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The Civil War and Southern Honor Culture:

William G. Brownlow, Southern Unionists, and the “God-forsaken Scoundrels” of Secession

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History Senior Capstone

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If these God-forsaken scoundrels and hell-deserving assassins want satisfaction out of me for what I have said about them,- and that has been no little,-they can find me on these streets every day of my life but Sunday. I am at all times prepared to give them satisfaction. I take back nothing I have ever said against the corrupt and unprincipled villains, but reiterate all, cast it in their dastardly faces, and hurl down their lying throats their own infamous calumnies.¹

This quote comes from the May 25th, 1861 edition of the *Knoxville Whig*. The *Whig* was one of the most popular and influential newspapers in mid-nineteenth century Tennessee. The publisher of this paper was a journalist with a massive following of loyal subscribers, an outspoken social and political thinker, a strict adherent to Southern honor culture, and the future governor of Tennessee, William Gannaway Brownlow. This edition of the *Whig* was published at an integral time in the secession saga in Tennessee, just two weeks before the state took its second vote on secession, which resulted in Tennessee becoming the last state to join the Confederacy.

The culture of honor in the nineteenth century South was the North Star by which any good southern gentleman, Brownlow among them, would orient his life. Honor consisted of an internal sense of self-worth, reputation of integrity and strength, and concern for family and name.² In addition to how one views himself and how his community sees him, it is integral that the honorable man defends himself against any perceived slight in the proper way. Brownlow's language in this quote perfectly reflects the values of this culture in which he operated in. He emphasizes his integrity and honesty by "reiterating all" he has said against his opponents,

¹ William Brownlow. *Knoxville Whig*. (Knoxville, TN). May 25, 1861.

² Wyatt-Brown, Bertram. *Southern Honor : Ethics and Behavior in the Old South*. Cary: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 1982. Accessed November 18, 2022. ProQuest Ebook Central.

standing by his word. Further, he not only emphasizes the value of his own word, but even offers confrontation to satisfy his opponent's threats. The willingness to have a physical confrontation after sensing disrespect is absolutely integral to maintaining an honorable reputation. Another fundamental aspect of maintaining an honorable self-image is to paint your opponent as a dishonorable man. By describing his adversaries as "unprincipled", "lying", and "scoundrels", he characterizes them as men who are failing at living up to the standards of society in the same way he has. This puts him, in his own mind and in the minds of his contemporaries, at a higher social status.

One of the few values Brownlow adhered to with the same fervor as honor culture was his devotion to Unionism and hatred of secessionists and their ideology. Given the time, place, and style of language, it would be easy to assume that the "God-forsaken scoundrels" to which Brownlow is referring are Union supporters or the Federal government, but his statement was actually referring to the Knoxville secessionists with whom he had been in constant battle. With his strict adherence to the culture of honor in the South, it is not outlandish to assume that he would subscribe to other southern cultural mores and favor secession, but his ideology proves that secession and honor culture did not necessarily have to coexist. In fact, Brownlow would say that the two are mutually exclusive.

William Gannaway Brownlow was without a doubt the most vocal, prominent, and eccentric of the Tennessee Unionists. A writer, preacher, politician, journalist, and one of the most contentious figures of his time, Brownlow thrived on controversy and crafted a reputation based on well-crafted insults, intentionally inflammatory statements, and fiercely held opinions. Brownlow was never one to shy away from a fight. He constantly hurled vitriol toward his political and religious opponents, so much so that one of his fellow Methodist preachers dubbed

him a “good hater”.³ A religious revival in his late teens inspired Brownlow to pursue Methodist ministry, but after a few years riding the circuit in the Carolinas he inflamed so many Baptists he narrowly avoided a lynching and was forced to return to Tennessee.

