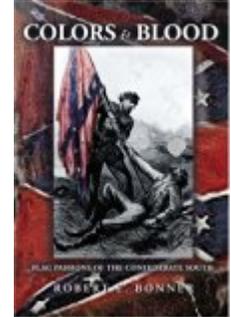


Robert E. Bonner. *Colors and Blood: Flag Passions of the Confederate South.*
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Flag Flap: Reading the Rebel Banner

In July of 2000, I attended the lowering of the Confederate flag from the dome of South Carolina's State House. No one standing along Columbia's busy Gervais Street that day would quibble with the assertion that Confederate symbols continue to have a powerful influence on twenty-first century southerners—often a baleful influence. On the day that South Carolina whites dipped their colors, hundreds of neo-Confederate partisans, dressed in faux rebel gray, wearing Confederate heritage t-shirts or sporting Confederate flag bikinis (yes, bikinis) mobbed the state house grounds, shouted racial epithets at NAACP marchers and, in general, proved right the critics who have insisted for decades that the angry red banner and its St. Andrews Cross represents hate, not heritage. If ever the cliché about needing more light than heat applied, this culture war needs immediate illumination.

A new book by Robert Bonner illuminates indeed. In *Colors and Blood: Flag Passions of the Confederate South*, Bonner gives us a timely, thorough, and highly sophisticated discussion of the

origins, context, and significance of the flag(s) of the Confederacy. Neo-Confederates, with their illusions of a banner unsullied by associations with the enslavement of human beings, will find little comfort here. However, it should be added, liberal academics who sometimes dismiss Confederate symbols as nothing more than encoded white supremacy will discover a story much more complex. Along the way, Bonner provides insight into the meaning of Confederate nationalism, the role symbolism played in the secession crisis, and even some interesting vignettes that allow us to see the Confederate government at work.

Bonner begins his work by reminding us that secessionists in 1860-61 faced the difficult task of forging a new Confederate nationalism on the ruins of the sundered Union. Discussion over the adoption of a new national ensign, much of it carried on in the Confederate press, played an integral role in this daunting task. Bonner makes two intriguing points here. First, he suggests that many of those who hoped to keep the old Star-Spangled Banner (or at least a slightly altered version) had held moderate, even Unionist, senti-

ments at the time of secession. Meanwhile, the "fireaters" often supported flags radically different from the old flag of union, symbolizing their desire to break political, but also emotional and aesthetic, bonds with American nationalism. The moderates had the better of this opening conflict--the first national flag (the so-called "Stars and Bars") was reminiscent of the colors of the old Union. Not until 1863 would the Confederacy adopt, as a national ensign, a flag that incorporated the more famous St. Andrews Cross.

Second, Bonner's voluminous research into proposed designs for the first Confederate national flag reveals that some southerners, especially those from rabidly secessionist South Carolina, hoped the new nation would unfurl a banner that would "make clear that the Confederates were establishing a proudly proslavery republic" (p. 48). One group of South Carolinians suggested a fairly complex design that "displayed black slaves picking cotton on one side of its eighteen-foot length and slaves rolling cotton bales on the other" (p. 24). In 1862, when the debate reopened over flag design, some southerners sought to have a black stripe included in the new rebel banner in order to openly declare their support of the peculiar institution. Surprise awaits those that assume the Confederate government would immediately adopt the most racist symbolism possible. Bonner argues, probably accurately, that Confederate political leadership never gave serious consideration to these designs, largely because of the concern that a proslavery flag would hinder diplomatic initiatives in Europe (p. 106).

Religion in the Confederacy plays an important role in Bonner's analysis, much as you would expect from a book that leads with an epigraph from Emile Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Bonner examines Confederate debate over employing the cross in Confederate symbolism and looks at the religious rhetoric of southern conservatives who desired a flag that would be an "anti-abolition banner." In a valuable chapter that

includes a fascinating discussion of Union response to the symbols of treason and examines African American appropriation of the Star Spangled Banner, the author discovers what apparently became a common rhetorical trope for Union partisans--the notion that Satan inspired the creation of rebel banners and tempted white southerners away from the old flag (pp. 127-29).

Bonner's research takes us at least a step toward a much-needed new direction in the historiography of the American Civil War--a study of Confederate popular culture. The author's close reading of what he calls a "multimedia flag culture" enables him to take the reader beyond many of the traditional, and often partly apocryphal, anecdotes about flag adoption. For example, most Civil War enthusiasts know that the Confederacy adopted a flag bearing a St. Andrew's Cross design largely because the Stars and Bars, with its stripes and field of stars, could be easily confused with the Star-Spangled Banner at crucial moments on the battlefield. It is true, Bonner notes, that P. G. T. Beauregard's public calls for a new flag after First Manassas, and his claim that its resemblance to the banner of the Union had almost cost him the battle, had much to do with the groundswell of support that eventually developed for a new symbol. Bonner does not leave it at that, however, and examines how Confederate popular culture, through newspapers, poems, songs and even funerary rites, built support for a distinctive Confederate flag.

It is worthwhile to note that Bonner, in a relatively slim volume, manages to chronicle the symbolism of a variety of different flags connected to almost all the states of the Confederacy. Such an approach enables him to buttress his claims regarding the Confederate's search for their own symbols of nationalism. Such a wide lens view of southern symbolism raises the possibility of numerous small errors, but there are really very few. My only, rather picayune, criticism concerns the author's suggestion that the penchant of South

Carolínians for flags with serpent heraldry heard back to the American Revolutionary era and, in particular to Benjamin Franklin's imagery of the fragmented serpent and the exhortation, "Join or Die" (p. 127). A good guess but these Carolínians undoubtedly wanted to evoke the flag that the radical Charleston patriot Christopher Gadsden introduced in 1776, a yellow banner with a serpent ready to strike and the superscription "Don't Tread on Me."

Finally, I should note that Bonner's discussion of the postbellum career of the rebel banner will seem much too truncated for those deeply interested in the question of Confederate memory. Moreover, in a book forthcoming later this calendar year from University of Georgia Press, I will be taking a very different approach than Bonner to the whole question of postwar southern defiance and the utilization of Confederate symbols during Reconstruction. The Lost Cause did not simply evoke nostalgia, gelding Confederate symbolism and blurring the "oppositional message" of these rebel symbols (p. 177). A fuller analysis of the postbellum era might have led Bonner to conclude that the message of the Lost Cause encouraged continued resistance among some in the aging Confederate legions as much as it led others to think in terms of reconciliation. It should be noted that Bonner does offer us an intriguing, if very abbreviated, discussion of twentieth-century African-American responses to the rebel banner, pointing the way to yet more fertile ground for future scholars (pp. 176-77).

Colors and Blood represents quite an achievement. Bonner's work effectively analyzes material that resists easy analysis and turns an objective eye on issues that generally ignite rancor rather than understanding. Few who don Confederate t-shirts (or bikinis) will pick up this important and timely book. But for those who want to understand why the symbols of the Confederate South remained so powerful in the New South, Bonner's

close reading of rebel iconography is just what we have waited for.

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