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Private Confederacies: A Review

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Private Confederacies: A Review

Abstract

For generations, notable scholars such as Gerald Linderman, Reid Mitchell and Joseph Glatthaar, have tried to understand the experience of common Civil War soldiers. With *Private Confederacies*, James J. Broomall makes a penetrating dive into the emotional world of elite male slaveholders, focusing on how the Civil War, emancipation, and Reconstruction affected their personal lives, emotional expressions, and gender identities. He argues that white Southern men struggled to process their wartime experiences due to societal expectations of male self-restraint. To overcome such expectations regarding their self-expression they created soldier communities that they could rely upon for emotional support and comfort. Using a variety of sources, including letters, diaries, and material culture, Broomall studies both the private and public lives of white Southern men to reconstruct their emotional trajectories throughout the war and into Reconstruction. At its very core, *Private Confederacies* explores how the shift from national strife to national peace was more than just a national change, as it was a deeply personal and emotional transition for those who experienced it. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

CWI Summer Conference, James Broomall, Private Confederacies

Disciplines

History | Military History | Public History | United States History

Comments

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Private Confederacies: A Review

By [Olivia Ortman '19](#) and [Cameron Sauers '21](#)

Private Confederacies: The Emotional Worlds of Southern Men as Citizens and Soldiers

James J. Broomall

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For generations, notable scholars such as Gerald Linderman, Reid Mitchell and Joseph Glatthaar, have tried to understand the experience of common Civil War soldiers. With *Private Confederacies*, James J. Broomall makes a penetrating dive into the emotional world of elite male slaveholders, focusing on how the Civil War, emancipation, and Reconstruction affected their personal lives, emotional expressions, and gender identities. He argues that white Southern men struggled to process their wartime experiences due to societal expectations of male self-restraint. To overcome such expectations regarding their self-expression they created soldier communities that they could rely upon for emotional support and comfort. Using a variety of sources, including letters, diaries, and material culture, Broomall studies both the private and public lives of white Southern men to reconstruct their emotional trajectories throughout the war and into Reconstruction. At its very core, *Private Confederacies* explores how the shift from national strife to national peace was more than just a national change, as it was a deeply personal and emotional transition for those who experienced it.

Broomall explores the dynamics of the private and public expressions of men who often harbored deep-seated sentiments that were at odds with their outward demeanor. Antebellum Southern men were reared in an honor-based culture that demanded distinct expressions of manliness based on Christian gentility, physical prowess, and self-mastery. In public, men were expected to distance themselves from bursts of emotion and instead show restraint and self-control. These cultural demands for appropriate conduct created boundaries between men and other members of society, which were necessary for maintaining their position at the top of the social order. In private, though, slaveholders were highly emotional and reflective. Broomall emphasizes antebellum diaries as a private place where Southern men could question themselves, interrogate the world around them, and freely express their emotions. However, upon

becoming soldiers, these men found themselves ill-equipped to deal with the horrors of war.

