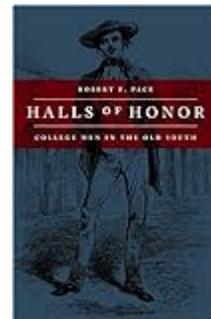




**Robert F. Pace.** *Halls of Honor: College Men in the Old South.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004. xii + 152 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-2982-1.



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## **Southern Honor and the Adolescent College Male: More than Dueling and Drinking**

In this slender, easygoing volume, Robert Pace seeks “to understand the *culture* of being a college student in the Old South” (p. 4). While recent students of southern culture have examined nearly all aspects of antebellum male life and masculinity, Pace notes that there has been no in-depth treatment of this subject since E. Merton Coulter’s *College Life in the Old South*, originally published in 1928. *Halls of Honor*, then, is a work that addresses an important but neglected topic in the history of southern white manhood. As the author states, he does not intend the book to be a comprehensive history of college life in the Old South. Rather, Pace focuses on the values, ideas, and ethics that shaped white men’s understanding of themselves and their behavior as they made the transition from adolescence to adulthood within the institutional structure and atmosphere of antebellum colleges.

As Pace describes it, the culture of college students “was created through a collision of two major forces: the southern code of honor and natural adolescent development” (p. 4). Following generally the concept of honor detailed by Bertram Wyatt-Brown and others in the past

two decades, Pace emphasizes—among various aspects of the rambling ethic—the importance placed on appearance.[1] In the tension between often strict rules of behavior that governed men’s public comportment and the sometimes childish actions and behavior of young adults lay the culture of southern college life. Thus, as he recounts the experiences and attitudes of “these young men of the South”—a frequently repeated phrase—Pace tries to place them within the context of southern honor.

Throughout their college lives, Pace argues, students faced the threat of shame from “the faculty, the curriculum, and the teaching methods” (p. 28). Examined in the classroom, men “lived under the constant threat that ... professors might bring them public shame in front of their peers” (p. 17). The academic challenges that students faced every day opened them up to being “unmasked,” revealed as something less than they seemed to be. Pace’s discussion of honor and academic life is the most engaging and unique section of *Halls of Honor*. He reveals how the students’ actions and attitudes reflected a mixture of adolescent immaturity with an evolving sense of their own manhood and what being a “man of honor”

entailed. The college experience had such high stakes for young southern men, Pace concludes, that graduation marked their moment of “victory” in the “honor wars.” “Graduates would never again have to be in a situation in which, on such a constant basis, they would be in danger of losing face—of being humiliated before their peers” (p. 32). This sort of conclusion challenges the work of most previous students of southern honor, who contend that no single triumph ever provided such security in the uncertain world of honor and masculinity because both required constant reaffirmation. Pace also does not elaborate on how these men’s formal education fit within southern gender and class expectations, in which too much schooling, for instance, could be viewed as effeminate. Rather than the serious scholar, many historians contend, southern gentlemen preferred a sort of casual (even if carefully styled) indifference to academic success. Still, Pace’s evidence and conclusions should make historians reconsider the place of college education within the complex definition of southern male identity.

Two chapters address some of the daily routine of college life: living arrangements; spending habits; leisure and amusements; dining and health care; relationships with fellow students and women. While these sections are filled with interesting anecdotes, most readers likely will find the conclusions predictable. Pace concludes that southern college students were often homesick during their first year but later came to enjoy newfound freedom; complained frequently about housing arrangements; found some roommates annoying; disliked noise when trying to study; schemed to save money on housing, eating, and heating expenses; struggled to find medical care when ill; thought a lot about sex; and often spent too much money on clothes, prompting urgent pleas to their parents for more support. Students also liked to drink, fish, hunt, chew tobacco, write letters home, and play pranks on fellow students. Pace sometimes struggles to fit these sorts of activities and concerns into his overall thesis. Typically, each paragraph relates an interesting or colorful anecdote from one of the students: for example, a Fourth of July celebration with flaming cotton

balls; an Independence-day outing which included naked swimming; winter ice skating or a snowball fight (pp. 58-59).

Pace’s analysis is more sharp-edged when he considers literary and debating societies, infractions of college rules—or the students’ perception of wrongly enforced rules—pranks, and duels. Particularly in the area of pranks, Pace describes how young college students sometimes moved uneasily between adolescent and adult, honor-bound behavior. “Although [some] of these incidents may seem harmless, they reflected the existence of a student peer-developed honor ethic” (p. 83). A final chapter traces students and colleges during the Civil War.

*Halls of Honor* presents a wealth of interesting information about college life in the Old South. Pace’s assertion that students created their own “student peer-developed honor ethic” adds a new element to the already complicated definition of the elusive code. Pace relies primarily on the private letters and published memoirs of students and some faculty. There is considerable variety in the type of institutions represented, although several collections carry a lot of weight—the ubiquitous Robert Dabney of Hampden-Sidney appears on more than one-fifth of the pages. Also, there is little analysis of change over the course of the antebellum years. Finally, Pace’s version of honor tends to push aside variations and subtleties within the ethic: religion, for instance. Despite these questions, however, the book should provoke discussion and further inquiry into this neglected topic. Robert Pace has done southern historians a service by collecting so much useful evidence about college life in the Old South, and he has challenged historians to address the place of formal education within the region’s code of honor and definition of masculinity.

#### Note

[1]. Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982).

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