

Book Review by Hank Nuwer for SAGE Publications (Published 2010)

The Company He Keeps: A History of White College Fraternities by

Nicholas L. Syrett. \$30. The University of North Carolina Press, 2009, \$30, 400 pages.

Author Nicholas L. Syrett's makes his position on fraternities clear in his preface to The Company He Keeps: A History of White College Fraternities. The faculty member at the University of Northern Colorado writes that he has no need of a fraternity other than what he enjoys with his brother by birth.

Syrett recounts how fraternities began as idealistic organizations under founders looking to join the company of other young men with similar values and sense of purpose. In his judgment, they've ended up a collegiate outlaw roost, sometimes permitting rape, criminal hazing, voyeurism, social injustice and even manslaughter in the name of camaraderie.

Instead of offering fraternal group members a means for personal improvement and a healthy masculine sense of self, fraternities offer the individuals they attract a sense of entitlement. For example, females exist to be possessed, sometimes carnally in the possession of several brothers at once. Syrett concludes that all participating in such orgies seem intent on demonstrating to their fellow members that their attraction for one another

contains no homosexual yearnings.

Likewise, Syrett demonstrates that all too many chapters value exclusion and power. They require members to stay isolated from non-Greek students, mocking college and national fraternity attempts to achieve diversity. Such fraternity houses acquire a perverse solidarity through their defiance of college and national organization rules, values and standards. In such a culture, gays are vilified (and woe to any brother who comes out) and non-sorority women are shunned or used as chattel to be disposed of like tissues once used.

Where does Syrett indicate that all went wrong? Although the author does not depend upon the classic 1950 study of American character titled The Lonely Crowd by David Riesman et al, Syrett seems in agreement with Riesman that the American character shifted dramatically from pioneer individualists to conformists obsessed with developing a self-manufactured character. Syrett concludes that the values of idealistic founders have given way to shallow displays of pseudo-masculinity where admiration goes to those in the house who guzzle liquor, are “face guys” who draw women to parties, and who get by in school without showing up their brothers.

Soon after the founding of the fraternities in 1825, fraternity men routinely could recite the names of a national organization’s founders along

with critical dates and stated values. Today, too few undergraduates and alumni can converse articulately about their organization's idealistic reasons for being. At rush events brothers are inclined to try impressing potential recruits with the names of celebrity alums and winked promises of debauchery to come.

The book's title says "A History," but it's a selective history of fraternal transgressions with little pretense of balanced reporting. Fraternal philanthropy and collective good works get scant mention. Syrett's best work is in his early chapters that contain scrupulous pants-to-chair research. Most compelling is his employment of scintillating nineteenth-century documents he has unearthed in musty archives at colleges such as Dartmouth he has visited.

What could be better? Syrett's prose, for one thing. He's a much better researcher than writer. He belabors way too many duplicating examples of gay bashing, juvenile behavior and criminal conduct. Readers will get frustrated with the book after they get fed the same point for the nth time.

What's missing? As the title indicates the book contains historical analysis based on archival sources and standard research, but Syrett's concluding chapter makes damning claims about the current state of white fraternities that should require more first-hand substantiation. His assertions

about present-day fraternal behaviors and values need backing up with more scholarly survey data and reliance upon credible sources from the present-day fraternal world. The author relies too much on newspaper and magazine articles for his conclusions. Leaving the archives and conducting face-to-face interviews with contemporary undergraduates, national fraternity officers, and college administrators would have provided sorely missing balance and perspective.

Much of the book's pertinent contemporary quotations and citations have been appropriated from the researched writings of other authors, and that's all right--to a point. That point is that the book needs first-hand responses from contemporary college administrators who needed to be asked this: how do you justify continuing fraternities on your campus when evidence of anti-social and criminal conduct can be so convincingly shown?

Syrett has ignored a growing body of fraternal reformists who try to convince undergraduates that young men in Greek groups can evince values, hold ideals, allow non-Greeks their dignity, and generally prove a beneficial presence. If the reform efforts can be demonstrated through fact and argument to be foredoomed so be it, but this apparent inability of houses to reform needs to be proved and not assumed.

Syrett concludes that fraternities seemed to have completely lost their

moral compass around 1970, mainly because of alcohol abuse where houses became the equivalent of campus speakeasies. He shows that even in the early days it should have been clear to all that the culture of fraternities was bound to careen way off course. For example, the almost religious-like fraternal initiation rituals which were one important reason for secrecy in secret societies at the start have given away to abhorrent, even criminal practices performed in houses behind a veil of secrecy, according to the author.

The book should inspire—not discourage—educators and activists determined to take fraternity chapters back to the roots and ideals of their founding fathers. While The Company He Keeps has imperfections, serious books about fraternity life are few, and it merits prominent placement in the stacks of collegiate libraries. The book's conclusion is frightening to those of us with college-age daughters and granddaughters: Syrett does demonstrate convincingly that men in some houses use rape and sexual debasement of females to impress brothers. His conclusions should frighten those of us who send to college sons and grandsons, whether they become fraternity members or targets of abuse.