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Robert E. Bonner: Colors and Blood

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INTRODUCTION



Waving Colors and Boiling Blood

IN THE 1990s, rebel flags became front-page news. Across the American South, Civil Rights groups worked to discredit a symbol they associated with slavery and racism. Self-proclaimed heritage organizations mounted a fierce counteroffensive, defending the Confederate battle flag as a proud relic handed down from heroic ancestors. Though neither side retreated from its stance, legislative compromises in South Carolina and Georgia produced a momentary truce. Then, early in 2001, Mississippians voted by a lopsided margin to retain the diagonal rebel cross in their state's flag. As the twenty-first century opened, a design created 140 years earlier remained the most visible symbol of America's unfinished Civil War.¹

Recent Confederate flag controversies say something important about the times in which we live. They remind us that the stubborn legacies of race and region still matter in the contemporary South, even as they have moved into the realm of cultural memory. This interest in how the past is remembered is a tribute to the success of the Civil Rights movement in discrediting overt racism in the present. Conflict that now swirls around the Confederate colors is shaped by an ascendant conservatism distrustful of government and hostile toward "political correctness." Flags have become flashpoints in the contemporary South because of current tensions that make two sharply opposed visions of a regional heritage more relevant than ever. At stake in these struggles is the ability to set the regional agenda and determine how the nation's most self-conscious region will remember itself.

Disputes say something too about how easily pieces of waving banners work their way under Americans' skins. Participants in flag debates go beyond explaining what the symbol means; they testify passionately about how it makes them feel. African Americans describe the chill the flag sends up their spines

and the sickness it brings to their stomachs, comparing their reaction to the experience of Jews before the Nazi swastika or of army veterans witnessing an American flag in flames. Pro-flag groups also invoke the visceral aspects of these colors, staging tributes intended to quicken the pulse, moisten the eye, and bring a lump to the throat. Such emotional appeals recall the similarly contentious disputes over the desecration of the United States flag. These two flag controversies—over Confederate symbols and over official protection of the Star Spangled Banner—have more in common with each other than is usually recognized. Both show Americans' preference for passion over reason when it comes to symbols that have been imaginatively soaked in blood.²

Colors and Blood explores how these waving swathes of cloth acquired their enormous power to inspire and to repel. It introduces a wartime flag culture that set the emotional tone of the Civil War in the Union as well as in the Confederacy and brought together powerful themes of defiance, sovereignty, and bloodshed. The flags that generated such passions in the 1860s provided in durable form a range of messages about a common undertaking. In doing so, these symbols extended popular understandings of sacrifice, defense of community, and treason, while they served also to shape relationships between men and women, masters and slaves, and soldiers and civilians. Northerners and southerners alike devoted enormous energy to flag-related activity during the Civil War, which was at once a watershed moment for the Stars and Stripes and a generative period for the cult of Confederate flags. Confederates faced two unique challenges, however, that make an extended story of their symbols particularly worthwhile. First, they recast elements from an inherited American flag culture to forge their own symbolic system, doing so with no little controversy among themselves. Then, defeated Confederates confronted an even more difficult task in making the prime symbol of their nationalism into a relic of a Lost Cause. In this, former rebels against government created an afterglow of wartime passions by extending earlier themes of soldierly devotion with an emphasis on the nonpolitical nature of their most cherished icon, the diagonal Southern Cross.

