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A Review of Virginia's Private War: Feeding Body and Soul in the Confederacy, 1861-1865, by William Blair.

New York: Oxford UP, 1998. 216 pages. Hardcover: \$32.50; Paperback: \$13.95.

Reviewed by Aaron Sheehan-Dean

Academic historians of the U.S. Civil War engage not only their colleagues but a large popular audience as well. Meeting the differing demands made by these disparate groups of readers requires skillful prose and a thoughtful balance of subject matter, analysis, and narrative style. William Blair, in *Virginia's Private War: Feeding Body and Soul in the Confederacy, 1861-1865*, accomplishes these multiple tasks by telling a new and convincing story about the course of the Civil War in Virginia, while also providing an important contribution to ongoing academic debates over the meaning and extent of Confederate nationalism, the shape and role of class conflict, and internal dissent in the Confederacy and the reasons behind Northern victory.

Blair builds his account on the observations of scores of contemporary observers but focuses on the relationships that existed between and among classes, regions, communities, races and all levels of government. He draws an especially good picture of the state's social fabric, pulling material on politics, economics, gender relations, race relations, and generational and class conflict into his analysis. After a brief but nuanced sketch of Virginia's antebellum social, economic, and political structures, Blair chronicles the continuous struggle between the army and the communities from which soldiers were drawn over access to labor and material resources. His research demonstrates the adaptability of Virginians to the novel strains, both internal and external, of the Civil War.

Drawing largely on evidence from Albemarle, Augusta, and Campbell counties, as well as the nearby city of Lynchburg, Blair shows the responsiveness of local governments, the state of Virginia and even (at times) the Confederate government to the increasing distress of the people on the homefront (a distinction of dubious value in the study of Civil War Virginia and one which Blair rarely uses). By war's end nearly 80 percent of eligible Virginia men had served in the army; their absence combined with the

devastation wrought by invading Union soldiers produced enormous hardship at home. By charting the responses from different levels of government, in the form of simple charity and in the more complex methods of controlling the workforce and the market through impressment and draft exemption legislation, Blair reveals a more politically-attuned Confederate political leadership than many of his predecessors observed.

Blair's argument that common Virginians pressured governments to respond to their needs (though frequently in an inefficient fashion) forms the basis for his most valuable historiographical contribution. In the debate over the extent of disaffection in the Confederacy and the role that disaffection played in Confederate defeat, Blair has given a clear and convincing answer to the arguments put forward most clearly by Richard Beringer, et. al.^[1] Beringer, and others, have argued that class, racial, and gender conflict undermined the Confederacy from within. Blair shows us that most Virginians remained committed to the Confederacy into late 1864 and explains why they would. When material conditions worsened, the government responded to the people's plight. Confederate leaders skillfully juxtaposed their efforts at relief with the actions of Northern soldiers who waged a "hard" war against Virginia in the last quarter of 1864. This contrast (which Blair notes began in mid-1862 when Union General Pope entered the state committed to the destruction of all its war-making capacities) channeled people's anger toward the Union and its army, not their own their own government.

Further, Blair reinterprets the history of conscription and impressment legislation, which previous historians have portrayed as uniformly unpopular and ultimately destructive to the Confederate cause. Applying a subtle perception of class difference and of contemporary perceptions and needs, Blair shows how local and state conscription agents listened to their constituents. Most communities desperately needed to retain the services of their artisans and local farmers who produced foodstuffs and draft agents responded by issuing exemptions for these occupations. Blair's examples show that Virginians closely monitored the level of sacrifice demanded of different classes within society. When people thought that elites were not contributing their share, they pressured the state to eventually repeal the ability of men (mostly wealthy elites) to hire substitutes in the draft. Blair details the state's response to this pressure in late 1863 and through 1864 as all levels of government worked harder to ensure that Virginians could survive at home and on the battlefields. In doing so, he provides us with a model for understanding how local and national politics and interests can blend and how and why Virginians of all stripes continued to support the war until the beginning of 1865.

by AARON SHEEHAN-DEAN

[1] Richard Berringer, Herman Hattaway, Archer Jones, and William N. Still, Jr., eds.
Why the South Lost the Civil War (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1986)

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