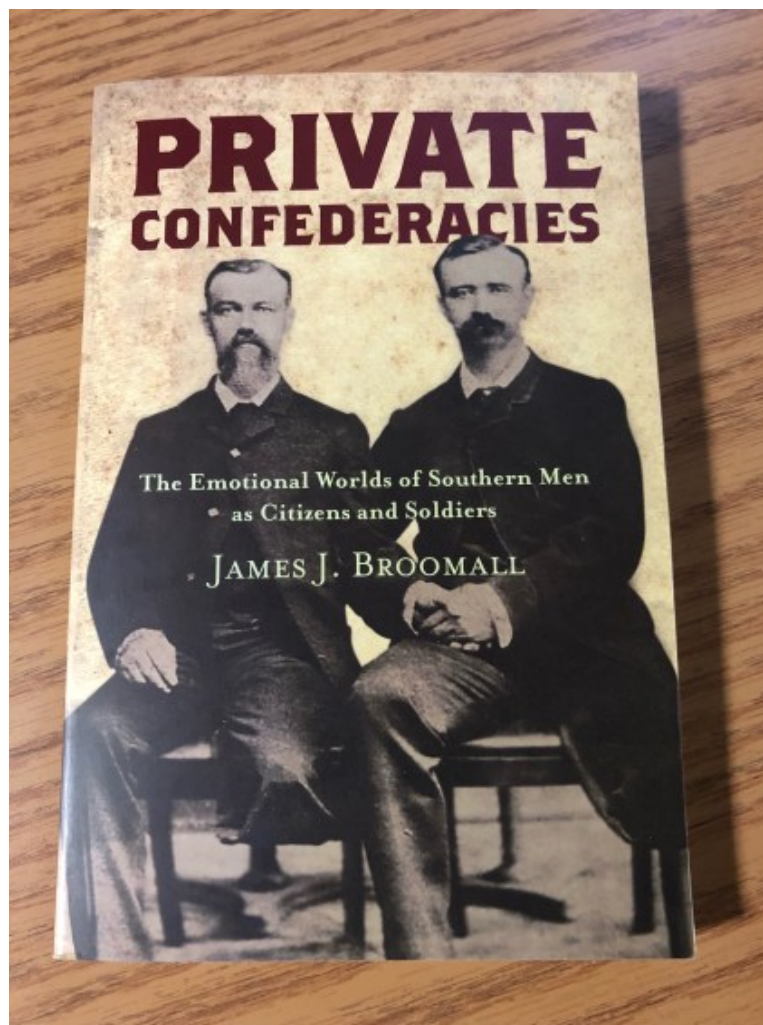
With the outbreak of the Civil War, Southern men were thrust into unfamiliar territory which threatened existing social and cultural expectations of manhood and class hierarchy. Men's pre-conceived notions of heroic action, stoicism, and the "good death" were challenged by the gruesome realities of battle and the seeming randomness of battlefield death, which could destroy men's bodies, render them emotionally vulnerable before comrades and their subordinates, and potentially undermine their respectability. The randomness of battlefield death and new soldiering lifestyle was exhausting both physically and emotionally for Southern men. To cope with the new experiences of soldiering, Southern men developed new methods of emotional release which reflected a larger breakdown in barriers between their public and private lives. Using a focused study of material culture, Broomall traces men's changing perceptions of themselves, their emotions, and the world around. When the war started, Confederate soldiers wore homemade uniforms, allowing them to maintain identities as citizens along with their pre-war worldviews. Once those uniforms deteriorated and were replaced by government-issued clothing, men fully recognized themselves as soldiers. This shift in self-identification and mindset made soldiers more willing to work together as a unit and to rely upon each other for emotional support.

Camp life also fostered critical changes in soldiers' behavior. Camps were public places where men worked within and respected a social hierarchy. However, they also ate, slept, and performed domestic tasks in camp, all of which were aspects of their private lives. The camps, therefore, became a space where soldiers renegotiated their masculinity and created a community reminiscent of familial bonds. Traditional notions of masculinity shifted away from the independence of antebellum days to the interdependence required of a martial unit. These new soldier communities, which were essentially interdependent martial families, gave soldiers a space to reflect on the battles they had gone through, as well as reaffirmed their notions of social hierarchy through differences in rank and the important racial distinctions and bonds derived from the presence of slaves. As southern men found their pre-conceived notions of manhood and war challenged on and off the battlefield, they continued to turn to each other for support and affirmation.

When the war ended and Southern men had to come to grips with defeat and emancipation, many turned back to these martial communities to process their new world. The realities of Reconstruction and military occupation, mixed with the depression of defeat, took an emotional toll on white Southern men. While many adjusted and returned to their position as patriarch of the household, some channeled their emotions into extralegal violence. The soldier communities that had made the Civil War survivable became the underpinnings of paramilitary organizations, like the Ku Klux Klan. Although an extreme group and not representative of all Southern men's feelings, the KKK tapped into the anger and fear felt by some white Southern men who used violence to assert their manhood in the face of emancipation and defeat, both of

which were extremely emasculating for Southern white men who had built their identities upon social inequality and dominance.

Private Confederacies offers an insightful look into the evolution of the emotional worlds of Southern men during the 19th century. Broomall's book reveals how the Civil War shook the self-identity of Southern males, whose new, tightly knit soldier communities became critical to their survival and their self-understanding during the hardships of the Civil War and its aftermath. Broomall's book expands our understanding not only of Civil War soldiers but of Southern society in critical ways by revealing the war's deeply personal impacts that collectively re-shaped southern culture in the postbellum era.



Dr. James Broomall will be speaking at this summer's [2019 CWI Conference](#)