



## *Defining Duty in the Civil War: Personal Choice, Popular Culture, and the Union Home Front* by J. Matthew Gallman.

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In *Defining Duty in the Civil War*, historian J. Matthew Gallman<sup>1</sup> (Univ. of Florida) contends that the men and women of the North did not know what was expected of them as they entered a conflict far greater than Americans had ever experienced. They sought guidance in popular print culture, including magazines, novels, poems, and cartoons:

Much as middle-class northerners had grown accustomed to turning to advice manuals, travel guides, sermons, political pamphlets, and all sorts of prescriptive literature in navigating the many challenges of an antebellum world in flux, these wartime citizens found guidance and solace in printed materials. They constructed a new wartime cultural world out of a combination of very familiar literary forms, often recast to meet the demands of war, and a variety of new forms of wartime writing (recruiting broadsides, patriotic envelopes, satirized caricatures) that spoke directly to the nation's new challenges. (253)

The book comprises an introduction, seven chapters, and a conclusion. Gallman devotes the introduction to an overview of the book, but also to overcoming the skepticism of readers that magazines and other literary forms aimed primarily at the urban middle class mostly in New York, Philadelphia, and Boston could have had a profound effect on a largely rural northern population. He stresses that the unprecedented scale of the war in American history left people of the North in need of advice and reassurance. Since most men of military age in the North did not join the army, he asks what those who did not serve saw as their civic responsibilities and duties in a time of civil war.

Gallman demonstrates that articles in magazines like *Vanity Fair* were reprinted in northern newspapers and that ads for eastern magazines appeared in midwestern newspapers. That is, the magazine material he uses as a major source had a wide distribution both in and far beyond the northeast. Though, he admits, immigrants and blacks were rarely addressed in this literature, Gallman believes it strongly influenced the native-born white population, except for the small anti-war Copperhead faction of the Democratic party. In short, popular literature, while not homogeneous, conveyed “a set of coherent cultural messages that were absorbed by a large portion of northern society” (20).

Chapter 1, “Striped Pants and Empty Heads,” focuses on cartoonish characters whose behavior was outrageously inappropriate in wartime. Reporters leaving for the front were mocked for silliness born of ignorance of the seriousness of war. The “swell,” another well established character both on the stage and in print, was an urban dandy preoccupied with clothing fashions, moustaches, and other grooming fads. He was a party animal, blithely and comically unaware of the war until the draft, which he assiduously attempted to avoid. The similarly obtuse “silly” woman figure was preoccupied with socializing and husband hunting. Gallman contends that consumers of popular literature felt reassured that “they were nowhere near as unaware as these absurd characters” (63). The home-front populace inferred that the duty “of the good citizen was to be informed and aware” (64) about the war and

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1. His many previous books include *Mastering Wartime: A Social History of Philadelphia during the Civil War* (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 1990) and *The North Fights the Civil War: The Home Front* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1994).

related issues. Here and throughout the book, numerous illustrations—cartoons, valentines, lithographs, and facsimiles of poems, songs, and book covers—wonderfully enhance Gallman’s text.

Chapter 2, “Don’t You Think It Is Time You Took Off That Uniform?” examines publications criticizing “cynical commission seekers [who] sought to exploit the national crisis for their own glory” (90) rather than faithfully serving the nation. Gallman describes the problem of faux soldiers in cities, men who wore uniforms but were not in the army. Such individuals coveted the social benefits of military service without actually serving. Another urban phenomenon was the “shoulder straps,” actual army officers who managed to attend social events and urban watering holes rather than being with the men they were supposed to be commanding. Popular literature held up all these types to the scorn of patriotic citizens.

Chapter 3, “Your Diamonds May Flash Gaily, But There’s Blood on Them,” explores the changing semantics of the word “shoddy” during the war. At first it was applied to inferior cloth sold to the government; then to any substandard item provided by a government contractor; and then to businessmen who cheated the government by selling it such goods. Next, the word came to signify the uncouth, uneducated, ill-mannered nouveaux riches who aped the tastes of old-wealth families. This “shoddy aristocracy” was often portrayed as composed of Irish immigrants. In sum, “shoddy” was associated with various qualities and behaviors to be avoided and condemned by good citizens.

Taken together, chapters 1–3 succeed in showing “how northern popular culture created extreme stereotypes of unacceptable wartime behavior as a way of marking out for ordinary civilians where they should not stray from their essential wartime duties, while also offering advice on who should be scorned” (121).

