

The Great Task Remaining Before Us: Reconstruction as America's Continuing Civil War

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Review

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Understanding the Unfinished Revolution

Historians continue to debate the degree to which the new freedoms won by former slaves through emancipation were obliterated by conservatives' return to power across the 'redeemed' South, but few would deny that in its protracted and formidable assault on Reconstruction the white South retook much of what it had lost through formal surrender. This collection of closely-researched case studies, encompassing a broad geographical swathe of the former Confederacy, is held together by a shared understanding of Reconstruction as a continuation of war by other means. Hostilities didn't end at Appomattox, the contributors aim to establish, but persisted in new and not-so-new forms, manifested in a series of aggressive political and paramilitary interventions carried out by unyielding, largely unobstructed ex-Confederates. In this extended view of the war, April 1865 loses its watershed significance; everywhere continuity triumphs over rupture, and the setback in Virginia is starkly reversed in the long war consummated at Columbia twelve years later.

Four of the eleven essays gathered here touch upon the unflattering record of southern white unionism. In Tennessee, Derek Frisby finds antebellum regional divisions intensifying after 1863, as conservative unionists in the west reacted against emancipation. Aroused against "usurpation enforced by the bayonets of negroes," they were lifted out of their gloom by the restrained policy emanating from the Johnson White House and drawn into an alliance against 'Brownlowism' alongside former Confederates, recently their persecutors (15). Confronted by the extension of the franchise and the enlistment of blacks in the state militia, the alliance sought from an early stage to win black voters to their ranks, though without success. By 1870 Radicalism had collapsed across the

state, and with white supremacy restored, the ex-Rebels ditched their former allies. Problematically, for Frisby the tragedy seems to lie in white unionists' inability to find common ground: in his judgment the "estrangement of conservative[s]" could only be overcome by reversing the "shift toward emancipation" (28). Freedpeople barely figure in the calculation.

Two impressive chapters on wartime and postwar Kentucky follow. In his compelling exploration of patterns of racial violence in Kentucky, Aaron Astor argues that neither of the two dominant explanations for Reconstruction-era paramilitarism holds for the Bluegrass state. Whites were motivated neither by the drive to restore conservatives to political power (they never lost it) nor the necessity of re-subjugating black plantation labor (they no longer needed it), but instead by the compulsion to reestablish racial control. The effects of black enlistment were keenly felt in Kentucky and Missouri, Astor suggests, as slaves enlisted en masse and were assigned duty on their home ground. As in Tennessee, Kentucky's conservative unionists recoiled from a war transformed by emancipation, and during its late stages black troops and the wider African American community were subjected to an "expulsionist campaign" aimed at driving them beyond the state borders (42).

This is a convincing essay, but it benefits from being included alongside Anne E. Marshall's perceptive study. White violence is, for Astor, largely a reaction to black claims on citizenship, but the "liberty fever" rife among slaves features more prominently in Marshall's rendering. "[P]olitics became one of the first meeting grounds for former foes" as white Unionists and ex-Confederates attempted reconciliation by turning out the conservative vote (58). Past divisions receded as the "negro" became the "one single rallying point," but as in Tennessee the former Rebels called the shots (59). The collapse of unionism in the face of these pressures had a profound long-term effect on public memory of the war, with the border state's unionist legacy obliterated from the commemorative landscape.

In northern Alabama, Margaret Storey suggests, unionists opposed secession out of a concern for stability and order, but their wartime stand brought violence and upheaval instead. Having paid a high price for their loyalty, they were "stunned and bitterly disappointed" by Johnson's leniency toward their enemies, and left vulnerable by his unwillingness to sustain troop levels in the South (76). Native white unionism is a more varied force in Storey's account: "by 1866," she suggests, "many white Unionists" supported black suffrage and could be found

on the Radical end of the Republican Party, advocating land redistribution and Confederate disfranchisement (77). On both issues they would be let down by the national party, and the absence of security in the face of an intensive Klan-led paramilitary campaign extinguished Republican potential by the mid-1870s.

