the page and out of the nineteenth century, so that they become accessible human beings, part of a dynamic and fascinating wartime world. The author evocatively illustrates how the individuals lived and how they interacted with national events. Throughout the chronological narrative, Selby smoothly incorporates the historical testimony of these seven Confederates, using their words--most often through their diaries and letters--to illuminate their view of the Civil War's events. Selby makes Civil War experiences seem real, writing that Confederates "viewed [Gettysburg] as just another big battle" and poignantly depicting Confederate despair at the war's end; in the process, he reinforces the intuitive but often overlooked fact that reconciliation was not easy or smooth after such a bloody war (pp. 236, 209). Because *Virginians at War* focuses almost exclusively on Virginia (concentrating less on non-Eastern events like the siege at Vicksburg), it delivers a skewed narrative of the war. But while the book centers upon the events and battles in which its characters were most involved, it is still informa-

tive, introducing the reader to the Civil War's participants and observers.

The seven people in the book emulate the broader rhythms of the Civil War, both reflecting and guiding the war's narrative. Selby caps Phillip Sheridan's overwhelming Union triumph over Jubal Early in the Confederates' second Valley Campaign with an account of Sergeant John Worsham's wounding at the third Battle of Winchester (pp. 177-178). Later, Selby notes that the Confederates' postwar years of personal "reflection, celebration, and memorialization mirrored those of their region and nation" (p. 223).

Selby effectively links historical fact, historical analysis, and the perspectives and opinions of the historical actors. He writes, for example, that "the firing on Fort Sumter would soon bring even the most dedicated Unionists around to the secession view." He supports his analysis by adding, "As Benny [Fred Fleet's younger brother] wrote in his journal on April 26, 1861, 'We joined the Southern Confederacy yesterday.... I have been for the Union ... until the first Gun was fired at Fort Sumter'" (p. 27).

As the author takes his readers through the Civil War and beyond, describing Confederate perceptions of battles, Union raids, and politics, Selby also provides historical perspective on the war's participants, by continually placing the experiences of the book's characters in historiographic context. Selby shows how Susan Caldwell "sits firmly with the majority of white Southern women," who, as historian George Rable has demonstrated, often filtered their experiences "through the prism of the family" (p. 21). Selby also demonstrates that by the last winter of the war, the lives of the Confederates in *Virginians at War* had become "replete with hardship and hope," noting that this fits into the analysis of historians William Blair and J. Tracy Power (p. 188).

Throughout *Virginians at War*, Selby emphasizes the individuals' personality, explaining, "the war tested character but did not change it" (p.

xxiv). As he focuses on the relationship between individuals, history, and perceptions of history, he also argues that human actions are shaped as much by personal nature as by surrounding events. Selby writes that the individuals' "character ... determined their attitude toward the war and its legacy" (p. 224). This focus on personality and character serves as a reminder of the complexities of history and human action. He notes, "When the focus [on the war] is narrowed from the general to the particular ... a more complex story emerges" (p. 92). Although at times *Virginians at War* does not sufficiently link home-front and battlefield experiences in its analysis, Selby generally uses Civil War accounts to show that hardship and hope as well as doubts and patriotism could exist at once, as part of a larger shared historical narrative. Thus, Selby demonstrates that individuals do not fit neatly into a historical mold, but instead their combined experiences form a common world.

While this emphasis on personal nature is often fascinating, it does not provide consistent insight into the book's other analytical strain, namely the depiction of a growing Confederate nationalism and wartime Confederate motivation. Although Selby writes that "circumstance, social situation and personality [determined individual] responses to" the war, he does not sufficiently link those elements (p. 131). Selby tries to reign in the narrative in order to illustrate common experiences that connect the "different situations" of the individuals in the book, namely "forbearance in hard times" and a corresponding devotion to the Confederate cause (p.139). Selby's analysis can get lost, at times, because the book expends so much energy linking the larger narrative of the Virginia war with the seven Confederates' perceptions of events as they transpired. As a result, the reader is left with a fascinating tale of wartime survival, but without an analytical voice pulling the narrative into a more cohesive account of how the indi-

vidual experiences help illustrate a larger Confederate nationalism.

This flaw in the book is most evident in Selby's neglect of several salient quotations that stand out in the text as evidence of a burgeoning Confederate national identity. For example, Fred Fleet's father wrote to his son early in the war about "services [potentially] required ... by your Country," and his mother likewise noted that Fred "can not sit idly by when our country expects every one of her sons to be up and doing" (pp.27-28). Similarly, Lucy Buck wrote in 1863 of lives "offered up on the altar of their country" (p. 96), and at war's end, Fred Fleet wrote of the war between "two nations" (p. 197). Robin Berkeley, too, wrote of "duty to God [and] country" (pp. 198-99). Selby does not sufficiently explore the meaning of the words "country" and "nation," which were apparently used by the book's figures to refer to the Confederate States of America. Instead, Selby tantalizingly leaves this evidence in front of the reader and does not fulfill his own goal of fully exploring the growth of Confederate nationalism or its link to national wartime motivation in the South.

