

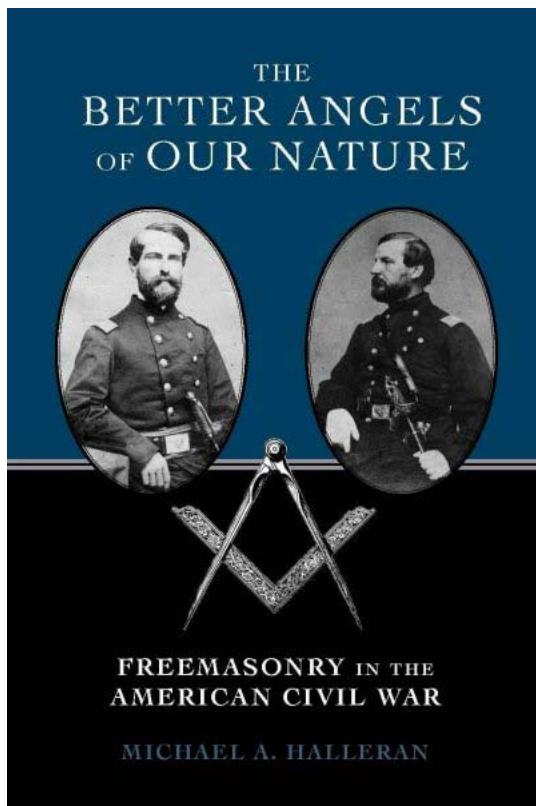
Book Review By Bro. Robert Blackburn



THE BETTER ANGELS OF OUR NATURE: FREEMASONRY IN THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR

Masonic histories are often (and rightly so) relegated to the dark corners of bookshops along with other “mystical” curiosities and esoterica. The problem is two-fold: a) they are the product of amateur enthusiasts, not trained specialists; b) the books, upon serious examination, prove little more than unsupported mishmashes of anecdote, legend, and wild conjecture. It is a rare gem that breaks this mold. But that is exactly what *The Better Angels of Our Nature* does - and it does it well.

Better Angels, according to Halleran, “... is an effort to provide a more evidentiary approach to documenting the intersections – and there are many – of warfare and Masonry during the American Civil War... [T]his study has examined Masonic myth with a critical eye. Incidents that can be shown to be spurious, or to be factually inaccurate, have been identified and examined in detail throughout the text.” It is somewhat amazing - given the sheer volume of Civil War literature - that *Better Angels* is the first scholarly attempt to examine the role, if any, Freemasonry played in this conflict. The result is a slim, though ultimately satisfying, read which views Masonry from the perspective where it counts - the personal level.



By the mid-19th century, American Freemasonry was enjoying a comeback. The Morgan Affair, though not forgotten, had been put to rest. For many, the Fraternity was now seen as a positive embodiment of middle class, Protestant, Victorian values and ideals. Roughly 4% of eligible men were members of the Craft (207,872 in 1860) with 5,113 lodges spread throughout the various states. Freemasonry was more common in the Confederacy, with Mississippi, Florida, and Georgia enjoying the highest membership percentages. Halleran argues convincingly that the Order’s “mystic ties” transcended national politics and even military orders, tempering the harshness and cruelty of war and providing a unique space where men could find aid, support, and peace

in the midst of events much larger than themselves.

Halleran takes a thematic approach to his material, marshalling what otherwise might be seen as unrelated incidents into categories such as combat, prison life, funerals, and military lodges. He also does a nice job of contextualizing the Craft within the scope of 19th-century fraternalism. If there is an oversight in *Better Angels*, it is Halleran's omission of grand lodge proceedings, pronouncements, and responses, if any, to the conflict. It would have been interesting, for instance, to know what types of relief, and how it was directed, grand lodges may have organized for brothers in the field, prison, or wounded and their widows and orphans.

Better Angels is a welcome and important update to Allen Roberts' *House Undivided* (Macoy Publishing and Masonic Supply Co. 1961). It may prove a wonderful calling card for the Fraternity as well. Just as these real life examples of brotherly love, relief, and truth inspired countless Civil War veterans to join the Fraternity at their earliest opportunity, Halleran's book, in retelling such accounts, may inspire even more good men to seek admission to our Order. We can only hope, therefore, that *Better Angels Of Our Nature* receives the attention it justly deserves.

Michael A. Halleran, *The Better Angels Of Our Nature: Freemasonry in the American Civil War* (University of Alabama Press 2010, \$24.95 USD)



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