After controversy ended his career in the church, Brownlow recognized his talent with words and decided to try his hand in journalism instead. He founded his first paper, the *Knoxville Whig*, in 1849, and quickly made a name for himself in the East Tennessee journalism scene.⁴ This would eventually become the most prominent Unionist paper in the region and propel Brownlow to national fame. At the time of its founding, though, the paper’s focus was on the Whig party, Methodism, temperance, and any other political or social cause Brownlow cared about. Through the *Whig*, he built a sizable base of supporters who admired his views and the powerful way he defended them. He was something of a local celebrity. As the issue of secession became more and more pressing, Brownlow quickly came out against secession in his trademark impassioned way. His fierce pro-Union beliefs earned him a seat at both East Tennessee Conventions and set him up to become one of the leading figures in East Tennessee Unionism and southern Unionism as a whole.

Despite his belief that a “secessionist gentleman” was an oxymoron, many who considered themselves such hurled constant attacks toward him and his family. Even as he faced a tirade of abuse and threats because of his beliefs, the “Fighting Parson” always stood firmly by his words in the *Whig*, which led him to face threats on his life many times. In October of 1861, he received a box in the mail containing a piece of cloth he was certain was infected with

³ Forrest Conklin. “ ‘Grape for the Rebel Masses and Hemp for Their Ladies’: Parson Brownlow’s Celebrated Tour of Northern Cities, 1862.” *The Journal of East Tennessee History* 77 (2005). Pg. 50.

⁴ E. Merton Coulter, "William G. Brownlow: Fighting Parson of the Southern Highlands" (1999). *Appalachian Echoes*. https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_pressappa/5. Pg. 46.

smallpox. He burned it on the lawn of his office and wrote a scathing editorial which said the act “entitles the cowardly villain who did it, to the honor of being picketed in the deepest gorge leading to hell!”⁵ Brownlow’s audacity was not limited to the pages of his paper, either. He was nothing if not bold. Even as Confederate troops began to occupy Knoxville he refused to bend to the new authority. He proudly displayed a Union flag from his front porch and was constantly harassed by soldiers and southern-sympathizing neighbors to take it down, to no avail. One unfortunate trespasser even came face-to-face with a revolver in the hands of Brownlow’s twenty-three-year-old daughter Susan for attempting to steal their flag.⁶ Once again, this act of defiance emphasizes his integrity and steadfastness, as well as the level of family loyalty that existed among the Brownlows that Susan would take to her family’s defense like this.

When the first wave of secession began in the Deep South in late 1860, the Upper South hesitated to join. When Tennessee held its first statewide vote on secession in February 1861, Unionism prevailed in all three regions.⁷ Other states, such as Virginia and North Carolina, held off on secession that winter as well. By spring, however, the final straw came when shots were fired, and the citizens of the Upper South faced the idea of drawing arms against their southern brothers. In June 1861, secession triumphed, and Tennessee became the last state to join the Confederacy. This wave of secessionist thought was not equally spread among the regions, though. While large majorities in Middle and West Tennessee supported succession, East

⁵ William G. Brownlow: *Fighting Parson of the Southern Highlands*, pg. 161.

⁶ William G. Brownlow: *Fighting Parson of the Southern Highlands*, pg. 159.

⁷ Charles L. Lufkin. “Secession and Coercion in Tennessee, the Spring of 1861.” *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 50, no. 2 (1991): 98–109. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42626935>. pg. 98.

Tennessee still favored the Union two-to-one and made it clear it did not approve of this “Wicked Rebellion”.⁸

Secession was a class-based issue in this region, and tensions grew because the two sides had so little in common with each other. Many East Tennesseans saw secession as a plot by the elites to exert control on the lower classes. The secessionist conflict exacerbated existing social, political, and class-based tensions and increased hostility both among citizens and between citizens and soldiers. The question of slavery, however, is one that was contentious even among Unionists.⁹ Many of the lower class felt that slavery impeded on the ability for poor whites to rise up in class, while others saw the personal benefits of maintaining white supremacy. Regardless of each Unionist’s personal beliefs on the matter, slavery was undeniably far less integral to East Tennessee’s economy than other areas of the South. This made the issues that caused the war much less personal to East Tennesseans. Even those who defended slavery were not personally affected by the system enough to want to go to war over it. Despite their shared devotion to the Union, it cannot be said that Tennessee Unionists held the same beliefs as their Northern counterparts. Most Tennesseans held a middle-ground opinion, wanting to stay in the Union but not to make any changes to life as it was before Lincoln’s election. Most East Tennessee Unionists were opposed to Lincoln, but they did not see his election as sufficient grounds to leave the Union.¹⁰

⁸ William Gannaway Brownlow, *Sketches of the Rise, Progress, and Decline of Secession* (Philadelphia: G.W. Childs, 1862). Pg 177.

