

The Bloody South Carolina Election of 1876: Wade Hampton III, the Red Shirt Campaign for Governor and the End of Reconstruction

Randall M. Miller

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Miller, Randall M. (2011) "The Bloody South Carolina Election of 1876: Wade Hampton III, the Red Shirt Campaign for Governor and the End of Reconstruction," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 13 : Iss. 2 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.13.2.07

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol13/iss2/6>

Review

Miller, Randall M.

Spring 2011

West, Jerry L. *The Bloody South Carolina Election of 1876: Wade Hampton III, the Red Shirt Campaign for Governor and the End of Reconstruction.* McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, \$45.00 ISBN 978-0-7864-4889-0

Another Look at South Carolina Reconstruction

In the preface to his new book, York County, S.C., historian and retired minister Jerry West confesses that he did not know quite where to go in looking at the election of 1876. He wanted to extend his study of wartime York County into the Reconstruction era—a noble pursuit in that the new direction of Civil War and Reconstruction studies is recognizing that the war did not end in 1865 and that Reconstruction did not begin there, as one begat the other. But West determined there was not enough material to sustain such a book for York County alone, and decided to investigate the election on a larger plain. This was terrain with which West was not so familiar, though the literature on it is rich and abundant. West's unsure hand on the compass of inquiry shows in a meandering, and sometimes misdirected, inquiry into the national, state, and local politics of Reconstruction and the "bloody" election of 1876 that gave Wade Hampton III the South Carolina governorship with the aid of his Red Shirts and other conservative Democrats hell-bent on ridding the state of Republicans, gave Rutherford B. Hayes the presidency with the aid of backroom dealings and questionable electoral returns, and gave Republicans the boot from office and influence in South Carolina. West fares well when relating his blow-by-blow account of York County political maneuvering and violence, but he founders when trying to make sense of the complicated and often contradictory politics both statewide and nationally. Factual errors further disrupt West's account. The result is a book that is at best uneven and at worst untrustworthy.

West's major problem is that he seems unaware of recent work on Reconstruction. He casts the story largely in terms of the old "tragic era"

paradigm, with vindictive Radical Republicans in Washington and their minions in South Carolina corrupting the political process and subverting what West terms the “gracious” Reconstruction policies of Abraham Lincoln and Andrew Johnson. To be sure, West deplors the violence of the Ku Klux Klan and other vigilante groups and scores Democrats and Republicans alike for double-dealing. And, though an admirer of Wade Hampton, West concedes that Hampton put his personal political ambition and interests in “redeeming” South Carolina from Republican rule ahead of any loyalty to the national Democratic party or presidential ticket in 1876. Hampton was not, West shows, a party man. But overall, West loads the postwar failures in rebuilding the state almost wholly on the Republicans and suggests, by inference and implication, that the freedpeople would have fared better in adjusting to freedom if they had entrusted their fortunes to the likes of Wade Hampton and his paternalism. On the latter count, in West’s telling, blacks appear more as objects being acted on by others than as historical actors in their own right, thinking about and acting on and for their own interests. Anyone familiar with the work of Eric Foner and his concept of Reconstruction as an “unfinished revolution” will find West’s take on events jarring. So too, will readers of recent works by Richard Zuczek, Rod Andrew, and Edmund Drago, among others, who have written sophisticated analyses of Reconstruction in South Carolina. Only Drago gets a mention in West’s book, but West does not engage his arguments.

Also frustrating is West’s cursory examination of Hampton’s motives regarding his willingness to stake his reputation on the “redemption” of South Carolina and to promise blacks that he would ensure their basic rights after the hated Republicans were driven from office. West simply insists that Hampton loved his state and that was that. No doubt Hampton’s sense of duty to restore the good name of his state, and by extension in the honor-bound South that of his people and even himself, explains much. But it does not explain all. West shows Hampton to be a savvy politician as he worked the confusion of the 1876 election to his advantage. He writes a plausible scenario whereby Hampton was willing to trade South Carolina’s presidential electoral votes for Republicans recognition in Washington that he was the legitimate governor in the contested state election. Doing so meant national Republicans abandoning the Republican gubernatorial incumbent in his re-election bid and their party’s rule in the last southern state they controlled in exchange for Hampton not doing much for the national Democratic ticket and accepting the compromise being worked out to give the presidency to Hayes. West moves easily in tracking the methods of local

political recruitment and Hampton's ability to tamp down excessive violence, but he does not get inside Hampton's head. Nor does he assess the extent to which Hampton delivered on his promises of good government and fair play for blacks under the new Democratic regime. One wonders if Hampton the hero stayed true to his sense of honor and honesty. What did "redemption" mean in practice? Did Hampton love his state so much after he and his supporters got hold of it? West does not say because by his reckoning the election ended Reconstruction and any need to inquire into further developments.

In sum, West's book seems more a throwback than an advance in understanding Reconstruction and the "bloody election" of 1876 in South Carolina. Its great strength also is one of its weaknesses—namely, West's command of the political dynamics working at the county level, which he cheats in its significance because of his uncertain and sometimes incorrect reading of larger events and interests. One wishes West had stayed on course to probe the experience of Reconstruction at the local level where he knows the people and the place well. His concern about limited sources notwithstanding, he already has found important permutations in political interests growing in native soils; that is the kind of work that Civil War era studies need.

Randall M. Miller teaches at Saint Joseph's University. His latest book, co-edited with Paul Cimbala, is The Great Task Remaining Before Us: Reconstruction as America's Continuing Civil War (Fordham University Press, 2010), and with Paul Cimbala, he is completing The Northern Home Front in the Civil War, to be published by Praeger Press in January 2012.