

Carpetbaggers, Cavalry, and the Ku Klux Klan: Exposing the Invisible Empire During Reconstruction

Mary Niall Mitchell

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

Recommended Citation

Mitchell, Mary Niall (2008) "Carpetbaggers, Cavalry, and the Ku Klux Klan: Exposing the Invisible Empire During Reconstruction," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 10 : Iss. 3 .
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol10/iss3/7>

Review

Mitchell, Mary Niall

Summer 2008

Martinez, J. Mich'l *Carpetbaggers, Cavalry, and the Ku Klux Klan: Exposing the Invisible Empire During Reconstruction*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., \$24.95 softcover ISBN 9780742550780

The Dark Side of Reconstruction

Among other things, J. Michl Martinez's *Carpetbaggers, Cavalry, and the Ku Klux Klan: Exposing the Invisible Empire During Reconstruction* (2007) recalls the darker consequences of the South's defeat in the Civil War and its occupation by federal forces during Reconstruction. In some ways, it may be easier (or, at least, less dispiriting) to write about the struggles of freedpeople and their allies against the former Confederacy than it is to look squarely at the perpetrators of unspeakable racial and political violence and the government's largely unsuccessful attempts to bring them to justice.

In this book, the author has chosen to do the latter, from a fresh perspective. For the most part, Martinez centers his history of the original, nineteenth-century Ku Klux Klan on Lewis Merrill, who led the effort to prosecute Klan members in South Carolina and end a reign of terror that targeted former slaves and their Republican allies. Merrill was a career army officer from Pennsylvania who had conducted campaigns against guerrilla fighters in Bleeding Kansas in the 1850s and against recalcitrant Mormons in Utah a few years later. (He was fortunate enough to miss a more fateful fight on the frontier in 1876, when the rest of the Seventh U.S. Cavalry headed to Little Bighorn.)

After the Civil War, Major Merrill was assigned the task of subduing Klan violence in South Carolina, albeit initially without any real law enforcement capabilities other than the support of (distinctly uninspired) local authorities. With the help of brave investigators and infiltrators, Merrill eventually gathered enough evidence of Klan atrocities to bring cases against individuals into federal courts. Indeed, his investigations made it clear that policing groups like the Klan—groups that beat, raped, and lynched black people as a means to maintain

political control and social dominance could not be left up to local and state officials. With most white southern politicians and county sheriffs unwilling to protect black citizens from such violence, and uninterested in enforcing the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, such work, Merrill argued, had to become a federal responsibility.

Given that Martinez chose to focus on a military officer's efforts to expose the Invisible Empire to sunlight(147), it might have strengthened the book's focus to offer a stronger sub-argument about the militarization of southern society after the war. Martinez does not give sufficient weight to the black militias, for instance, which former slaves (male and female) mustered as a means of self-defense after the war. Rather than view these militias as organizations that exacerbated the hostility of Klan members, it is more useful, perhaps, to view them in light of recent black military service. Militias were an extension of black military participation in the Civil War, service that should have secured their rights to citizenship. Yet these were the very rights that were under attack by the Klan. By the same token, it would be interesting to consider the paramilitary nature of the KKK in light of its members' recent enlistment for the Confederacy. Did shared military service make it easier for landowners and non-landowners to collaborate with one another? And how did that wartime mobilization give shape to the organization and its network of members?

While much of the information about Reconstruction politics in Washington, conditions in the South, and the formation of the Klan will be familiar to academic readers, Martinez's study provides a valuable synthesis of recent work for more general readers and shapes it into a highly readable narrative. It would be fascinating to read more about what the author sees as Merrill's legacy (particularly in terms of federal intervention in guerilla warfare and the prosecution of terrorism). Still, the epilogue devoted to the sinister, flickering images of D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915) and the aftermath of the Leo Frank lynching in Georgia does much to explain the consequences of Merrill's unfinished struggle, as well as the revived political role of the Klan well into the twentieth century.

Mary Niall Mitchell is Associate Professor of History at the University of New Orleans. Her book Raising Freedom's Child: Black Children and Visions of the Future after Slavery was published by NYU Press in March 2008.