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Thomas E. Buckley; S.J. *The Great Catastrophe of My Life: Divorce in the Old Dominion.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002. xi + 346 pp. $70.00 (library), ISBN 978-0-8078-2712-3; $25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-5380-1.

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Exploration of a Southern Society

Thomas E. Buckley has written a book in which there is something for almost everyone. Those interested in gender, religion, class, social structures and relationships, cultural values, racial issues, and political and economic considerations during the period from the American Revolution to the Civil War will find this book helpful. By examining over five hundred divorce petitions submitted to the Virginia Assembly from 1786 to 1851, Buckley has produced an interesting description and analysis that brings together many topics that often receive separate treatment by historians.

According to Buckley, most southern men and women viewed marriage as an essential element of personal happiness, identity, and societal stability, and, therefore, considered divorce to be a personal, familial, and social disaster. It brought personal pain, stress, and upheaval to families, and threatened the South's social structure. In making this argument, Buckley divides the book into three sections relating to the contexts, causes, and consequences of divorce, and supplements these with a brief, but helpful appendix that offers statistical analyses of the divorce petitions. The book is well-documented with both primary and secondary sources, while the divorce petitions are supplemented with newspaper accounts, court and church records, and correspondence and reflection from spouses, family members, and friends. Buckley recognizes the hazards of using divorce petitions in historical analysis due to their subjective nature, but he also points out that virtually all primary sources, especially letters and diaries, must be used cautiously for the same reason. Furthermore, the public divorce process helped establish the veracity of the petitions' claims. The petitions also reflect the cultural values and beliefs of individuals from a variety of socio-economic positions and thereby present an opportunity for broad historical analysis.

The book's first section explores the political, legal, religious, and familial/communal settings in which divorces were played out. Throughout these chapters, Buckley demonstrates the struggle being played out in divorce cases between civic republicanism and individual autonomy. Originally, Virginia gave no judicial jurisdiction for granting divorces. Although the General Assembly held this power, it rarely allowed divorces, and did not grant the first one until the beginning of the nineteenth century. In spite of this low rate of approval, Virginians continued to submit petitions. For men, the process, even when unsuccessful, helped maintain or restore their social standing within their local communities. Women, however, remained legally bound to their husbands when their petitions were denied. Most legislators, reflecting public sentiment based originally on Anglican cultural values and later on evangelical Protestantism, regarded marriage as a sacred institution necessary to the stability of a Christian society. Seeking to safeguard one of society's foundations, they placed societal welfare over that of the individual, and usually refused to grant divorces. This subordination of private interests to the greater communal good exemplified civic republicanism. Legislators also did not want to intrude

on the prerogative of the male to control his household. Compatible with a slaveholding, hierarchical southern society, this conservative ideology stood against the liberal emphasis on the autonomy of the individual. Most Virginians during the 1840s, however, increasingly rejected the common good argument. As a result, the Assembly began granting more divorces. In reaction to this, legislative divorce was ended in 1851 with the adoption of a new state constitution. The termination of legislative divorce did not reflect a liberalizing of divorce laws because its replacement, the courts, were bound by stricter guidelines. Yet Virginians essentially circumvented these laws on the local level. While family and friends usually reinforced the values of male domination and the sanctity of marriage, local communities often asserted individual freedom and autonomy by privileging the injured spouse even when the Assembly denied a request for divorce. In essence, these communities exercised ultimate control over marriage and social relationships.

Buckley takes up the most common causes of divorce in the second section: interracial sex, male violence, and female infidelity. Interracial sex, which occurred in all social classes, represented a challenge to the foundational values of a white society when an African-American male successfully gained the affections of a white woman. In spite of the Assembly's resistance to grant divorces, interracial sex became the most common reason for giving a husband a divorce from his wife (although it was not automatic). Husbands who engaged in interracial sex, however, usually were tolerated as long as their actions did not challenge the hierarchical foundations of a slave society. Not surprisingly, the views of African Americans are not reflected in the divorce petitions, and those who participated in these relationships did so at great risk to themselves. Infidelity on the part of the woman, regardless of her paramour's race, became the most common grounds given by the husband requesting a divorce. The vast majority of men looked to marriage for personal happiness, whether it was to fulfill emotional and sexual needs or to have important domestic functions performed. Men, therefore, presented wives' infidelity as destroying their idyllic union. While women faced economic disaster from a divorce, men confronted domestic disaster.

