

Intimate Reconstructions: Children in Postemancipation Virginia

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Review

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Jones, Catherine A. *Intimate Reconstructions: Children in Postemancipation Virginia*. University of Virginia Press, \$45.00 ISBN 9780813936758

Debates over Children's Education Shaped Reconstruction Virginia

Offering "a child-centered view of Reconstruction," *Intimate Reconstructions* illuminates the role that children played in negotiating the transition from slavery to freedom as well as the symbolic importance of childhood in discussions of social welfare, racial order, and public education (13). Taking Virginia as her focus, Catherine A. Jones uses a range of sources, from Freedmen's Bureau reports to manuscript letters and diaries, to examine the important roles that both black and white children played as workers, family members, and political "lightning rods" in post-Civil War Virginia (12). In so doing, she joins the growing number of social historians who insist that age is an important category of analysis, operating both independently of and in tandem with the categories of race, class, and gender. In addition, building on the work of women's historians who have melded gender analysis with political history, she asserts that politics are "aged" as well as "gendered." Ultimately, *Intimate Reconstructions* aims to show that "even those most excluded from political power—children—helped to shape the course of Reconstruction" (189).

Like other children's historians, Jones confronts the challenge of attempting to combine the history of children—their lived experience—with the history of childhood—cultural definitions of child status, often deployed inconsistently and self-servingly by adults in pursuit of particular political agendas or public policies. Examining apprenticeships, orphan asylums, and educational institutions often reveals more about adults' expectations, desires, and priorities than it does about children's own perspectives. Emphasizing children's role as autonomous agents, Jones insists that children shaped the circumstances of their lives even within institutional parameters, whether by influencing the decisions of Freedmen's Bureau agents, running away from orphanages or work

assignments, or simply making a living on the streets as thieves, prostitutes, and “juvenile rogues” (103).

Jones is on stronger ground, however, when analyzing childhood as a potent symbol in public discussions of racial hierarchies and Reconstruction politics. For instance, questions about responsibility for children—whether freed slaves or Confederate orphans—led to a significant expansion of the state’s role in ensuring social welfare. In addition, debates over children’s education became pivotal to the rapid rise of the Readjuster Party. While opponents warned that public schools were an infringement on parental authority and filial responsibility, “calculated to emasculate the energies of a people, and to debauch public and private morality” and “connected by regular, logical sequence with legalized prostitution and the dissolution of the conjugal tie,” as well as leading inexorably to “atheism and irreligion,” (176-177), ultimately advocates of debt readjustment and public schools succeeded in creating “a state government that served the people, including those who could not exercise full rights as citizens”—that is, children (187). *Intimate Reconstructions* is an important contribution to historical scholarship on the Civil War and Reconstruction, African Americans, and families and children.

Anya Jabour is Professor of History at the University of Montana and the author of Topsy-Turvy: How the Civil War Turned the World Upside Down for Southern Children (Ivan R. Dee, 2010). She is currently completing a biography of southern-born educator and social justice activist Sophonisba Preston Breckinridge (1866-1948), under contract with the University of Illinois Press.