Two essays explore the formulation and limits of Republican policy in the post-Appomattox South. Michael Green revisits some heavily-traveled historiographical terrain in his piece, offering novel insights into the confrontation between Johnson and the Radicals but little else that isn't already well established. Carole Emberton's cogent rumination on the difficulties faced by federal authorities in compelling southern white loyalty touches on the central problem of power in the protracted conflict that seethed through the post-emancipation era. Where Frisby and others view Republican excesses as fatal to Reconstruction, she suggests that their real weakness lay in "underestimat[ing] the warlike nature of the democratic revolution" they'd instigated (182).

Denise Wright and Justin Nystrom break new ground in chapters that focus, respectively, on postwar relief as an extension of welfare provision initiated by the Confederates and on the complex motivations animating the widespread turn to 'passing' among New Orleans' free people of color after emancipation. Many of the latter were anxious to distance themselves from the rough plantation laborers pouring into the city after emancipation, Nystrom reminds us in his nuanced study, but they were driven by an acute vulnerability in the new era as well. Free women of color were especially exposed under the new order, and given a choice between attaching oneself to white identity or sharing a life of drudgery alongside black women, some inevitably chose the former. Carol Faulkner looks at a different set of women—white northern reformers mainly—and finds that their involvement with Freedman's Aid led them into confrontation with federal officials over their treatment of freedpeople and provided an arena for asserting women's rights, helping to forge "a new relationship between women and the federal government" that persisted into the Progressive era (100).

Two essays offer differing perspectives on the Confederate military experience and the origins of the Lost Cause. Jason Philips contributes a thoughtful essay on the "ethos of invincibility" that inspired Confederate perseverance up to and beyond Appomattox. White southerners thought

themselves unconquerable, and secular faith in their own superiority was reinforced by a religious conviction that they had God on their side. The arrogance that these combined to sustain made it impossible to see in northern motivations anything but a base attempt to subdue the South: emancipation was but a “cover-up for racial warfare” (161). Having sustained them in war, the same culture of invincibility anchored whites’ attachment to the status quo through the tumult of Reconstruction, underpinning their “conviction to continue their war by other means” (171).

Rod Andrews Jr. draws upon his biography of planter-general Wade Hampton to challenge David Blight and others who’ve characterized the Lost Cause as a retrospective attempt to manipulate the story of Confederate defeat, arguing instead that it was rooted in a “persistent, deeply felt need to find validation and meaning” in the carnage of war (140). In his attitudes to slavery and race relations, Hampton was an archetypal paternalist both before and after the war. In the battlefield deaths of his brother and son he endured excruciating heartbreak, and he saw enough of Confederate valor and northern warmaking to ratify his convictions about southern righteousness. But Andrews pushes a reasonable argument too far when he suggests that for Hampton the Lost Cause “transcended politics and even race” (149). His role throughout Reconstruction—lightly examined here—suggests instead that Hamptons’ inability to perceive the fundamental injustice at the heart of the Confederate project was wholly bound up with his complicity in the race-obsessed paramilitary crusade that reclaimed South Carolina for white supremacy in 1876. Andrews’ piece reflects a tendency in too many of the essays included here to place freedpeople to one side in the story of Reconstruction.

The ‘long war’ perspective undergirding this collection yields valuable new insights but tends also to understate the possibilities unleashed by the end of slavery. At Radicalism’s high tide, ex-Confederates in parts of the South were deeply despondent at their powerlessness to shape events, freedpeople thoroughly aroused by the influence they wielded for the first time. Running through much of the volume is an underlying (perhaps unintended) assumption that Reconstruction was doomed to fail. Retrospectively, it’s an inference made reasonable by circumstances on the ground. Freedpeople showed an exceptional capacity for mobilization in the early period after emancipation, but were massively outnumbered across most of the South and everywhere outgunned; they could maintain their rights only with sustained support from the outside. The odds were stacked against the building of a credible, bi-racial southern

coalition from the outset, and diminished as racial polarization intensified. With the exception of a handful of Radicals, the federal government was ambivalent in its commitment to black freedom, and its willingness to intervene faded even as the threat from white conservatives gathered force. Despite these fundamental disadvantages, it is worth remembering that, briefly at least, freedpeople and their allies gave those pining for a return to the old order a run for their money. *Brian Kelly is the Director of Research, Imperial and Global History in the School of History and Anthropology at Queen's University in Belfast, Northern Ireland*