ESSAY REVIEW

Edmund Ruffin, American


For a very long time historians of the Civil War era have been divided in offering an interpretation of the war's causes. One camp, adhering to the view expressed by William H. Seward of New York, in 1858, sees the war as an "irrepressible conflict" between a fundamentally different North and South. Although differing in the degree of emphasis placed on various causal factors—economies, for example, or social organization—all agree that this was a war that sooner or later had to happen.1 The other camp sees things differently. Expressed most vigorously by historians writing in the aftermath of World War I, these "revisionists" view the Civil War, indeed all wars, as "repressible," brought on not by irreconcilable differences but by human

1 General surveys of this literature include Thomas J. Pressly, Americans Interpret Their Civil War (Princeton, 1954); and Edwin Rozwenc, ed., The Causes of the American Civil War (Lexington, 1961).
failings. They emphasize the similarities rather than the differences between North and South and attribute the Civil War to a “blundering generation” of politicians. Radical abolitionists and fire-eaters whipped superficial differences into tragic, and avoidable, conflict.

Recent scholarship has begun to take a different view, reflecting perhaps the present generation of historians’ unwillingness to accept the terms of debate defined by predecessors living in a time when America’s military adventures, undertaken when “good” and “evil” were clearly understood, usually had happy endings. The best of the new work has been in the field of intellectual history, and it has dared to assume that southerners meant what they said about themselves and their society. Taking these southerners on their own terms, and moving beyond hand-wringing imputations of guilt, this new scholarship has revealed in men and women hitherto regarded as curious cranks a surprisingly rich and informed world view—flawed, to be sure, by a devotion to slavery, but in most respects plausible and sophisticated. And, as readers are reminded that the contexts are both universal (what is the proper role for the man of the mind?) and particular (what sort of a nation is this still-incomplete country to be?), they come also to realize that the old historiographical battle lines need to be redrawn.

The redrawing has already begun. Not surprisingly, the most successful approaches thus far have been biographical. Earlier studies of southern fire-eaters have attempted to consider them, individually and collectively, as “types.” This approach worked well enough under the old interpretive formulations. It now fails to satisfy. For only when one is able to examine anew such men as James Henry Hammond or John A. Quitman can one see them as types only of imperfect human beings imperfectly comprehending the world around them. They were, put another way, uncertain Americans in search of a definition for themselves and their society.

It should come as no surprise—should come, indeed, as predictable and welcome—that old interpretations of Edmund Ruffin are now being revisited. Reconsideration in this case has been long overdue. In his 1932 biography, *Edmund Ruffin, Southerner*, Avery O. Craven wrote that “no figure . . . better expressed [the] more pronounced temper and ways” of the Old South than Ruffin. Betty Mitchell in a 1981 biography, which viewed Ruffin as “a man whose life is in so many ways indicative of Southern temperament

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during the antebellum and Civil War years," added little to Craven's account.3

The basic outline of Ruffin’s life is well enough known to students of nineteenth-century America. Born in Virginia in 1794, Ruffin spent many years as an agricultural reformer. A man shy in public but aggressive and sharp in print, Ruffin was generally regarded as a hypochondriacal crackpot. In the pages of his Essay on Calcareous Manures (1832) and the Farmers’ Register (1833-1842), which he edited, Ruffin extolled the virtues of scientific farming, especially the use of marl, or fossil shells, to restore the exhausted soil of Virginia. Largely ignored, Ruffin grew more frustrated as the decline of the seaboard South continued, and he began to turn his attention toward the Yankee as the greater threat to southern economic well-being. Increasingly this meant defending slavery and advocating secession. Ruffin was present for the hanging of John Brown. He pulled the lanyard that sent the first shot screaming toward Fort Sumter. In June 1865, old, weary, defeated, he penned a final diatribe against “the perfidious, malignant, and vile Yankee race,” placed the muzzle of a rifle in his mouth, and, with a forked stick, pulled the trigger.

It is a commentary on the past state of scholarly interpretation that such a man living such a life could possibly be thought of as a “typical” southerner. The works presently under review appear to be a major corrective. William M. Mathew’s 1988 study centers less on Ruffin than on “the relationship between slavery and agricultural reform” (p. ix), and perhaps for this reason, it seems most conventional. Slavery, Mathew argues, impeded agricultural reform by discouraging entrepreneurship, slowing the development of a transportation system within a market network of exchange, and stifling criticism. As a result, Ruffin’s efforts, which might have saved a system that exhausted the soil and retarded economic development, found few supporters. His failure was “a social phenomenon” (p. 9). Discouraged and rejected, Ruffin, whose mind and personality are curiously obscured in Mathew’s analysis, joined the growing number of southerners who found it “easier to hate Yankees than understand soil chemistry” (p. 206). One wishes for a more thorough explanation, which might have been found through a closer look at the particulars of Ruffin’s life, of why secession replaced marl in Ruffin’s mind. One wishes, too, for a more clearly written, less pedantic account. Mathew’s concluding call for an “extended sense of the ambiguities and ironies of the past” (p. 213) is welcome.