Whereas husbands found most success when they proved their wives were involved in interracial sex, wives who could prove extensive physical abuse most often prevailed. Yet the abuse had to be extreme and prolonged because Virginian society accepted that violence was an acceptable means for controlling a wife, and the Assembly was reluctant to impinge on the male prerogative to rule his household. Nonetheless, Virginians deemed excessive violence a threat to the stability of society. Lawyers representing women typically used social characterizations and expectations of wives as weak, dependent, and helpless individuals to argue their cases. Depicting a woman in this manner magnified the brutality of the husband's violence and often gained their client a positive verdict.

The book's final section illustrates the disastrous consequences that divorce brought to men and women by detailing the experience of Sally McDowell Thomas, wife of Frank Thomas, governor of Maryland, and daughter of James McDowell, governor of Virginia. Divorce destroyed the identities of men and women, and subjected them to social stigma and persecution. The public and cumbersome process involved in obtaining a divorce took its toll personally and economically, as well as created great stress among the spouses' families and communities. This chapter admirably demonstrates the results of divorce within elite circles, but comparing and contrasting it with a similar case emanating from the lower classes would deepen our understanding of some of the finer nuances of divorce's impact, as well as perhaps the impact of class on divorce. Such a case likely would not have been as well documented as the Thomases', but this in itself might suggest something of the impact of divorce among the various classes. While Buckley demonstrates throughout the book that reasons leading to requests for divorce cut across social classes, one wonders if the consequences of divorce were identical for all classes. Undoubtedly they were similar, but further investigation into the specific ramifications might lead to further insights regarding the inter-relationship of marriage, divorce, class, and gender.

The strength of Buckley's book lies in its breadth. He brings together several vantage points–gender, religion, class, social structures and relationships, cultural values, racial issues, and political and economic considerations–and enables the reader to see these factors interacting with one another. While the book is chiefly concerned with the disastrous consequences brought about by divorce, it contextualizes this experience within the diversities and complexities of southern societies. He demonstrates that societal values and expressions of southern culture were contested from a variety of perspectives. The conflicts reflected in the divorce petitions were not monolithic; the issues were not simply racial or gender or religious or class issues. They were a combination of these and other factors. The book presents southern men

and women attempting to manage and integrate the conflicting demands arising from these factors.

A book of this breadth is understandably unable to analyze these factors in great detail. Some may find this dissatisfying, but it does not detract from the book's contributions. A more direct analysis of these perspectives and their meaning for understanding southern society would have been helpful. This occurs to some extent in the last chapter regarding Sally McDowell Thomas's divorce, but its contribution mainly enhances our understanding of Virginia's upper class. At times, Buckley makes tantalizing assessments. For instance, when discussing divorce petitions involving interracial sex, he concludes that they "suggest an openness in interracial sexual relationships and a degree of white acceptance of sex across the color line that challenges historical generalizations and traditional stereotypes of both free blacks and the slaveholding society of the early-nineteenth-century South." He goes on to assert, "these conclusions in turn reinforce the evidence from the divorce petitions that interracial sexual liaisons involved white women from every class in society and were far more common and more tolerated, particularly in local communities, than historians until recently have noticed" (p. 151). While Buckley concludes that these instances of interracial sex and their treatment in the divorce proceedings actually demonstrate the resilience of antebellum values, insights like these offer the opportunity to explore the dynamics of race, gender, and class within the South's construction of one of its central institutions, the home, and in light of the struggle for control between local communities and the broader culture. The pursuit of these connections would have further revealed the meaning and significance of divorce. Nonetheless, Buckley has certainly illuminated the trauma associated with divorce, as well as provided useful data and perspectives that ought to stimulate further contemplation and understanding of southern societies.

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