Selby also does not sufficiently explore the role of slavery in Confederate nationalism and identity, especially considering the fact that primary individuals in the book owned slaves before and during the war. At the book's end, Selby mentions that "the color line" helped push Confederates into war (p. 236). He does show how individuals reacted with "great fear" over potential slave insurrections, although, at one point, he demonstrates that Fred Fleet's family was eventually willing "to see the end of slavery" for the sake of Confederate victory (pp. 18, 197). But the author does not take the analysis of slavery's role any further; thus he fails to examine whether slavery played an important role in Confederate motivation for fighting the war or in any sense of creating Confederate national identity. By focusing on wartime hardships and not on slavery, Selby does

not explain if Confederate identity emerged out of slavery even before the war started.

Still, one of the greatest strengths in *Virginians at War* is its depiction of how devotion to a "Southern cause" powerfully evolved during the war, permeating Southern life and perceptions of events (pp. 103,181).[4] Although Selby does not sufficiently explore the growth or deeper meaning of an actual, distinct Confederate nationalism, his evidence does demonstrate that a Confederate identity (albeit a somewhat vague identity) did exist, in that the individuals in *Virginians at War* defined themselves by their devotion to the "Southern cause." While Selby does not fully explore what defined that "cause" or whether it amounted to a true nationalism, he clearly shows that Confederate individuals were attached to the "Southern cause" and fought for it throughout the Civil War. Thus, for Selby, devotion to the "cause" itself is central to understanding Confederates' experiences. Selby illustrates that Confederate devotion often grew precisely because of wartime challenges to daily life and to Confederate military success, manifest in a growing feeling of investment in the war.

Importantly, Selby illustrates through the experiences of the seven Virginians that there was a vital difference between Southern disaffection with the war's results and potential decline in devotion to the Confederacy (though, again, Selby does not take this a step further to explore its link to a Confederate nationalism): Confederates could easily become frustrated by war, without losing devotion to their "cause." Selby writes, "We see scarcity and worry among the individuals in this study, but not utter despair over the war"; even as "the losses mounted for the Confederacy, [individuals] held onto their desire for 'independence.'"[5] Thus, hope and hardship coexisted, and they helped forge Confederate loyalty and perhaps identity (pp. 188, 93). While the meaning of the "Southern cause" is often ambiguous and the author does not tell us if it directly translated into

Confederate nationalism, Selby does emphasize that during the Civil War, there were Southern "soldiers and civilians who strongly supported the Confederacy from beginning to end" (p. 236). Thus, the author counters historians who look for the root of Confederate defeat in a loss of Confederate devotion or motivation.

The next step, then, is to determine how devotion to a Confederate cause actually indicated that there was also a distinct Confederate nationalism and Confederate national identity, beyond the level of loyalty to individuals' Southern states or pragmatic investment in the war effort. Selby does depict how seven Virginians, through their perceptions of the Civil War, became devoted to a "Southern cause." [6] In the process, he shows that many white Southerners thought of themselves, at least for a few years, as part of a separate American society. For these reasons, *Virginians at War* is a valuable addition to understanding the experiences of the Civil War on the battlefield and Virginia's home front. In illustrating the wartime commitment of Confederate individuals, *Virginians at War* will also help other historians comprehend how a Confederate identity and perhaps a Confederate nationalism, distinct from the United States and unique to the years of the American Civil War, might have developed and blossomed in the context of wartime struggle, sacrifice, investment, and ultimately Confederate perseverance.

Notes

[1]. Gary W. Gallagher, *The Confederate War: How Popular Will, Nationalism, and Military Strategy Could Not Stave off Defeat* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 96.

[2]. Because there is less primary evidence about the individuals' perceptions of the world around them and of the war's legacy, in the last section of the book Selby primarily relies on the facts of their postwar lives to extrapolate an analysis of "patterns of behavior and thought." Selby discovers that the individuals in *Virginians at*

War spent their postwar years building new lives (though they all were able to remain in the Southern social elite) and trying to reflect upon the historical and personal significance of their Civil War experiences (p. 213).

[3]. As Selby notes, the individuals in his study came from either the "slaveholding yeomen" or the "wealthy elite," using the categories of historian Fred Bailey (p. 217).

[4]. Selby writes that "despite ... occupations by Union troops, military service for loved ones, the flight of slaves, and the constant influence of the war on their daily lives, the three women in this study remained loyal to the Southern cause" and also that even at the end of the war, General Lee and General Early were ready for another military "gamble" and hoped that victory at the close of 1864 could "rejuvenate [their] army and [their] government's fortunes" (pp. 103, 181).

[5]. Perhaps this mention of "independence" begins to define the often vaguely referenced "Southern cause."

[6]. This cause, then, while not always articulated, was often deeply felt (p. 233).

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

Citation: Matt Speiser. Review of Selby, John G. *Virginians at War: The Civil War Experiences of Seven Young Confederates*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. June, 2003.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=7790>



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