It also turns out to have been anticipatory. David F. Allmendinger, Jr., has answered the call. Focusing on Ruffin’s private life, Allmendinger attempts to show the importance of the Virginian’s family to his developing thought and public pronouncements. *Incidents of My Life* is a series of autobiographical essays written between 1851 and 1853. The first volume, covering his life to age twenty-nine (to 1823), remains lost. The two surviving volumes are published here in their entirety, along with appended narratives, written in 1855, describing the deaths of two of his daughters.

Emerging from the pages of *Incidents*, Allmendinger contends, is a “representative man” (p. 13). But readers need not fear yet another rehash of Craven, for Allmendinger’s Ruffin is representative not of the Old South but “of antebellum America” (p. 13). In his own words, Ruffin shapes the story of his life as a triumph over adversity. Here depicted is a man attached to family and place, comprehending and loving each completely, and attempting to understand himself and the wider world from this familiar perspective. Virtually absent is the cranky, outspoken, narrow-minded “typical” southerner. In its place we find a complex, and often appealing, human being.

Allmendinger’s *Ruffin* makes of the raw data in *Incidents* a fascinating portrait of the private Edmund Ruffin. He reveals a man who, despite his conspicuous successes in the practice of scientific agriculture, actually hated farming, preferring to read, write, and think. By 1850 Ruffin’s turn inward was virtually complete. As he experienced the difficulties men of mind have always encountered, Ruffin looked to his home and family for support and sustenance, intellectual and otherwise.

Over time, and especially after the outbreak of war, Ruffin began to consider his own death. Allmendinger convincingly argues the relationship in Ruffin’s own mind between the cycles of the agricultural year and the cycle of a human life. To this, he links Ruffin’s recurrent experience of death within his own household (eight family members died between 1844 and 1860 and both his son and grandson died on the battlefield) and particularly the death, by suicide, of his closest friend in 1840. Ruffin’s decision to take his own life, Allmendinger contends, was the result of his persistent belief that “an acceptable life involved personal independence based on adequate financial resources” (p. 177). By June 1865, “the conditions of an acceptable life had ended” (p. 177).

Finally, William Scarborough, in the third and final installment of Ruffin’s diary, rounds out the story in Ruffin’s words of the political phase of his life begun, along with the diary, in 1857. Here, in language and tone the old Virginian might or might never have intended to come into full view, is the most recognizable Edmund Ruffin. Reclusive and temperamental, relying entirely upon the daily newspapers for information, Ruffin spent
the last two years of his life in his own private world keeping a daily account, as he put it, "of first impressions of public events" (p. xx).

The diary traces not simply the deterioration of the Confederate cause but also the deterioration of Edmund Ruffin. As the war dragged on, Ruffin grew weaker physically, financially, and psychologically. His beloved plantation Marlbourne was wrecked in the summer of 1864, and he spent these last years a refugee on a farm some distance from Richmond. His contempt for unfamiliar things—Jews, democracy, blacks, and, most profoundly, Yankees—thrusts through a fascinating narrative that presses relentlessly to its carefully planned, suicidal conclusion, reenacting in remarkable detail the 1840 self-destruction of his closest friend and mentor, Thomas Cocke. At the same time, beneath the old man’s surface bluster there continues to reside a keen intelligence (reflected in an extended analysis of Tocqueville) and deep love of family and home.

Scarborough’s impressive achievement joins a collection of recent and provocative works that leads to an inescapable conclusion: a new biography of Edmund Ruffin is very much needed. Whoever that biographer might be will find in the present works a significant contribution to current and future understanding.

That future biographer will be challenged to build upon, and to revise, the work of earlier generations. Several new themes ought to emerge in such a study. One is Ruffin-the-environmentalist. It is quite clear that in his quest to restore the exhausted soil of his native state, and in his recognition of the political dimensions of agricultural reform, Ruffin recognized the need to preserve and pass on to posterity a love of the land and a determination to transmit it, undiminished, to succeeding generations. A second is Ruffin-the-intellectual, a man well-read and well-connected to the larger world of nineteenth-century thought.

A third, and most important, is Ruffin-the-American. It is impossible to read these volumes and retain the image of Ruffin as typical southerner, whatever that might mean. Here is a self-made man, active, energetic, insecure, probingly introspective, politically naive. These are the qualities of human beings in general. Although they tell us little about what may have made the Old South distinctive, they tell us much about the incompleteness of nineteenth-century America and hence the similarities among nineteenth-century Americans. One need not require a subject to be "representative" or "typical" to justify its study. To explore Edmund Ruffin is to examine a life that is intrinsically interesting. From it, and from similar studies now underway or recently completed, will emerge not only a new understanding of long misunderstood Americans but also a new appreciation for the ways in which biography can illuminate central historical themes.

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