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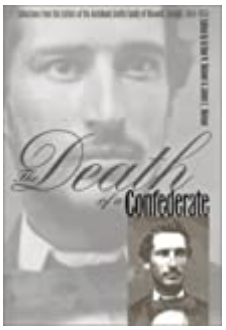
Arthur N. Skinner, James L. Skinner, eds. *The Death of a Confederate: Selections from the Letters of the Archibald Smith Family of Roswell, Georgia, 1864-1956.* Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996. xlviii + 296 pp. $34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8203-1844-8.



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On July 7, 1865, Private William Seagrove Smith of the 18th Battalion Georgia Infantry died of dysentery in Raleigh, North Carolina. Nothing about Smith's life or death was singularly notable. But this ordinary life left behind it a fascinating record. The letters of William and the rest of the Smith family shed light on many of the issues which dominate study of the Civil War today–slavery and race, Confederate nationalism, and wartime gender roles. For this reason, this newly edited collection is an important contribution to the field.

The letters in this collection span nearly a century, beginning in 1864 and ending in 1956. Most of the correspondence, however, is concentrated between early 1864 and mid-1865. The Smith family moved to north Georgia from the coast in the 1830s and became one of the founding families of the textile town of Roswell. The patriarch, Archibald Smith, Sr., and his wife, Anne McGill Smith, were devout Presbyterians who at one point operated a plantation of hundreds of acres with the help of twenty-one slaves. The Smiths were also minor capitalists, investing heavily in Roswell's textile mills. They had four children: Elizabeth, William, Helen, and Archie. The two sons were to become the focus of the family's concerns after Fort Sumter. William, the eldest, enlisted in the Confederate forces as a telegrapher in 1861, while eighteen-year-old Archie enrolled in the Georgia Military Institute (GMI) the following year. There, Archie's parents hoped he could be kept out of harm's way without staining his martial honor.

By the spring of 1864, Sherman's advance toward Atlanta endangered the Smith civilians. Like many southerners, they became refugees, as they packed their belongings and slaves and fled to Valdosta on the Georgia-Florida border. The Smiths would not see their home again until after the war. Archibald Sr., Anne, and their two daughters spent their months in exile worrying about the fate of the two boys. Ironically, Archie, whom the family had tried to keep out of active service, was swept up into combat when Georgia's Governor Joseph E. Brown ordered up the GMI cadets in defense of Atlanta and Savannah. After the latter city fell in December 1864, the brothers separated. Archie went home on furlough, while William joined the long Confederate retreat through the Carolinas. William fell ill in March, and, too ill to return home, was taken in by a Raleigh family. He died that summer, without having seen parents or siblings. The surviving Smiths spent the rest of their lives coming to terms with William's death.

The Smiths were a perceptive family, and their writings are a valuable source on the southern homefront. Especially illuminating is the way in which the correspondence fleshes out the complex intersection of slav-

ery, race, war, and emancipation in the Deep South. Archibald Smith had once owned slaves, but during the 1830s he "was infected with abolition ideas and designed to free his Negroes" (p. xxxviii). Smith spent years educating his slaves in order to "prepare" them for freedom, and finally manumitted most of them by 1860. During the war, the boys rarely ended a letter without a friendly "tell all the servants howdye for me" (p. 50), evincing the paternalistic assumptions of the white master. But the war strained these ties for those who remained at home. For the Smith women, especially, the war and emancipation conjured up the worst nightmares of racial conflict. Anne McGill Smith vented her increasing racial bitterness as events eroded her once-privileged position as plantation mistress. In letters to her sons, Anne railed against the "diabolical deeds" of emancipated slaves (p. 13). She worried about rumored slave uprisings and expressed satisfaction at the execution of a number of black insurrectionists. The other Smith women joined in this racist chorus, while castigating the servants for their laziness. "They do very little planting. They never make their own feed," one wrote (p. 170).

The Smith women voiced concerns about a wide range of topics, and, indeed, their letters are undoubtedly the most interesting in the collection. Anne and her daughters were far from passive or submissive. They were intensely aware of politcs–national, sectional, and local. The women argued with William and Archie through the mails about Confederate troop dispositions, command arrangements, and strategy. They took avid interest in the 1864 presidential election in the North, and showed acute understanding of the Union's political factions (for example, Anne accurately discerned the difference between the Democratic "peace platform" and the less dovish views of the party's nominee, George McClellan). State politics were also a source of vital interest for the Smith ladies, who wrote often of their disdain for "Gov. Brown and the Crackers," whom they thought traitors for opposing the Confederate conscription act. Anne and her daughters maintained strident martial rhetoric throughout the conflict–"war is the only way to bring peace ... war is our duty and our salvation," Elizabeth wrote in 1864. There is little evidence here of the peace sentiments scholars often attribute to southern womanhood.

These letters also inform the historiographical debate over the depth and durability of Confederate nationalism. Some scholars hold that nationalism was too weak in the South to sustain the war, while others claim that the Davis government successfully forged a strong sense of nationhood. Defenders of neither position will find unqualified support in this collection, for the Smith letters illustrate the complex, variegated, and inconsistent nature of southern loyalties. All of the Smiths wrote of their devotion to the Confederacy and Jefferson Davis, and their hatred for those they deemed disloyal to the South. They were particularly concerned about the perceived treason of their fellow Georgians, and advocated harsh punishment for dissenters. As Elizabeth wrote in 1864, "I do wish every [dissenter] could be sent into the army or north of the Mason & Dixon, & be hung if they were ever south of it" (p. 118).

And yet some of the actions and statements of the Smith family call into question their committment to the Confederate cause. While they supported military conscription in the abstract, Archiblad and Anne put every effort into helping their youngest son avoid the draft. And even though the Smith women lambasted Governor Brown for defying Richmond's conscription edicts, they cynically rejoiced that Brown's "pets" at GMI, including Archie, were protected from Confederate service. In short, these letters help to confirm that loyalty was fluid and conditional in the wartime South, and never static.

This skillfully edited collection has much to offer scholars of the period. Each chapter is preceded by a thorough introduction and succeeded by good explanatory footnotes. The editors made a good decision to include some postwar letters, which provide a revealing coda to the story. In these later writings, William's family and descendents wrestle with the tragedy of his death. Here again, the Smith women take the lead by keeping William's memory alive and serving the important postwar roles of the suffering female survivors with dignity. The final letters, written in the 1950s, illustrate that how the Civil War was remembered was almost as significant as its physical consequences. The major flaw in the collection is the somewhat too vigorous editing, which sometimes excludes interesting material. The editors quote passages from fascinating letters that were written before 1864 in the introduction. One wonders if they might have broadened the range of the work to include the full text of these earlier letters, possibly leading to a fuller explanation of Archibald's alleged "abolition ideas," for example. In general, however, this is a significant contribution to the history of Georgia, the South, and the Civil War.

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