

### Appalachian Crossroads: Wartime Conflict And Divided Loyalties In The Southern Highlands

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## Review

### APPALACHIAN CROSSROADS

#### Wartime conflict and divided loyalties in the Southern Highlands

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**O'Brien, Sean Michael** *Mountain Partisans: Guerrilla Warfare in the Southern Appalachians, 1861-1865*. Praeger, ISBN 275964302

*This review is also available under the following title:*

*Mountain Rebels: East Tennessee Confederates and the Civil War, 1860-1870*

Finally, after years of relative neglect, scholars have "discovered" the Appalachian South during the Civil War era as an important, rich, and complex subject for historical analysis. Gordon B. McKinney, Phillip S. Paludan, Altina L. Waller, John C. Inscoe, Kenneth W. Noe, Noel C. Fisher, and others have begun to challenge longstanding myths about modernization, politics, sectionalism, slavery, unionism, and warfare among the isolated, rugged mountain folk. Rejecting stereotypes, they identify class, community, county, and region as factors that explain why and how mountaineers chose to support the Confederacy, the Union, or neither side during the Civil War.

As Paludan has written, in the Southern Highlands "an allegiance was worn as a target over the heart, amid armed enemies, and loyalty could attract both dangerous friends and mortal enemies." Noe and Shannon H. Wilson have remarked that "[t]he valleys of Appalachia acted as a crucible where Unionism and sentiments in favor of secession mixed to create an explosive reaction." Books by W. Todd Groce and Sean Michl O'Brien support this argument. Though both books are flawed, they nevertheless serve up a wealth of new detail, underscore the diversity of Southern Appalachia's Civil War history, and make useful contributions to the "new" historiography of the mountain region.

Whereas previous writers have concentrated on mountain unionists and their determined efforts to squelch the Confederate war effort, in **Mountain Rebels** Groce seeks to rescue Tennessee's secessionists from oblivion. When writing about the War, he explains, historians either have ignored East Tennessee Confederates "or viewed them as shadowy characters operating on the fringe, rather than at the center, of events. They have assumed...that these rebels were little different from other rebels across the South, and thus they have dismissed them as unimportant or labeled them a mere aberration...." Groce, in contrast, interprets East Tennesseans as reluctant and exceptional Confederates. Relying heavily on the voices of participants, he tells a heartfelt story of defeat, suffering, and banishment of the "large, vocal, and determined Confederate minority" in Tennessee's mountains in 1861.

Unlike other Confederates, rebels in East Tennessee fought a three-front war. They confronted Federal invaders, Jefferson Davis's unfriendly administration in Richmond, and an antagonistic Union majority in their own backyard. What led them to don Confederate gray? According to Groce, the mountain rebels had long-established antebellum economic, cultural, and familial ties with the Deep South, relations they feared (with much prescience) would be disrupted by northern invasion. East Tennessee secessionists tended to be younger, Democratic, prosperous, and oriented more toward commerce and finance than their unionist (and former Whig) opponents.

Unfortunately Groce fails to develop fully his economic argument and, as a result, readers will want to know more about the motivations and loyalties of the East Tennessee secessionists. Apparently despite their saber rattling, they were ambivalent Confederates from the start and, not surprisingly, their zeal for the cause waned rapidly as military defeats escalated. Groce also devotes inadequate attention to East Tennesseans' service with Confederate forces. He admits that they performed poorly as soldiers but, clearly sympathizing with the Tennesseans, insists that Jefferson Davis's government (especially General Edmund Kirby Smith) distrusted and abandoned them. Fearful of their disloyalty, the Confederate high command dispatched the mountain rebels to fight in Mississippi while their families were exposed to constant attacks from unionist guerrillas and draft dodgers. When, by 1864, East Tennessee fell to the Federals, its rebels were subjected to savage and bitter attacks by local unionists. Retribution bred dislocation, legal persecution, social chaos, and widespread violence that persisted well into the 1870s.

## **Paramilitary guerrilla warfare and extralegal vigilantism**

In **Mountain Partisans** Sean Michl O'Brien examines an earlier phase of that violence, the paramilitary guerrilla warfare and extralegal vigilantism that engulfed Southern Appalachia throughout the Civil War. Secessionists and unionists both conducted irregular operations that left bitter hatreds in their wake. These animosities simmered long after War's end, leading Appalachian scholars to debate the Civil War's long-term impact on such questions as the timing of the mountain region's modernization, its reputation for political conservatism, and its alleged penchant for family feuds and violence.

Though regular Confederate and Union army regiments served in the southern mountains, guerrilla warfare was conducted largely by irregulars -- Home Guards, Partisan Rangers, and independent units, often called "bushwhackers." Home Guards, organized on the county level, were responsible for rounding up deserters and draft dodgers, protecting communities from resident unionists and Federal troops, and confiscating animals and supplies for the Confederacy. According to O'Brien, "It was not unusual for Home Guards to be neighbors and personal enemies of the deserters they were hunting. They used their authority to conduct personal vendettas arising from feuds over land, property, and livestock, and robbed and harassed the defenseless women and children left at home."

Partisan Rangers, authorized by an act of the Confederate Congress in April 1862, conducted lightning fast raids, captured prisoners, destroyed enemy war materiel, and often succumbed to the lure of plunder. "Bushwhackers," answerable to no central authority, wreaked the most havoc on civilians on both sides. "Often," O'Brien concludes, "they were little more than outlaws, who took advantage of the chaos of wartime to rob, pillage, and murder."

Drawing largely on recently published scholarship rather than original sources, O'Brien divides the mountain South into five parts (Western North Carolina, East Tennessee, North Alabama, North Georgia, and West Virginia) and describes the culture of guerrilla fighting there state by state. "It was a dirty, secret little war," he writes, "where small groups of nameless bushwhackers struck at each other without warning, savagely. Where death often came suddenly from the silence of the wooded mountain slopes. Where the hangman's rope and the raider's torch were liberally applied. Where the real heroes were women and small children left at home, vulnerable to attack by marauders who

struck without conscience or ethic."

The strength of O'Brien's book is the arsenal of case studies he assembles to document the many uncivil wars that raged in Civil War Appalachia. In January 1863, for example, 13 unionists suspected of guerrilla activity were executed in a brutal fashion by Confederates at Shelton Laurel, in the western North Carolina mountains. In November 1864, Federals torched the North Georgia town of Canton in retaliation for raids by pro-Confederate guerrillas. Thomas M. Clark, a rebel deserter, and his band, the "Buggers," preyed on both Confederates and unionists throughout North Alabama. Two weeks after Appomattox, Clark and his gang continued to rob, torture, and murder defenseless citizens in Lauderdale County. O'Brien catalogs a long list of assaults, atrocities, bridge burnings, killings, tortures, and all manner of wanton destruction by both sides throughout the Southern Appalachian region.

Though he has compiled many colorful accounts of mountain murder and mayhem, O'Brien's book unfortunately adds up to less than a complete whole. Packed with unconnected and undigested examples of guerrilla violence arranged geographically, **Mountain Partisans** bursts from the seams with details but lacks both a coherent structure and enough context to explain their significance. O'Brien generally ignores local differences, thereby rendering communities caught in the throes of internecine struggle homogeneous, lifeless, and uninteresting.

Despite their deficiencies, these two books nonetheless add to our understanding of the Civil War in the Highlands. Scholars and general readers, however, must wait for broader and more thorough analyses. Mountain folk who lived and labored in the hills and hollows of Southern Appalachia had complex identities. They were more complicated than the stereotypes depicting them as feuding hillbillies or passive victims suggest. Their story remains to be told.

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