

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jon L. Wakelyn, ed. *Southern Pamphlets on Secession: November 1860-April 1861*. Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1996. xxix + 418 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2278-4.

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Southerners often claimed that secession merely followed the example of the Revolutionary forefathers in resisting the tyranny of a centralized power. Not only did residents of the slave states preserve that ideological umbilical cord with the Revolutionary Era but they also employed the same technique as their ancestors for pressing their case—through pamphlets that carried the secession debate throughout the southern states.

Jon L. Wakelyn has performed a service in resurrecting a selection of these pamphlets that renew our acquaintance with this important political tradition. With the exception of Frank Friedel's two-volume collection of Union pamphlets published in 1967, very few works even associate pamphlet writing with the Civil War. Historians acknowledge the importance of this ideological vehicle to the Revolution, primarily because of the work of Bernard Bailyn, whose *Pamphlets of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, 1965) served as something of a model for Wakelyn. When the Civil War came, the pamphlet still held a strong place in American society. Cheap to print and easy to distribute, the pamphlets extended the reach of their authors and provide today's historian—as Wakelyn persuasively argues in his introduction—with an important window into the intellectual, cultural, and political dimensions of this nation's tragedy.

Readers will find that the pamphlet trail takes them through terrain both familiar and foreign—from political venues such as the U.S. Congress to the pulpits of southern churches. Some of the writers represent the usual suspects in the secession debate: Senator Robert M. T. Hunter of Virginia, agricultural writer James D. B. DeBow, and theologian Rev. James Henley Thornwell, to name a few. But there are also surprise guests.

One is a political catechism of secession prepared in 1830 by Maria Henrietta Pinckney of South Carolina for her niece. Distributed in pamphlet form, the catechism presented questions and answers about the nature of the Federal Union, reinforcing the predictable conclusion that sovereignty lay with the states. Its existence illustrates a public political channel that women continued to use in the antebellum period, although the extent of this activity remains understudied. Another surprise—or perhaps irony is a better word—is the pamphlet of John Pendleton Kennedy of Maryland. As the author of the novel *Swallow Barn*, Kennedy helped create the myth of the South as a land of genteel aristocrats, thus providing a foundation for southern distinctiveness. Yet in December 1860, while denouncing secession, he claimed that the Federal government worked fine and that the border states had better look out for their own interests within the Union.

Altogether, Wakelyn collected one 120 pamphlets that he culled to twenty and printed in the following sections: prelude to secession; the Lower South; and the Upper South. Most of the contributors held public office, such as Jefferson Davis and Howell Cobb of Georgia, although the collection also represents religious figures such as Thornwell. The pamphlets originated as speeches, sermons, articles, or letters to constituents that the authors wished to circulate more widely. Some even began as pamphlets. Wakelyn ends the volume with two appendices containing abstracts of an additional sixty-five pamphlets and the full text of Alexander Stephens's famous "Cornerstone Address" in which he asserted that the cornerstone of the new Confederate government rested "upon the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man" (p. 406). Reprinted from the



version available in Frank Moore's *The Rebellion Record: A Diary of American Events*, 12 vols. (New York, 1862-1867), I:44-49, the text rounds out the volume nicely by gathering into one place a wide variety of perspectives on secession.

The material has great potential for educating a broad public—students, buffs, and scholars—on the intricacies of the sectional crisis. First of all, the pamphlets strongly underscore the central role of slavery in causing secession, something that portions of the public still find hard to accept. Even a die-hard Unionist such as Kennedy warned the Free States that “the old Union is an impossibility unless the agitation of slavery is brought to an end” (p. 245). From the pulpit came a similar—and stronger—message with the Rev. Benjamin Morgan Palmer of South Carolina defending slavery to his congregation as the best relationship of worker and employer; a relationship that he believed the South should preserve by seceding from the atheistic North. Thus, the importance of religion to southern and Confederate identity that historians have begun to resurrect is reinforced in these pages.

Secondly, the pamphlets highlight the divided mind of the region. Wakelyn's decision to group the pamphlets by Upper and Lower South reinforces this conclusion, and reflects a border state mentality the more northward one lived within the region. People in Maryland and Kentucky—and to some extent Virginiad—viewed themselves as a conglomeration of moderate-minded states sandwiched between extremes. But the editor of this collection also includes pamphlets from dissenters who challenged the prevailing mood of their respective sections. For instance, from the secession-minded Lower South, readers will find the Rev. George H. Clark defending slavery to his Georgia congregation while warning them against the evils that lurked behind disunion. And in the section featuring pamphlets from the more cautious Upper South appears the argument by Albert Pike that Arkansas must secede to protect its sovereignty from a centralizing power.

Overall, the two sides sounded like contemporary historians as they debated whether North and South were fundamentally different. The Unionists of 1860-1861 stressed that the two sections shared common ground, especially the common heritage of the Revolutionary past and the principles of constitutional government. Their main message was that the government functioned well enough, if only the people would follow the guidelines as written in the Constitution. The country, in their view, was being torn apart by extremists who refused to

let the slavery issue die. On the other hand, secessionists claimed that the two sections had developed unique characteristics, with slavery defining the South socially, economically, and politically. The regions, secessionists maintained, had fundamental differences that put them on a collision course with the North. As evidence, many cited northern Republican William Henry Seward's observation about an “irrepressible conflict” in the making. The shift in power signaled by Abraham Lincoln's election to the presidency meant that the South should follow the example of the Revolutionary forefathers, not in building the Union but in resisting tyranny by setting up a new government. The themes of Unionists sound remarkably like the arguments of consensus historians of the 1950s who viewed Americans as more alike than different. Similarly, today's post-consensus historians argue much like the secessionists that North and South diverged from each other in ways that put them on a collision course—an interpretation that now dominates college textbooks. Perhaps we have not come so far after all.

Shortcomings of this volume are extremely minor and will catch the eye of scholars more than they will casual readers or students. The rationale for selecting which pamphlets to print is not explained very well. Wakelyn appears to follow Bailyn's model of presenting pamphleteers based on their contemporary fame, representativeness, literary style, and originality of thought. Yet he does not clearly spell this out, thus leaving readers to guess at the evaluation process. His desire to represent all regions of the South is, however, clear and well done. More troublesome to the researcher is the fact that he does not list the archives that contain these precious finds. Preceding the abstracts of sixty-five pamphlets, the editor mentions that additional pamphlets may be found at the Library of Virginia in Richmond and the Southern Historical Collection at Chapel Hill, but he does not specify which archives house which pamphlets. Finally, the labeling in Appendix A has some problems, with material from 1860 appearing under the heading “Pamphlets Published Before 1860” (pp. 375-79). These examples, however, in no way detract from the value of the book, which has potential for use in the classroom with upper-level undergraduates and graduate students.

Ultimately, this is a welcome effort in which the editor has taken care to capture a wide variety of opinion within the pre-war South. The collection also suggests that the pamphlet remained a popular vehicle for disseminating political thought in the South. Most scholars of the sectional crisis will want to have this volume on their

shelves where it will provide substantial primary material for understanding the southern mind, as well as good examples for sharing with students and the public about why the war came.

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