⁹ Robert Tracy McKenzie. "Contesting Secession: Parson Brownlow and the Rhetoric of Proslavery Unionism, 1860–1861." *Civil War History* 48, no. 4 (2002): 294-312. [doi:10.1353/cwh.2002.0060](https://doi.org/10.1353/cwh.2002.0060).

¹⁰ Verton M. Queener. "East Tennessee Sentiment and the Secession Movement, November 1860-June, 1861." *The East Tennessee Historical Society’s Publications* 20 (1948): Pg. 63.

Though they had different reasoning from their Northern counterparts, their beliefs were just as firmly held. In late May, a group of men representing all but two counties in East Tennessee in Knoxville to voice their disapproval of separation from the Union in light of the upcoming June 8th vote on secession. At the time this convention was called, Tennessee had yet to secede, but recent the wave of secessionist beliefs sewed uncertainty about the outcome of the upcoming vote. Headed by U.S. Representative T.A.R. Nelson, many of the most prominent social, political, and religious figures in the region- including Brownlow- were called to serve as representatives of their respective counties. Andrew Johnson, a Union-loyal Senator from Tennessee and prominent figure at both the state and national level, gave a rousing pro-Union speech at the Convention, though he was not a delegate.¹¹ Though the room was full of many of East Tennessee's brightest political minds, the meeting did not have any actual governmental function beyond portraying a strong and united front in favor of remaining in the Union.

Less than two-weeks after the Convention concluded, much to the dismay of the East, Tennessee voted to join the Confederacy. Upset by this decision, a smaller group of the most devoted delegates who had served at the original Convention decided to meet again to strategize. Threats against these men prevented them from meeting in Knoxville, so the meeting was instead held in Greenville. This meeting featured fierce debate over possible plans of action, but in the end the resolutions passed by the Convention declared secession unconstitutional, asserted that East Tennessee would not participate in a civil war, and established a three-man commission which would go to Nashville and meet with state officials about the prospect of East Tennessee

¹¹ Charles F. Bryan. "A Gathering of Tories: The East Tennessee Convention of 1861." *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 39, no. 1 (1980): 27–48. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42626043>. Pg. 33.

becoming its own state. The convention put out a Declaration of Grievances, with the main objective written as follows:

We do therefore constitute and appoint O.P. Temple of Knox, John Netherland of Hawkins, and James P. McDowell of Greene, Commissioners, whose duty it shall be to prepare a Memorial, and cause the same to be presented at the General Assembly of Tennessee, now in session asking its consent that the counties composing East Tennessee... may form and erect a separate state.¹²

The delegates at the convention drew inspiration from the citizens of West Virginia, who had called a similar convention and, less than a week before the second East Tennessee Convention met, announced their separation from the state of Virginia for the same reason.¹³

The East Tennessee Convention did not have the results its delegates hoped for. The commissioners, Temple, Netherland, and McDowell went to Nashville to meet with the General Assembly and present their request for statehood and a committee of thirteen was formed by the legislature to consider this request. Unfortunately, most Eastern representatives were boycotting the legislature, leaving the committee in the hands of Middle and Western Tennesseans. Because of this, the three were never even given a formal response to their request, and the committee was simply disbanded, leaving East Tennesseans even more frustrated than before.¹⁴ The decisions made by the delegates, specifically the decision to ask for a formal separation from the state, emphasizes the level of Union loyalty that existed in this region and the unwavering sense of devotion its citizens felt toward their beliefs surrounding Union loyalty. Besides a very vocal

¹² *Proceedings of the E.T. Convention* (Greenville, TN, 1861). Pg. 24.

