

Bitter Fruits of Bondage: The Demise of Slavery and the Collapse of the Confederacy, 1861-1865

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Review

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Robinson, Armstead L. *Bitter Fruits of Bondage: The Demise of Slavery and the Collapse of the Confederacy, 1861-1865*. University of Virginia Press, \$34.95, hardcover ISBN 813923093

Confederate class conflict

The war within the war

Why the Confederacy lost is a question almost as old as the Confederacy itself. Armstead Robinson provides his answer in the form of an inscription for the tombstone of the Confederacy: Died of Class Conflict. The epitaph links Robinson with the recent interpretative revolution that identifies internal dissension, rather than the North's superior numbers and resources, as the principal cause of the Confederacy's demise. According to this now dominant perspective, the sources of Confederate defeat are found in the social history of the homefront, where southerner confronted southerner, and not on the battlefields. Historians differ about whether the Confederacy unraveled along the seams of class or race or gender. In **Bitter Fruits of Bondage**, Robinson weaves two of these strands, class and slavery, into a tapestry of Confederate defeat.

As one would expect, this book has a hint of amber about it. After all, Robinson began this project as a dissertation more than thirty years ago, and he was working on it in 1995 when he died. In a field as vibrant as Confederate studies, delayed publication has consequences. Parts of **Bitter Fruits of Bondage** are dated. More often than not, when Robinson argues that slavery undermined the Confederacy, he means the institution of slavery, which he argues spawned fatal class conflict among whites, and not actual slaves, who Steven Hahn argues in *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (2003) raised the largest slave rebellion in modern history. Little appears here, for example, about the 130,000 ex-slaves who put on blue uniforms and fought their former masters. Robinson's discussion of southern responses to Union invasion and occupation

falls short of the complex analysis in Stephen V. Ash's *When the Yankees Came: Conflict & Chaos in the Occupied South, 1861-1865* (1995). Robinson's understanding of the origins and consequences of Jefferson Davis's suspension of habeas corpus seems one-dimensional compared with William Blair's sophisticated discussion in *Virginia's Private War: Feeding Body and Soul in the Confederacy, 1861-1865* (1998).

Moreover, the unique publishing history of **Bitter Fruits of Bondage** has left tracks. In addition to offering appreciations of Armstead Robinson, the man and the historian, separate forwards by Joseph P. Reidy, Barbara J. Fields, and the publisher explain the extraordinary measures required to turn Robinson's massive, unfinished 1,200-page manuscript--with multiple, undated drafts, contradictory arguments, and missing citations--into a coherent book. As Barbara Fields observes, this is not the book Robinson would have published had he lived.

Still, and remarkably, **Bitter Fruits of Bondage** is no fossil. Despite its limitations, it addresses acutely the relationship of class, slavery, and defeat, arguing that under the pressures of war the social fault lines created by slavery grew into fissures and that nonslaveholders' alienation from the Confederate cause proved catastrophic. No other historian has identified richer primary sources (official or private), mined them more thoroughly for the voices of yeomen and slaveholders, or marshalled a more comprehensive argument for the class origins of Confederate defeat.

Robinson's major interpretative aspiration is to link government policy, social strain, and military disaster. Almost from the beginning, government officials confronted the impossible tasks of simultaneously protecting planters' interests in slavery and retaining nonslaveholders' allegiance to the Confederacy. Focusing on the Mississippi Valley, Robinson shows that slaveholders demanded government assistance in keeping control over their increasingly restive slaves. Local efforts included augmenting patrols, establishing Home Guards, and building statewide militias. Slaveholders' domination of the Richmond government insured a raft of national class-based legislation. When Richmond adopted a system of universal conscription in early 1862, for example, the law provided for substitutes and exemptions that favored wealth and privilege.

Slaveholders steadfastly resisted government policies that impinged on their narrow self-interest. Robinson provides a convincing but familiar litany of

planter selfishness--profiteering, avoiding conscription, resisting impressments, and refugeeing out of harm's way--but he pushes beyond slaveholders' behavior to explore its social and military consequences. Rather than serve up their slaves for military labor, planters held them back, fatally compromising, he argues, the defenses at Forts Henry and Donelson and the entire western frontier. Rather than grow corn, western planters continued to plant and sell cotton, creating a subsistence crisis for yeoman families.

Yeoman anger and resentment led to massive resistance to conscription, desertion, and even to putting on blue uniforms. Nonslaveholder opposition to Richmond's wartime mobilization, Robinson argues, grew principally out of the government's class-based discrimination and slaveholders' persistent defense of slavery. While planters received special favors, yeomen often failed even to receive their \$11 a month army pay. Government crackdowns on draft resisters, evaders, and deserters simply deepened the alienation. This war within a war, Robinson concludes, prevented the solidification of Confederate nationalism and brought down the Confederacy.

Robinson's most explicit efforts to link the homefront and the battlefields focus on Confederate losses at Vicksburg and Missionary Ridge in 1863. In both contests, he argues, civilian defeatism undercut rebel armies and led directly to military disaster. Grant advanced easily outside Vicksburg because he relied on southern spies, deserters, and runaways. The war weariness that preceded the 47-day siege of Vicksburg was as important as the siege itself in sapping the spirit of the city's defenders. Grant exploited yeoman alienation by paroling and sending home what Robinson calls on p. 207 thirty thousand demoralized ambassadors of disaffection. Paroled troops spread discouragement, social unrest, and the southern peace movement on the homefront. By resorting to severe measures, the government managed to coerce most of the Vicksburg parolees back into service, and a large number of them sat atop Missionary Ridge on November 24, 1863, when Grant's troops stormed out of Chattanooga. Union soldiers reached the ridgeline without significant resistance, Robinson argues, because the dispirited, re-drafted defenders cut and ran.

Even historians who remain unconvinced by Robinson's argument for the link between slavery, class conflict, and military defeat will appreciate his efforts to think seriously about the connections between homefront and battlefield. Too often, the new social history of the homefront is merely assumed to have military consequences. Robinson seeks to trace and measure those connections and

consequences. In that effort, **Bitter Fruits of Bondage** is cutting edge.

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