

A Scalawag in Georgia: Richard Whiteley and the Politics of Reconstruction

James M. Russell

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

Recommended Citation

Russell, James M. (2008) "A Scalawag in Georgia: Richard Whiteley and the Politics of Reconstruction," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 10 : Iss. 1 .

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol10/iss1/18>

Review

Russell, James M.

Winter 2008

Rogers, William Warren , Jr. *A Scalawag in Georgia: Richard Whiteley and the Politics of Reconstruction.* University of Illinois Press, \$40.00 hardcover ISBN 97802520311601

Reconstruction in Georgia

William Warren Rogers's biography of Richard Whiteley reveals a complex individual who generally conforms to the characteristics of other scalawags in the southeast. Rogers, a professor of History at Gainesville State College, previously wrote a biography of another scalawag, Charles Hay of Alabama. Whiteley presented Rogers with a difficult target. There is no collection of his personal papers, but meticulous research in several manuscript collections, federal government records, and especially newspapers (which Rogers went through with an extremely fine toothed comb) allowed him to depict not only Whiteley's political career but also his personal life.

Born in Ireland in 1830, Whiteley migrated with his mother and two siblings to the area around Augusta, Georgia in 1837. Whiteley lived most of the next forty years in that part of the state. He grew up poor and never had the benefit of a formal education. A factory boy in a textile mill at the age of ten, the ambitious and hard working Whiteley rose through the hierarchy of that industry as a weaver, a mill superintendent, and part owner of a cotton mill near Bainbridge, Georgia. By 1860, he had purchased two slaves and had passed an oral exam to become a lawyer in that state. Rogers is unable to say exactly how Whiteley managed to acquire the knowledge to be a lawyer, but the law eventually became the focus of his working life. Whiteley was not in favor of secession; he supported Stephen A. Douglas in the election of 1860. Yet when the war came in 1861, Whiteley volunteered for the First Georgia Infantry Regiment and, just as he had in the cotton mills, speedily rose through the ranks from sergeant to major by 1863. Major was the title by which he was known for the rest of his life.

After the Army of Tennessee surrendered in the spring of 1865, Whiteley returned to Bainbridge, where his conversion to the Republican Party occurred. He was elected as a Bainbridge city councilman in 1865 as a Democrat. But sometime in 1867 he became a moderate scalawag. Like James P. Longstreet and other Republican converts, the initial reasoning for his new political stance was simply that the Union had won the Civil War and intransigence would only hurt the South. He was elected in that year as a member of the 1867 state constitutional convention in Georgia. He was an outspoken advocate of debtor relief in that setting, no doubt inspired by his own background. At the same time, he showed increasing interest in the welfare of the freedmen, often acting as their lawyer in court cases in his hometown. He was first elected to the House of Representatives in 1870 and served two terms as Representative of the Second Congressional District in Georgia, where he tried unsuccessfully to persuade Congress to outlaw poll taxes in 1872. His support of what became the Sumner Civil Rights Act of 1875 got him in serious trouble with white voters in his district and proved the deciding factor in his defeat in the election of 1874. During his terms in Congress, Whiteley effectively represented his district by securing river improvements, increased postal services, and patronage appointments for local Republicans.

According to the evidence presented in James A. Baggett's 2003 monograph on scalawags, Whiteley's background and career were fairly typical of scalawags in the southeast. Like Whiteley, most of them were anti-secession, but during the war most served in the Confederate army or civilian government. The majority were slaveholders, though only a few owned as many as twenty slaves. As an Irishman, Whiteley was an atypical scalawag; most foreign-born scalawags were German.

After another failed Congressional campaign in Georgia in 1876, Whiteley moved in the following year to Boulder, Colorado, where he died in 1890. In Boulder he was known as an outstanding lawyer and spokesman for projects to benefit the community. He was elected to the Board of Aldermen in the town in 1878 and was very active in Republican Party activities in the community. He showed a continuing liberal streak by advocating women suffrage in the state during the late 1870s.

In Rogers's study, Whiteley emerges as a sympathetic figure. One admires his principled stances on behalf of the freedmen and the poor generally. But he did have weaknesses, particularly in his personal life. During his time as a

congressman, he had an affair with a woman by whom he fathered an illegitimate daughter. Later in Boulder, he committed adultery with another woman who may have been a prostitute. Within two hours after his divorce from his wife of 33 years became final, he married the woman of questionable character, who was his junior by more than thirty years.

Rogers's portrait of Whiteley is well written and superbly researched. Biographies like his are much needed to reassess old stereotypes about scalawags and bring them to life as individuals.

James M. Russell is chair of the history department at the University of Tennessee, Chattanooga. He is the author of Atlanta, 1847-1890: City Building in the Old South and the New.