¹³ *A Gathering of Tories*, Pg. 40

¹⁴ *A Gathering of Tories*, Pg. 45.

minority, most East Tennesseans remained devoted Unionists. Knoxville, as the region's largest city, was the home of most secessionists, and even there they were far from the majority.

Secessionists were so few in number that when Confederate elections were held in November 1861, East Tennessee did not even bother to set up polling stations.¹⁵

After secession became the official policy of the Tennessee government, Governor Isham Harris enforced a policy of oppression against "loyalists".¹⁶ East Tennessee was an important strategic location for the Confederacy and the sheer number of loyal Unionists incited fear among political leaders in Nashville of a possible armed rebellion. Confederate military leaders sent troops to occupy East Tennessee in great numbers. Despite this oppression, East Tennessee continued to operate as if it was still part of the Union. Its representatives, including Senator Andrew Johnson and Representatives Horace Maynard, T.A.R. Nelson, and George W. Bridges, continued to go to Washington D.C., to take their seats in Congress.¹⁷ Johnson and Maynard were the only ones who stayed in Congress for an extended period, as Bridges term expired, and Nelson was arrested by Confederate authorities on his return to Washington. He was pardoned by Jefferson Davis under the terms that he submit to Confederate authority. The former President of the East Tennessee Convention was not as active in Union circles after his arrest and pardon.

The climax of the Unionist movement occurred in late summer of 1861 when Johnson, Maynard, and a prominent Rogersville pastor named William Carter met with high-ranking Union generals William Tecumseh Sherman and George Thomas to make plans for a Union occupation. Johnson and Maynard were the most influential political figures representing East Tennessee's agenda at the national scale, and their biggest goal was to bring about Union

¹⁵ William G. Brownlow: *Fighting Parson of the Southern Highlands*, pg. 165.

¹⁶ *A Gathering of Tories*, pg. 45.

¹⁷ William G. Brownlow: *Fighting Parson of the Southern Highlands*, pg. 162.

occupation for their home region. The ramifications of such an act cannot be overstated; two men, who were already considered traitors by the occupying governing body of their state for their participation in the U.S. Congress, took their treason a step further by engaging in an active conspiracy with the enemy government's highest military officials. Rev. Carter also put himself at great risk by becoming the leader of the plot they developed. It took a great deal of convincing to get Sherman on board, but after some convincing by his superior, Gen. Robert Anderson (of Ft. Sumter fame) he signed off on the plan.¹⁸

Rev. Carter went to Washington soon after getting approval from the Union Army to introduce President Lincoln, Secretary of State William Seward, and Commanding General of the Union army George McClellan to the plot. Meeting with the highest possible officials in the U.S. government was the highest possible act of treason against the Confederates, so it was crucial for Carter, Johnson, Maynard, and all those involved that the plot be successful. Lincoln was a major advocate for East Tennessee throughout his time in office and had long desired to free the region from Confederate oppression, so he saw this plan as a great opportunity to regain a loyal population and take control of a strategically located territory. He issued an order instructing Union troops to invade East Tennessee in conjunction with Carter's plan.¹⁹ Everyone present at this meeting signed off on the idea, leaving the details to Carter's discretion.

Carter planned to cripple Confederate transportation by burning the nine main railroad bridges that connected Tennessee to Georgia and Virginia. Then, Sherman and his troops, stationed in Kentucky, would enter the region through the Cumberland Gap and reassert control.

¹⁸ David Madden. "Unionist Resistance to Confederate Occupation: The Bridge Burners of East Tennessee." The East Tennessee Historical Society's Publications 52 & 53 (1980-81) Pg. 25.

¹⁹ Kelly, Dorothy, "[The Bridge Burnings and Union Uprising of 1861.](#)" Tennessee Ancestors 21, no. 2 (August 2005):123-129. Pg. 124.