The rest of the book concerns the question of what citizens, male and female, white and black, owed to their country. Chapters 4, “Our Duty,” and 5, “No Man of Honor Shall Shrink from Running His Chance,” which discuss the civic duties of white males, constitute the volume’s most valuable contribution to understanding the Civil War. Most studies of patriotic motivation draw on the correspondence of soldiers in the Union army. By examining short stories and novels featuring characters who did or did not serve, Gallman reveals the motivations of a much broader gamut of the male population. He concludes that avoiding military service was acceptable in the case of men who strongly supported the war effort but whose heartfelt sense of conflicting responsibilities to family and nation made them unwilling or unable to enlist. Once conscription began, however, a citizen was expected to take his chances in the draft. If familial or other obligations prevented him from serving, hiring a substitute or paying a commutation fee entailed no dishonor. Evading the draft dishonestly, fleeing to Canada, and acting out of cowardice were, of course, intolerable in any citizen.

In chapter 6, “The Woman Hides Her Trembling Fear,” Gallman describes a genre of prescriptive literature for Unionist women that closely resembled prewar Victorian writings on proper female conduct in general. While some patriotic women volunteered to work with aid societies or as nurses, Gallman finds that popular literature did not require them to prove their commitment to the cause by some action. As with the loyal man, it was enough simply to espouse the Union cause. The patriotic woman was, however, expected to encourage the men in her life to serve, if their circumstances allowed, and to shed no tears until they had left for the front.

Gallman devotes chapter 7, “Will They Fight? Should They Fight?” to the North’s tiny black population (less than 2 percent of the total) in order to make informative contrasts with northern whites and to clarify black conceptions of citizenship. To understand the black response, the author resorts to abolitionist publications because mainstream popular literature rarely included black characters. He discovers that blacks thought of themselves in relation to the state both as members of a group and as individuals, while whites thought only of their individual relationship with the state. Once blacks be-

gan to be allowed to enlist in the Army in 1862–63, northern blacks debated whether they owed any allegiance to a government that denied them so many basic rights and freedoms both as individuals and as a group. Eventually, most blacks decided that, given the issues at stake, they must fight even for a nation that did not treat them as equals.

Throughout the book, Gallman skillfully deploys his literary and visual source materials and clearly presents his interpretations. In terms of documentation, his endnotes are thorough and informative, and his bibliography quite useful. But serious scholars will note that many groups and events in various parts of the North are absent from the literary sources Gallman analyzes. Blacks and immigrants are largely missing, as are Democrats who opposed the war and radical Republicans who saw it as a crusade against slavery. Very few rural or small-town characters appear in the sources discussed. (A single endnote suggests that the popular literature included some stories set in the countryside.) And, too, one would not guess from the literature considered here that mobs were destroying dozens of newspapers across the North, that civilians were being tried in military courts, that three Indiana men were sentenced to death for treason, that draft enrollment officers were attacked and even murdered, that political opposition to the war was so strong at times in 1864 that Lincoln thought he would not be reelected, and that in places in the Midwest the major parties were organizing militias and preparing for war.

Some might also question the book's central assumption—that many people in the North, being unsure how to react to the war, found instruction in mainstream literary sources. It is hard to credit that there was widespread uncertainty among the people of the North, when hundreds of thousands of them (like their counterparts in the South) volunteered even before a draft existed or popular culture had had time to shape their attitudes. And what of the thousands of extant letters by soldiers and their families that refer patriotically to “making a sacrifice on the altar of their country”? Does it make sense to think that magazine articles had more influence on a person's views and beliefs than did his family, peers, church, or political party?

Finally, Gallman notes that popular magazines quickly changed their orientation to a northern audience after they lost their southern readers to secession. One is left wondering whether novels and magazines molded northern opinion or merely reflected what the urban middle class already believed and wanted to hear? In a sense, this is a moot question; either way, the literature provides insights into the political perspectives of at least a portion of the northern public. Even if that portion was not as broad as Gallman believes, his work does provide valuable insights into the attitudes of a very influential segment of the northern urban middle class. In addition, his conclusions about white male and female citizens' sense of obligation to the state are quite intriguing and persuasive; they also make his analysis relevant to northern people outside the affluent middle class of the major northern cities.

Readers interested in the shaping of public opinion during the Civil War will learn much from *Defining Duty in the Civil War*.