By focusing on flag culture in the wartime South, this study contributes to a debate over Confederate nationalism, a topic every bit as old, and nearly as contentious, as rebel flags themselves. Confederates were quite self-conscious about their nationhood during the Civil War, claiming that they and the Yankees were part of "two distinct nations" differing from each other "in blood, in race, in social institutions, in systems of popular instruction, in political education and theories, in ideas, in manners." Choosing a set of flags for their new republic was a concerted effort to furnish a distinct people with distinct symbols of their own. Whether or not there was an objective basis for Confederate claims of distinctiveness has stirred considerable disagreement ever since. Many scholars have concluded that the entire notion of a distinct southern nationality was fraudulent and that few Confederates fully supported political

independence. The supposed deficiency of southern nationalism has become a familiar theme in historical scholarship, as has the notion that the Confederate enterprise was quixotic and artificial. Some have even suggested that internal weaknesses associated with the insufficient nationalism of the South had more to do with the outcome of the Civil War than the strength of the Union armies.³

Southern historians have only recently begun to approach Confederate nationalism as a process worthy of study in its own right and not just one of many deficiencies that helped the Yankees win the war. Drew Gilpin Faust set a new agenda by incisively comparing the Confederacy to other new nations, noting how its citizens actively fashioned a sense of nationhood that had not existed prior to secession. Confederates did so, Faust explained in 1988, by engaging in an ongoing set of cultural practices that intersected with ideological, religious, and military developments in a society mobilized for combat. Her approach, which coincided with a blossoming scholarly interest in modern nationalism's paradoxical mixture of transparent artificiality and its pretenses to ancient lineage, provided one of the most effective American case studies of how rituals and symbols legitimated power. Historians who have since written on this topic have been indebted to Faust's insights, even while they do not always share her conclusions. Gary Gallagher has made a particularly important contribution, following Faust in treating Confederate nationalism seriously, though placing much more attention on the martial themes in Confederate purpose.⁴

Despite the increasingly sophisticated approaches to Confederate nationalism, there remains an important gap in the literature, which an examination of the emotional dimensions of the South's popular flag culture can help to fill. Current work has yielded considerable insight into ideology—whether expressed in the language of theology, constitutionalism, political economy, or nineteenth-century ethnology. We also have a great deal more understanding than we once had of how the clergy and military leaders worked to inspire popular allegiance to the common cause. Yet in trying to explain such fundamentally emotional issues of loyalty and sacrifice, neither ideology nor the leadership of a few can satisfactorily explain that gut-wrenching patriotism that was felt, rather than thought, by the many.⁵ The Union effort was clearly bolstered by “an emotional attachment to vague but numinous symbols of national solidarity,” as the historian Charles Royster has put it. Yet because the Confederacy did not win this flag-draped war, it has been harder to see how patriotic symbols were powerful sources of cohesion within the wartime South as well.⁶

Confederate flags helped to focus patriotic emotions from the early days of the secession crisis in 1860 past the moment of military defeat in 1865. A series of banners generated a multimedia flag culture characterized by the breadth of its cultural practices. Poetry, songs, and orations that paid tributes to specific flags appeared constantly in print, providing a set of common understandings about collective aims. Inherited conventions about the meaning of certain flags

elements, such as stars, stripes, and crosses, became a topic of common discussion and wide understanding. Just as important, a series of impromptu rituals drew attention to flags, which were endlessly raised, blessed, presented, and, in a similarly dramatic fashion, protected through bodily sacrifice. Cloth, words, and public performances together conveyed to millions of participants what their country stood for and what their suffering during war was meant to accomplish.⁷

The popular patriotism that placed flags at its center has largely eluded the attention of cultural historians of either the Confederacy or of the Union. The conventional, syrupy aesthetic that informed wartime flag culture has been all too easily dismissed as the “Patriotic Gore” that Edmund Wilson derided in his classic study of Civil War literature. Confederate flags that already drew forth sentimentalism during wartime were further softened by their association with a nostalgic Lost Cause and with the mass-marketing of regionalism of the twentieth century. Until controversy over these flags flared in recent years, the diagonal rebel flag had been reduced to a quaint marker of a Dixieland that had passed into the mists of history. As this vestige of the 1860s became part of later cultures of memory and heritage, the sharper wartime edge of banners, poems, and activities became hard to take seriously. Even while the Civil War remained America’s “felt history,” it was difficult for many to see anything other than nostalgia in the sort of patriotic reverence for flags and for the cause that was expressed while the conflict was still underway.⁸