The bridges would burn November 8th, 1861. Local men took an oath to the Union army and set the bridges ablaze.²⁰ Two Union officers accompanied Carter, Captains David Fry and William Cross, the only official members of the army involved with the bridge burnings. While they could not burn down all the bridges they planned to that night, many of the attacks succeeded. Much to the dismay of everyone involved, though, Sherman called off his end of the plan the day prior, citing a lack of men and resources.²¹ This left Carter and the bridge burners completely unaware that they did not have backup coming from the Union army, which put them in serious danger. Confederate officials put out warrants for the arrests of many of the known conspirators in the attacks, requiring many to hide or flee the region.²² An unfortunate group of five of these men, with no way to escape, were hanged for treason in the winter of 1861.²³ Authorities determined to punish those who took part in what they considered a treasonous activity, and by the end of November, at least seventy people sat in Knoxville jails with supposed connections to the plot, though the true number of conspirators remains unknown.²⁴

The bridge burning plot lay full of examples of Southern honor culture at play. The creators of this plan, such as Carter, Johnson, and Maynard, put their lives at risk in order to further a cause they felt important. Stepping back on one's word was not considered honorable behavior. Another very potent example of the differentiation of treatment for the honorable versus the dishonorable is the fate of the bridge burners who were captured by Confederates. They believed the bridge burners to be traitors, one of the most dishonorable crimes possible, which thus entitled them to horrific treatment. One of the most egregious examples of treatment

²⁰ Donahue Bible, "The Hangings of the Greene County Bridge Burners." Tennessee Ancestors 21, no. 2 (August 2005) Pg. 131.

²¹ Unionist Resistance to Confederate Occupation, pg. 29.

²² Unionist Resistance to Confederate Occupation, pg. 36.

²³ The Hangings of the Greene County Bridge Burners. Pg. 131.

²⁴ William G. Brownlow: Fighting Parson of the Southern Highlands, pg. 172

toward these men was the way their bodies were treated after execution. The corpses of many of these men were hung on a tree limb nearby the railroad to allow riders to beat them with their canes.²⁵ This post-mortem humiliation emphasizes the lack of respect Confederate sympathizers had for their Unionist enemies and the ease with which people of the Southern honor culture could commit violence and cruelty to those who they found dishonorable.

In understanding the role honor played in such a violent and divisive time in American history, it is essential to consider the way a “good southerner” would view those who were not “honorable” by his standards. While the code itself had strict rules for behavior, there was not always a great deal of agreement about what opinions and ideologies could be held by an honorable man. For Brownlow and his Unionist contemporaries, secessionists were dishonorable for turning away from their country. To the rest of the South, the federal government had been continuously dishonoring their way of life, so they must secede to maintain their own honor. Bertram Wyatt-Brown explored these concepts in his book *Honor and Violence in the Old South*, writing:

Above all else, white Southerners adhered to a moral code that may be summarized as a rule of honor...Since the earliest times, honor was inseparable from hierarchy and entitlement, defense of family blood and community needs. All these exigencies required the rejection of the lowly, the alien, and the shamed. Such unhappy creatures belonged outside the circle of honor. Fate had so decreed.²⁶

²⁵ Martha L. Turner, “The Cause of the Union in East Tennessee.” *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 40, no. 4 (1981): 366–80. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42626233>. Pg. 372.

²⁶ Wyatt-Brown, Bertram. 1986. *Honor and Violence in the Old South*. New York: Oxford University Press. Pg 3-4.

This brings up the important distinction between the honorable and the dishonorable, the lowly and the elite, the shameful and the entitled. While honor required you treat those on par with you with respect, the rules were different for those who did not abide by “honorable” standards (as you defined them). Those who behaved dishonorably deserved the absolute harshest treatment in return, which was emphasized by the treatment of the bridge burners after their execution. To secessionists, their actions against the Confederacy banished them outside of the “circle of honor” and made them worthy of the most shameful, humiliating, and gruesome punishment. The South relied heavily on the existence of a hierarchy that punished those at the bottom, and to insult, disagree, or act against the honorable man necessitated an exile to the bottom of the social ladder.

