Moses of South Carolina: A Jewish Scalawag During Radical Reconstruction

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Review

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A Fresh Look at Reconstruction in South Carolina

Composed of six chapters and a Coda, Moses of South Carolina examines the life of Franklin Moses, Jr., the scalawag governor of South Carolina, during Congressional Reconstruction. Using diaries, newspapers, official proceedings, and a myriad of secondary sources, Benjamin Ginsberg hopes his “book will bring Moses a measure of posthumous rehabilitation” (xi). According to the author, Moses’s Jewishness is the key to understanding him. Although his father, Franklin Moses, Sr. became a respected politician and jurist from the Upcountry (Sumter District), he was not of the ruling gentry. The elder Moses left the boy’s religion to his wife, who raised him as a Methodist. Still, he suffered humiliation. His mother-in-law, for example, did not let him enter her home. When the war broke out, he became an ardent secessionist and aide-de-camp to Confederate governor F.W. Pickens. His military record was not sterling enough to secure his future. Moreover, in the waning days of war, a wave of anti-Semitism swept over Southern states as the vanquished looked for scapegoats. Moses “stood at the fringe of the southern aristocracy, but was never invited to join…always on the outside looking in” (7). At the end of the war he was broke.

This very marginality allows him to “envision a society different from the one in which he had been raised” (7). To achieve his burning ambition to become governor, he had to totally throw in his lot with the freedmen. In the process, he becomes a pariah to most white South Carolinians. Ginsberg’s Moses is both an outcast and a visionary who “built America’s first black-Jewish alliance, a prototype for the alliances that were to help reshape American politics in the decades to come” (7).
Moses of South Carolina is a welcome and long overdue reappraisal of the firebrand governor. Moses had become the “most perfect of scalawag" stereotypes, a kind of Bête Noir (dust jacket). Yet, we still know little about the man. Eric Foner’s masterpiece Reconstruction America’s Unfinished Revolution (1988) mentions him in passing. D.W. Griffith’s photoplay “Birth of a Nation" virtually ignores him in order to create a black menace in the person of the Lieutenant-Governor, Alonzo Ransier.

The author’s revisionist case is deceptively simple. His argument is an extended debate on the interplay between ethics, politics, and society. First, Moses was not just the gang leader of a group dedicated to milking the decent people of the state of all that they could. He never personally picketed much money, while more corrupt northern Republicans escaped unscathed. Most of the corruption was related to building a Republican party organization “based on an impoverished base that would be capable not only of winning elections but also of withstanding the intimidation and violence directed against it by its foes" (127). If the Union Leagues and the Black Militia, commanded by men like Moses, were ruthless and arbitrary in dealing with moderate Republicans, disaffected freedmen, and Democratic enemies, Ginsberg argues they had to be. Such activities were routinely practiced by machine politicians in the North.

There is much to recommend Ginsberg’s work. The author makes the Byzantine politics of the period understandable. His discussion of Moses’s marginality, the politics of corruption, the economy, and land reform in the state is compelling, intriguing, and audacious. Unfortunately, in refuting the traditional stereotype of Moses, the author posits another one, Moses the all-powerful. The governor never had the sufficient clout to dictate South Carolina politics in that ways that Ginsberg imagines.

Moses’s life precipitously spiraled downward after he left the state. His time in exile in the North was spent as a “petty grafter,” including several years in a Massachusetts penitentiary (190). His alienation from home was complete. Some members of the Moses family changed their surnames. When he died in December 1906, most of the actors in the Reconstruction drama were either gone or had become irrelevant. The author ends book by noting that “there was no one to care that the Israelite Franklin Moses, Jewnier, the only white man in South Carolina who had given a damn about blacks had died" (192).
Edmund L. Drago is a professor of history at The College of Charleston. His most recent book is Confederate Phoenix: Rebel Children and Their Families in South Carolina (Fordham University Press, 2008).