The Civil War generation accorded their flags more importance than subsequent scholars have allowed. They recognized the powerful ways that these emblems expressed political commitments and elicited military courage in battle. Living in an age of popular nationalism, Confederates were as attuned as their northern counterparts were to the sort of public display in which flags worked best to churn emotions. To a far greater degree than patriots of the American Revolution, Victorian men and women who rallied the faithful during the Civil War immersed themselves in dramatic mythmaking, taking their symbols with tremendous seriousness. Seeing how Confederates chose their symbols and celebrated them seems straightforward, since this process was done in public, especially through the burgeoning world of print journalism. Yet since patriotism rested then, as now, on how things ought to be rather than how they how they were, professions about what these flags meant must be placed in the context of larger objectives to be fully understood.

The scholarly respect accorded to nationalism in the past twenty years has recently been extended to the contours of emotional life. Particular efforts have been made by American historians to understand Victorian sensibilities and the value placed during the mid-nineteenth century upon both emotional intensity and the restraint of dangerous passions. Men as well as women, we have learned, were committed to a culture of sentiment that saw immense positive value in what later generations would consider excessive weepiness

and needlessly inflamed ardor. The most intense displays of emotion have usually been associated with private settings, especially the domestic sphere. But as an emotive wartime flag culture made clear, feelings were an important part of public life as well. In normal times, society might hold together with sober self-interest and a modicum of sympathy for one's fellow citizens. But when it faced war on the scale witnessed in the 1860s, a stronger set of emotions was needed. Under these conditions, Victorianism distinguished itself as a culture "impatient of limitations and hospitable to luxuriant sensations," as the historian Anne Rose has put it.⁹

Taking the wartime passions of the 1860s seriously requires reconsidering many cultural figures and forms that have been long dismissed. Sidney Lanier provides a good example, since he was singled out in Wilson's *Patriotic Gore* for his tendency to be "at once insipid and florid" and apt to be "sometimes a little stupid" in his rhetorical excess. Yet Lanier not only produced the sort of purple prose featured in this book's epigraph, from *Tiger Lilies*. He also worked out a larger philosophical stance based on the belief that "a man must always *feel* rightly (that is his *emotion* must operate rightly) before he can *think* rightly (that is before his *intellect* can operate rightly)." Given this understanding, Lanier believed that "the initial step of every plan and every action is an emotion." Though he developed his insights by immersing himself in German Romanticism, Lanier's outlook fit the circumstances when he made these observations late in 1860. Just a few weeks after his philosophical speculations, he noted how a flag presentation at his small Georgia college had called forth "sparkling eyes and flushing cheeks" of all assembled. His explanation of how "woman's sanctity" would instill in the soldiers a "still but thrilling war-cry in the hearts" as they moved from feeling to action echoed a series of similar formulations made in literally thousands of American communities.¹⁰

As the following chapters make clear, that flag culture which Lanier both observed and later joined as a Confederate soldier operated at distinct stages and through a variety of distinct emblems. Resistance banners, which were the first cloth symbols to challenge the Stars and Stripes, hastened disunion while representing new commonwealths to the world. The Stars and Bars flag, chosen soon thereafter as the first national flag, provided a new and untested government a powerful means of eliciting popular support through a burgeoning body of patriotic poetry, song, and ritual. Military banners drew even wider attention, especially at the local level, where communal ceremonies engaged a range of martial themes that would intensify after blood had been shed and regimental colors had become a central part of how both soldiers and civilians imagined combat. The Southern Cross, the same rebel flag that still generates controversy, emerged in this martial context, becoming the leading Confederate symbol at least by 1863, when it was incorporated on a new national flag known as the Stainless Banner. Midway through the war, a coordinated martial iconography had been created that allowed both soldiers in

the field and civilians in occupied areas to show their true colors. At each of these stages, wartime flag culture helped to push forward Confederate efforts to found a new republic and injected questions of national purpose into the vibrant realm of popular culture.

