The Yellowhammer War: The Civil War and Reconstruction in Alabama

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Review

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Noe, Kenneth W. *The Yellowhammer War: The Civil War and Reconstruction in Alabama*. University of Alabama Press, \$49.95 ISBN 978-0-8173-1808-6

New Scholarship on the Civil War and Reconstruction in Alabama

This volume features fourteen excellent essays, replete with full endnotes, by talented scholars who together present a sharp and challenging picture of Alabama during the Civil War era. The product of impressive organizational skill by its editor, Kenneth Noe of Auburn University, the book probes crucial aspects of secession, war, and Reconstruction. Noe's introduction—a valuable essay in itself—gives a clear overview of basic themes while also introducing the essays and placing them in their proper historiographical contexts.

Lonnie A. Burnett's lead essay explains Alabama's pivotal role in the splintering of the Democratic party in the 1860 presidential election. Jennifer Treviño then analyzes the patriotic convictions and actions of white Alabamian women, describing them as vital catalysts for secession and mobilization for war. Both essays dramatize the white South's social, economic, religious, and political motivations, mainly to protect and promote slavery. Ben H. Severance's essay on the battle of Salem Church, Virginia, titled "Confederate Alabama's Finest Hour," highlights the marvelous contributions of Cadmus M. Wilcox's brigade of "Alabama boys" to the Army of Northern Virginia's success during the Chancellorsville Campaign in May 1863. By contrast, Brian Steel Wills provides a stark depiction of the desperate and tragic efforts by Nathan Bedford Forrest and his cavalymen to defend Alabama from Union invasion in 1865.

In an effective dissection of Alabama soldiers' remarkable ability to sustain their fighting morale, Kristopher A. Teters argues that upper class men were inspired most by Confederate nationalism, animus toward the North, religious faith, and a fierce adherence to slavery. Lower class soldiers were far less motivated by nationalism, although they were clearly devoted to religion, saw the need for slavery, and were determined most of all to prevent Yankees from

violating their homes. Lower class soldiers were also more prone to yearn for peace as the war ground on, yet most remained dutiful Confederates to the end. Victoria E. Ott's essay on non-elite yeoman and poor whites complements Teters'. Bearing the brunt of deprivations and sacrifices on the home front and battlefield alike, non-elites were compelled by family duty and reputation to do their grudging duty to the Southern nation.

Jennifer Lynn Gross focuses on one of Alabama's most ardent Confederates, the popular novelist and propagandist August Jane Evans, who worked and wrote tirelessly for the cause. Typically neglected and unsung, Jews signified a small but prominent part of the war effort, prompting Patricia A. Hoskins to title her essay on Jewish Alabamians "The Best Southern Patriots."

The immediate aftermath of the war receives treatment by Harriet E. Amos Doss in her sensitive essay on the various and contrasting reactions among black freedmen and defeated whites to the jolting news of Abraham Lincoln's assassination. Reconstruction in Alabama is wisely summarized in Sarah Woolfolk Wiggins's essay on myths and realities about Reconstruction's misdeeds and excesses. Carpetbaggers, perhaps the most stereotypical characters, were personified by Alabama's U.S. Senator George E. Spencer, an ambitious and devious yet devoted public servant. Terry L. Seip's critical and revealing portrait of Spencer underscores the need for a full scale biography.

Reinforcing Seip's essay are the final three: Michael W. Fitzgerald on the wartime origins of the postwar Republican party's leadership, diverse constituencies, and ambitious agendas; Jason J. Battles on the Freedmen's Bureau and its legal struggles to provide equitable treatment to former slaves as laborers and former masters as employers; and Bertis English on the all-important black grassroots institution during and after Reconstruction: the African American church. A ten-page bibliography of essential printed primary and secondary sources serves as the frosting on the multi-layer cake that is a satisfying book.

The historian who has edited or contributed to a collection like this knows how simple it appears and in fact how difficult it is to accomplish. This is cutting edge scholarship, certainly worthy of the editor's goal to create the best path toward understanding Alabama during the Civil War era. For readers wondering about the title: Confederate soldiers from Alabama were known as "yellowhammers." To understand why, see:

http://archives.state.al.us/emblems/st_bird.html.

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