

West From Appomattox: The Reconstruction of America After the Civil War

Michael W. Fitzgerald

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

Recommended Citation

Fitzgerald, Michael W. (2007) "West From Appomattox: The Reconstruction of America After the Civil War," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 9 : Iss. 3 .

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol9/iss3/25>

Review

Fitzgerald, Michael W.

Summer 2007

Richardson, Heather Cox *West from Appomattox: The Reconstruction of America after the Civil War*. Yale University Press, \$30.00 hardcover ISBN 9780300110524

The Idealized West and Reconstruction

West from Appomattox by Heather Cox Richardson offers an ambitious synthesis of the decades after the Civil War; she shifts the vantage point from race in the South to incorporate western and national developments as well. The author is no neophyte, having written two previous books on the northern response to the Civil War era. *West from Appomattox* has something meaningful to say, but the treatment raises a variety of interpretive issues.

This work examines what might be termed the dominant—middle and upper class—opinion of the equally-dominant northeastern region, from the Civil War to the turn of the century. The focus is on mainstream Americans—those vocal and powerful men and women who prospered in the dynamic postwar economy (344). Richardson argues that prosperous northerners remained wedded to concepts of individualism; they distrusted special interests that used government to advance what seemed a class agenda. The emergence of corporate capitalism and its growing influence over the Republican Party disturbed them, but working class radicalism and immigrant-based machine politics troubled them more. Agrarian demands for monetary inflation were more unsettling than corporate misdeeds. The dominant national viewpoint is thus seemingly identified with what used to be called mugwump sentiment, with independent-minded, educated, and rather ethnocentric easterners. Most often, the political opinion of the polite classes could sway national elections. Because the Democratic constituency was susceptible to the farmers' and working class demands for change, particularly in time of economic depression, the Republicans looked like the safer choice.

I am not sure how original professional historians will think this approach, but there is such a thing as the common sense of the comfortable classes, and this vantage point conveys a lot well. Readers of Richardson's previous book on the press and Reconstruction will find familiar her exploration of how civil rights fared before the northern public. Patriotic antislavery sentiment encouraged most northerners to see the freedmen as worthy Protestant individualists, who just wanted a chance at the American dream. However, in Richardson's view, the grubby realities of Reconstruction rule eroded northern sympathy, especially the Radical Republican use of activist government to benefit the African-American masses. In northern eyes, the freedpeople came to resemble the northern immigrants that sustained the corrupt Tweed ring, and a working class that was increasingly inclined toward trade unionism. With the depression of the mid-1870s, national sentiment abandoned the costly commitment to protecting the freedmen's voting rights.

It is here that the major motif of the book comes in, the *West from Appomattox* notion. Richardson contends that as the southern scene soured, the tendency was to look toward an idealized west. The celebration of the glories of Yosemite and Yellowstone, the cowboy mythology, the western dime novels; all fit with the general sense of an eroding society of individualists farther east. Southerners distrustful of a big federal government were particularly drawn to this vision, as the novels *Shane* and *The Virginian* might suggest, but the appeal was national. As Richardson observes, the western reality was far different, but the image would be of a rural land, the antithesis of confused, corrupt city life (118). The book culminates in the ascension of Theodore Roosevelt, with his enthusiasm for western individualism and interest in conservation, which vividly encapsulates the book's themes. It also illustrates the growing willingness of mainstream opinion to back a suitably domesticated form of Progressive anti-corporate reform by the turn of the century.

The west as a counterpoint to Reconstruction trauma is perhaps the book's major interpretive point, but the emphasis on respectable opinion does allow a number of other aspects into her synthesis. The author argues that the reform agenda toward Native Americans, from Grant's peace policy to the Dawes act, fits in to this same emphasis on free labor individualism. One might cite Protestant ethnocentrism as a more decisive factor, but the author's emphasis does not do violence to the evidence. Similarly, the author effectively integrates the women's rights issue, especially the repackaging of women's rights from radical egalitarianism to social uplift, through settlement house efforts and the

like. As Richardson notes, This middle-class vision also limited women's role in society by basing their power on their positions as wives and mothers, not as independent, equal individuals (7). But it did point to the incremental triumph of women's suffrage as part of the wider Progressive agenda.

West from Appomattox offers readers a sensible approach to the late nineteenth century decades; she avoids the censorious tone so prevalent in Gilded Age studies. Historians may not be particularly surprised by Richardson's findings, but discourse of the dominant classes does seem revealing, and the western angle is fresh. There were, however, some aspects of the execution that might merit comment. For the readers of this online publication, the first chapter on the Civil War will be of interest, but it has some detail issues. I doubt that plantation owners were clustered mainly on the coastlands of . . . Mississippi, the geography here being imprecise (12). Similarly, Sherman didn't devastate three hundred miles from Nashville to Savannah, Atlanta would seem the more relevant departure point, given the distance cited (16).

There are more meaningful interpretive loose ends. The author notes the similarity of recent election results with those of 1896, but with the parties reversed. In 2004, red state voters who championed American individualism and blue state voters who recognized the limitation of that vision both reflected patterns established over a century ago (349). It is a striking point, but it doesn't seem that connected to the larger interpretation, even considering President George W. Bush's evocation of his Texas origins. The author spends a great deal of time on the mythic west, rather than engaging with how western developments concretely interacted with southern trends, like the departure of cavalry to fight Native Americans and the deployment of investment capital and government aid to the western railroads. Furthermore, the author misses the opportunity to tie frontier vigilantism to the defense of southern lynching; press apologists relied heavily on the western precedents. In general, there is less here about the southern states than one might expect, given the subtitle; after Redemption, Richardson's white southerners are tacitly absorbed into her narrative as mainstream Americans.

The West is also vaguely defined as a concept, which is problematic because the farm frontier is precisely the area most prone to heterodox monetary ideas, activist government regulation of railroads, and radical third parties. When Richardson talks about the idealized region, she is often talking about the sparsely-inhabited west, as opposed to the restive Granger-Greenbacker-Populist

agrarian west where people generally lived. Similarly, the author notes California's 1870s adventure in anti-corporate politics, but the anti-Chinese working class upsurge doesn't figure into the book's imagined west. Nor is the mining frontier's attachment to the silver heresy and the Populist revolt. Prosperous easterners were well aware of such western realities, but these inconvenient aspects get slighted in this book's argument.

The author also has difficulty integrating the political narrative of the two parties with the emphasis on dominant opinion and its importance. The strength of the book is the central focus on a mainstream consensus, but the fate of the two parties is not as integrated into this tale as a political historian might wish. The topic is treated more as a side issue rather than something worthy of serious consideration. Had the author done this more consistently, the book would be more effective as a synthesis.

These issues notwithstanding, this is an effective look at the era for a popular audience. The author avoided portraying the era as one of abstract forces, in favor of emphasizing the experiences of a number of actual Americans (6). The use of individual, recurring vignettes proves an effective narrative technique, and I at least found many of the individual stories novel and engaging. The book might be well used as an undergraduate textbook for an upper level class. Given the difficulties making the Gilded Age come alive for the wider public, this is a real accomplishment.

Michl W. Fitzgerald, Professor of History at St. Olaf College, is most recently the author of Splendid Failure: Postwar Reconstruction in the American South (Ivan R. Dee, 2007).