One of the greatest examples of a man who lived his life through this honor culture was the Fighting Parson himself, William Brownlow. He was among the most wanted by Confederate authorities for his supposed connections with the bridge burnings, among many other acts of treason against the Confederacy. Though he burned no bridges himself, he was accused of being the originator of this plan. No one can say exactly who first suggested the idea, but an article in the *Whig* published in May 1861 (a full six months before the burnings occurred and two months before Johnson and Maynard’s meetings in Washington) convinced Confederate authorities that Brownlow was responsible. “Let the railroad on which Union citizens of East Tennessee are conveyed to Montgomery in irons be eternally and hopelessly destroyed!”, Brownlow wrote, “...Let it be done, East Tennesseans, though the gates of hell be forced and the heavens be made to fall!”²⁷ A quote of this nature, published in a paper with such a large audience, left little doubt that Brownlow was culpable of something. There had been a warrant out for Brownlow’s arrest

²⁷ *Sketches of the Rise, Progress, and Decline of Secession*. Pg 300

for a month before the bridge burnings took place, but he had fled to the Smoky Mountains in order to avoid being captured.²⁸ Once the bridge burnings occurred, it was added to the list of crimes Brownlow was wanted for.

Of course, had he agreed to take an oath of loyalty to the Confederacy, these troubles could have been avoided, but that was something he refused to ever do. “When I shall have made up my mind to go to Hell, I will cut my throat and go direct, and not travel around the way of the Southern Confederacy”, he once wrote.²⁹ Brownlow held steadfast the idea that a man should stay true to his word and stand firm in his beliefs. To go back on his beliefs was the most dishonorable thing a man could do, and he had pledged his life to the standard of honor that nineteenth century Southern culture prized.³⁰ Eventually, he was found by authorities and spent almost a month in a Knoxville jail for several charges of treason before getting a pardon from the Confederate Secretary of War Judah P. Benjamin.³¹ For Brownlow, serving time in a jail cell was better than being cowardly and taking the oath. Afterwards, he left the state for his safety and went on a speaking tour of the North, where he had gained notoriety as a Southern Unionist.³²

Though East Tennessee technically seceded in June 1861, the citizens of the region refused to acknowledge that in their daily proceedings. Congressional representatives were sent to Washington, not Richmond. Confederate elections were not held. Even more consequentially, citizens participated in active plots to overthrow their Southern government. The East Tennessee convention emphasized the level of pro-Union sentiment that existed in the state, so much so that

²⁸ *Sketches of the Rise, Progress, and Decline of Secession*. Pg 281.

²⁹ James Welch Patton. *Unionism and Reconstruction in Tennessee, 1860-1869*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1934. Pg 54.

³⁰ James Welch Patton. *Unionism and Reconstruction in Tennessee, 1860-1869*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1934. Pg 54.

³¹ William G. Brownlow: *Fighting Parson of the Southern Highlands*. Pg.

³² *Grape for the Rebel Masses*. Pg. 49.

the convention voted to secede from the state of Tennessee. The bridge burning plot, which was made in collaboration between prominent East Tennesseans and high-ranking Union political and military authorities, represents the degree to which East Tennesseans were willing to go to oust Confederate military control. The most prominent and influential of these men developed their influence through a strict adherence to the culture of honor that ruled Southern social life. By sticking to their word and adhering to the culturally defined sense of honorability, they created a society in which Unionism was the standard despite secession. The cultural sense of honor was used to justify much terror as well. Anyone who existed outside of the acceptable bounds of your personal belief system was entitled to the cruelest, most violent, and humiliating experienced because of their lowliness. This allowed the Confederates to treat Union sympathizers extremely cruelly with a total lack of remorse. This creates a continuing cycle, where Unionists continue to defy because of their morals despite the chance of punishment, and Confederates continue to increase the punishments because of the massive amount of resistance.

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