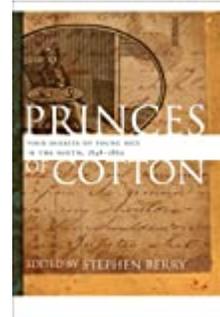




Stephen Berry. *Princes of Cotton: Four Diaries of Young Men in the South, 1848-1860.* Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007. xiv + 554 pp. \$44.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8203-2884-3.



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Four Young Southern Men Reveal All

Stephen Berry has transcribed and annotated the diaries of four young Southern men from 1848 to 1860 to compare what they reveal about regional masculinity during the years immediately preceding the Civil War. Berry begins the work by providing a brief introduction to the backgrounds of these largely obscure young men, but most of the book consists of their diaries.

Seventeen-year-old Harry St. John Dixon was the youngest of the four diarists when he began recording his daily experiences on January 1, 1860. Harry's parents owned considerable land and slaves near Greenville, Mississippi. Dixon's diary focuses on a variety of topics, particularly his friendships with other boys, his relations with young women and, most notably, his preparations to attend the University of Virginia. Although it covers the shortest period of the four diaries, Dixon's 180-page account actually is the longest in the book.

Henry Hughes, who began his diary at age eighteen on January 1, 1848, covered the most time of any of the diarists—about five years and five months. However, because he generally wrote entries only on Sundays, his diary runs just under 100 pages. Hughes lived much of this

time in New Orleans, where he became a lawyer, as well as Port Gibson, Mississippi, where his mother resided. Most of this diary records what Hughes was reading and particularly his rather bold future aspirations.

John Albert Feaster Coleman of Feasterville, South Carolina, was twenty-years-old when he began his diary on November 1, 1848. The diary lasted until the end of 1851, but his generally very short daily entries compared to those of the other diarists kept the log to only a bit more than 100 pages. These short daily entries, generally consisting of only one to three sentences, record his social activities, but especially highlight the various agricultural tasks that took up so much of his time.

The last diarist, Henry Craft, was twenty-four-years-old on April 8, 1848, when he began his diary. Most of the diary centers on Craft's depression which resulted from the death of his fiancée, Lucy Hull, who became ill and died months before he began the diary. Indeed, the diary represents what Berry terms a "memorial" to the anniversaries that marked the couple's relationship, such as when they first met and when he proposed to her. While Craft was a resident of Holly Springs, Mississippi,

the diary begins in Princeton, New Jersey, where he relocated to attend law school and escape reminders of Lucy. However, because his father wanted him to come back to Mississippi, much of the 78-page diary, which covers a bit more than one year, records Henry's continual exposure to these painful reminders while in Mississippi.

These four young Southerners, as Berry notes in the book's epilogue, "despite similarities of rank and region â were very different men" (p. 505). However, it should be emphasized that Berry leaves it largely to the reader to identify these differences. The decision to place the burden of analysis on the reader is both a plus and a minus of the work. It is a plus because it allows the reader to reach his or her own judgments about the diarists largely by reading their own words. Still, after reading about 500 pages of diaries many readers will wonder what the person who knows these four individuals best—the editor of their diaries—thinks about them and believes their accounts reveal about Southern masculinity.

While this reader largely agrees with what little Berry reveals about his opinions about these young men, there are some issues that Berry might have developed further. For example, the three diarists whose fathers were still alive clearly were influenced by them, as they often commented on how their fathers felt about their decisions. Likewise, the sole exception, Henry Hughes, surely would have benefited from the presence of a father who might have given him more of an emotional compass. Instead, quite simply, Henry Hughes had become something of the "tortured megalomaniac, a dictator in training" according to Berry (p. 505). Another issue that Berry might have compared more directly was the diarists' views on education. Berry largely ignores

how Harry's diary conveys his growing love of learning for the sake of learning. By contrast, Henry Hughes seems to have viewed learning largely as a means to gain personal power and control—indeed, world domination. The perspectives on education and learning of John Albert Feaster Coleman and Henry Craft fall somewhere between the two extremes, though surely they closer to Harry St. John's than to Henry Hughes's. Another point of comparison between the diarists is their writing style. While Berry skillfully uses annotations to explain the context of the words and phrases these diarists recorded, he devotes little attention to their writing style. This shortcoming is most evident in the case of Henry Craft. Berry is absolutely correct in noting how Craft continuously conveys his "cycle of grief and self-loathing" (p. 505), but he ignores Craft's skill as a writer. For example, after observing on June 27, 1848, that there was "nothing in the day's history worth recording," Craft added, "Time's stream flow on with a most smooth & even current for most of our downward journey and each day is like the last, and also the type of the next. Were the individual history of the race [written] twould be a most tame and monotonous recital. We live on unconsciously from month to month & then we all die, passing from childhood to youth, from youth to hoary age, scarcely observing the steps on the transition" (pp. 453-454). Though Craft's depression is quite evident, he clearly was very skilled at conveying it.

An editor of original sources always faces a difficult task even when it involves just a single historical figure, let alone four different ones. This book deserves credit for bringing these four diaries to a much larger audience of readers who otherwise could only use them in the archives where they are preserved.

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