

Lincolmites and Rebels: A Divided Town in the American Civil War

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Review

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McKenzie, Robert Tracy *Lincolmites and Rebels: A Divided Town in the American Civil War*. Oxford University Press, \$35.00 hardcover ISBN 9780195182941

Division in Tennessee

Unionists and Confederates in Civil War Era Knoxville

Abraham Lincoln and many later scholars were convinced that East Tennessee was a center of Union support during the Civil War. Robert Tracy McKenzie challenges this received wisdom in his nuanced study of Knoxville between 1861 and 1865. McKenzie demonstrates that Knoxville was an anomaly in this largely rural and mountainous section of the state. Situated at the confluence of several rivers, this early capital of Tennessee had long been the commercial center for that region of the country. The addition of railroads before the war insured that this small city—with fewer than 5,000 inhabitants in 1860—would retain its preeminent position. Additionally as the home of the educational institution that would become the University of Tennessee, Knoxville was a diverse community.

This diversity became its hallmark during the secession crisis and the war that followed. A relatively broad spectrum of political positions did not lead to accommodation and compromise. Newspaper editor William G. Brownlow made sure of that. Brownlow, an outspoken partisan in politics and a Unionist, was not content to enunciate his positions with clarity. He specialized in the use of personal invective that lacerated his opponents. They were unwilling to remain passive targets and replied in kind. The result was a rather acrimonious public sphere into which all of the stresses of a civil war were thrust. McKenzie points out that Brownlow's national prominence and gift for colorful language has led many scholars to assume that he spoke for the entire community and region. But his careful analysis of the city's political landscape throughout the conflict demonstrates that this was incorrect before the Union Army arrived in 1863 and

large numbers of Confederates fled from Knoxville.

Drawing upon his previous research for *One South or Many? Plantation Belt and Upcountry in Civil War-Era Tennessee* (2002), McKenzie carefully distinguishes between elite activities and the concerns voiced by the middle and lower classes. By using the abundant sources available, McKenzie has determined the location of known Confederate and Unionist households in the city. He documents the fact that partisans from both sides were distributed in all sections of the community and found among all classes. The result was that virtually everyone's political allegiance was recognized by their neighbors and often known throughout the city. Despite the overwhelming opposition to secession recorded in the city, old political divisions appeared soon after secession became a fact.

Aware that the secession vote had demonstrated a strong anti-Confederate feeling among many voters in the city, Confederate military leaders sought to conciliate the local population. For their part, committed Unionists either left—including Brownlow—or offered no overt opposition to the new government. This unofficial neutrality was tolerated until a small number of Unionists participated in a railroad bridge-burning spree that prompted Richmond authorities to demand a harsher policy. The truce definitely ended when the Confederacy instituted conscription in 1862. Local Confederate commanders sought but failed to have East Tennessee exempted from the draft. This action drove nearly one hundred Unionists into the Federal Army and encouraged others who remained behind to join clandestine anti-Confederate forces. Unionists who remained found themselves forced to provide material support to the Confederacy despite personal misgivings.

The advance of the Union Army under General Ambrose Burnside in 1863 and the subsequent uncontested occupation of Knoxville completely changed the partisan dynamic. Many Confederates fled the city—including virtually the entire leadership cadre. Many Unionist exiles returned, including the vengeful Brownlow. Now the Confederate citizens found themselves victims of the seizure of their property and its subsequent destruction. The advance of a Confederate Army under General James Longstreet placed everyone in the city under duress. McKenzie is justifiably critical of Longstreet's vigor and strategy during the extended confrontation that followed. With the forced retreat of Longstreet's army, Knoxville's anti-Unionists were at the mercy of their foes.

In the concluding section of this trenchant study, McKenzie traces the divisions among the Unionists. Although regional leaders gained unparalleled prominence—Andrew Johnson was elected vice president in 1864 and became president in April 1865 and Brownlow was elected governor by a restricted electorate—the winning coalition split apart over the issues of emancipation and African-American rights. Conservative Unionists refused to support Brownlow and the anti-Confederates that joined the Republican Party. The division was made permanent as many of the more aggressive Unionists sought to use local and Federal courts to gain recompense for their financial losses from their former enemies. Other former Confederates stood trial in court for illegal activities during the war. While few of these actions provided much satisfaction to the Unionists, the cases insured that wartime animosities would continue unabated. McKenzie concludes his analysis with a brief description of the postwar political and social developments in this divided city.

This brief summary cannot do justice to McKenzie's sophisticated narrative and interpretation. It goes into much greater depth about developments in Knoxville than does Noel C. Fisher's *War at Every Door: Partisan Politics and Guerrilla Violence in East Tennessee, 1860-1869* (1997). Like the Fisher study, McKenzie's book disputes the stereotype of unchallenged Unionism in the region. By being able to identify many of the individuals caught in this nightmare and to be able to assign allegiances to them, McKenzie allows the reader to follow the changing perceptions and actions of the participants in this drama. This is the book's greatest contribution. Although McKenzie is more than willing to draw his own conclusions, he provides the reader with sufficiently detailed information that the reader can analyze the data and agree or disagree.

This study is an important addition to our understanding of the Civil War in the Appalachian South. As McKenzie clearly demonstrates, allegiance in this contested borderland was complex and unstable. This was particularly the case in urban areas that had a diversified economy and population. While events and developments in Knoxville were unique in some important ways, McKenzie's broader findings are applicable to the entire region. These include the fact that both Confederate and Unionist populations were not united and often differed profoundly on fundamental questions and strategies. In addition, the bitterness that developed within the civilian population was often based on antebellum divisions and was intensely personal. Finally, reconciliation after the war was difficult and animosities lingered for years—even decades in some instances. It appears unlikely to this reviewer that this study will be superseded unless some

new cache of documents is uncovered. These broad findings are part of a growing consensus of scholars of the region, and McKenzie's book will insure that this interpretation will be accorded even greater credibility.

Gordon McKinney is Professor of History and Director of the Appalachian Center at Berea College. He is co-author--with John C. Inscoe--of The Heart of Confederate Appalachia: Western North Carolina and the Civil War (2000) and author of Zeb Vance: North Carolina's Civil War Governor and Gilded Age Political Leader (2004).