Every distinct stage of wartime flag culture was marked by shared sensibilities. The symbolic grammar in which Confederates worked out their flag designs continued to owe much to the American flag practices that had been established decades earlier. The range of Confederates' flag-related productions also drew from a national "melodramatic mode" that, as Alice Fahs has recently shown, pervaded American life during the Civil War.¹¹ Melodramatic features of flag culture included a characteristic concern for highly charged language and actions and for an underlying emotional extravagance. In this, flag patriotism was part of a larger configuration, as several studies of mid-Victorian public life on both sides of the Atlantic have suggested. The basic conventions of melodrama—its exaggerated moral, its tendency to feature an unexpected turn of events and to focus on the lives of average people, and its explicit rendering of sharply etched emotions—provided all citizens with the same overt message, making this genre a quintessentially democratic form. Such aspects of melodrama were easily translated from the stage to other forms of public discourse. The flag-draped patriotic performances of the 1860s echoed conventions of the stage in the stock roles played by vulnerable females and vigilant males and by the overriding sense that a lurking evil foe would be vanquished, to name just two examples.¹²

If this theatrical, highly stylized flag culture could inspire passion, it also channeled strong emotions, thus restraining popular patriotism from potential excess. This result was important, since Victorians' appreciation for emotional intensity in the mid-nineteenth century was accompanied by profound anxieties about unregulated appetites and drives. In the case of civilian flags, insurgent energies that mobilized Confederates were soon channeled into a commitment to sovereign authority and collective national order. The even more perilous passions drawn forth by battle flags were also tamed. Combat in the Civil War, as has been true of large-scale war in all human societies, threatened to reduce soldiers to barbarism. In their military uses, flags gave structure to the most extreme and violent elements of war—killing one's enemies and putting one's own life at risk. These banners legitimated bloodshed by lending transcendent meaning to the horrific business of combat. The larger system of values evoked by flags first highlighted national independence, but by the end of the war they also stood for a warrior's code of honor. Understanding the development of a martial flag culture can help to explain how Confederate soldiers surrendered their flags in 1865 and how they prided themselves on honorable acceptance of their loss even as they placed their nationalist cause, and all the carnage that had come with it, firmly in the past.¹³

The efforts made by ordinary white southerners to create and consecrate their flags had certain unintended results. Even before surrender, the national Stars and Bars and the army's diagonal Southern Cross provided the North with strongly negative symbols to rally against. These motivated Unionists to fight on, just as today's rebel flag has stirred anger and helped mobilize Civil Rights forces during the 1990s. In the case of African Americans, their fight for the Stars and Stripes and against a "banner of treason" linked the cause of their own freedom to a broader struggle for national existence. At the same time that the American flag expanded its associations beyond the battlefield to herald freedom for slaves, Confederate emblems became ever more oriented toward themes of combat and conflict through war. Martial themes that ran through mature Confederate flag culture may have sustained popular support for armies in the field. But the attention that it directed toward regular combat troops would discourage civilian resistance after these same armies surrendered. The centrality of battle flags would, in the postwar period, help to divorce martial honor from a dead nationalist cause. In retrospect, a flag culture that during wartime nurtured a far richer Confederate patriotism than most have appreciated proved incapable of sustaining southern separatism after 1865.

An analysis of Civil War flag culture can provide new insights into America's most divisive conflict. It might also lend some perspective to controversies of our own day, showing the wartime roots of arguments both for and against rebel colors and providing a greater understanding of the appeal of cloth symbols in American culture. Readers looking primarily for answers to today's struggles, however, should be forewarned. As a contribution to Civil War history, the following pages focus far more attention on how Confederate emblems came into being than on what they would eventually become. The story it tells starts not with current passions or even with flags of the Confederacy. The curtain rises instead in 1860, as a war hero from Mississippi considers the American Stars and Stripes for which he had once risked his life.