

Lightning Rod': A Southern Unionist's Blustery Observations On War, Slavery, And The Free Press

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Review

LIGHTNING ROD'

A Southern Unionist's blustery observations on war, slavery, and the free press

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Ash, Stephen V. *Secessionists and Other Scoundrels: Selections from Parson Brownlow's Book*. Louisiana State University Press, ISBN 807123536

Parson Brownlow's Book, the familiar title printed on the spine even on its first publication, of *Sketches of the Rise, Progress, and Decline of Secession, with a Narrative of Personal Adventures among the Rebels*, became, soon after publication in 1862, a major propaganda tool for the Union.

It was augmented by Brownlow's numerous speeches in Cincinnati and Philadelphia, sites of the co-publishers, and in New York and many other Northern cities, and by various popular culture expressions of Brownlow's fame, such as songs and poems about his exploits. For that and several other reasons, this is an important Civil War era book.

Parson Brownlow's Book embodies and expresses all the characteristics of the man and the features of his life of public service. Born in Virginia, he spent most of his life in small mountain towns of East Tennessee, working his way over the years westward. From early days as a Methodist Circuit Rider of the Holston Conference, Brownlow migrated to Elizabethtown and Jonesboro and to Knoxville, where he set up newspapers that took controversial stands on religious, social, and political issues. He often stood gladly and aggressively, and even happily, alone among and against his adversaries, and was attacked with equal vigor and vitriol, sometimes physically.

The only Union newspaper in the Confederacy

For many months, his *Knoxville Whig and Rebel Ventilator* was the only Union newspaper in the Confederacy, which held Knoxville during that time.

When the Union seized Knoxville, Brownlow returned from his continuous speaking tour in the North to set his newspaper up again, and after the war, he moved farther west to become Reconstruction governor in Nashville, where he fought the emergence of the KKK and was vilified on many occasions and on many issues. To this day, his is a hated name in Tennessee.

What we value in him and in his writings is his role as a unique lightning rod that stands along on the rooftops attracting the fierce light by which the landscape of antebellum, Civil War, and Reconstruction eras are illuminated for us.

Hot-off-the-presses reaction

Brownlow published his arrogantly prideful autobiography at age 29, plus several books attacking his foes in realms of religion, and, following *Parson Brownlow's Book*, his speeches as governor. All contribute to a body of work that is extraordinary for its rhetorical power. Paradoxes and contradictions, sheer venom, and hot-off-the-presses reaction to every manifestation of religion, alcoholism (he championed the Temperance movement), slavery (he defended it, citing religious and other evidence), secession (he opposed it, as a fire-eating Unionist), journalism (every item in his paper was written with personal editorial force), and many other elements are all to be found in *Parson Brownlow's Book*.

Where it is inaccurate, its deliberate distortions express attitudes that we today cannot feel the full force of from any other source. Readers will find Brownlow unique, above all, but as entertaining as he is sometimes thrillingly loathsome.

Full of great energy, rhetorical skill, and rambunctiousness, Brownlow follows in the tradition of the tall-tale vernacular writers of that time, such as George Washington Harris, creator of Sut Lovingood, also a native of Knoxville.

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