The Long Shadow of the Civil War: Southern Dissent and Its Legacies

Michael Perman

Family and Dissent in the South during and after the Civil War

Victoria Bynum’s new book expands on her 2002 study, *The Free State of Jones: Mississippi’s Longest Civil War*, because it supplements the resistance against the Confederate government in southern Mississippi with two other similar revolts, one in east Texas and the other in central North Carolina. The outcome is not a longer book but a very compact volume of just 148 pages of text that presents, to a wider audience than most scholarly monographs, the little-known story of this local opposition to the Confederacy. Bynum then proceeds to show that, after the war, these same three pockets of resistance generated a pattern of dissidence that continued throughout the last decades of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. This “long shadow of the Civil War” consisted of a tradition of dissent that passed through several generations within the families and communities that were involved in these three initial anti-Confederate insurgencies.

The three areas of resistance were, more specifically, the Quaker Belt in the Appalachian foothills, or piedmont, of North Carolina; Jones County in the Piney Woods region of Mississippi; and the Big Thicket area of eastern Texas, just inside the Texas border with Louisiana. And this wartime resistance to the Confederacy took many forms, such as refusing to enlist in the army, protecting deserters, harassing Confederate militia by means of guerrilla-style operations, and actually fighting pitched battles against Confederate troops. The most intense of these confrontations occurred in Jones county where Newton Knight and Jasper Collins formed the Knight Company that was involved in fourteen battles with Confederate troops, while the broadest popular insurrection arose in Randolph County, NC, where Bill Owens’ guerrilla band encouraged and
sustained widespread disaffection with the Confederacy. In Big Thicket, harassment was intermittent, with an armed band, led by Warren, Jasper Collins’ brother, harboring deserters and bushwhacking Confederate soldiers in the area.

The people who engaged in these overt acts of resistance were, according to Bynum, non-slaveholding farmers who lived outside the plantation areas of their states and who increasingly resented the conflict as “a rich man’s war and a poor man’s fight” that was also perceived as “a slaveowners’ war and a non-slaveowners’ fight.” Moreover, these rebels came from the same local communities and were even related to each other. As kinfolk, they banded together, with the women playing a major role in the resistance, protecting their families and communities from Confederate threats to their livelihood and shielding their male kin who were of draft-age. A third characteristic was their independent spirit and their nonconformist behavior. One of the most prominent of them, Newt Knight, lived openly with his racially-mixed family and their offspring, defiantly unconventional conduct that is described in some detail in the book’s sixth and final chapter.

As Professor Bynum explains, their acts of resistance and defiance shaped these renegades and their descendants so that they continued after the war to embrace the habits and values that had characterized their rebellion. And, of course, they were regarded with disdain by the more respectable and influential people, thus confirming them in their lack of social status as outsiders. As a result, dissidence became a tradition among these anti-Confederate outlaws. And so, in the 1880s and 1890s, the economic plight of farmers like themselves prompted some of them to support the new third party, the Populists, as did Jasper Collins of Jones and Warren Collins of Big Thicket. Some of the east Texas anti-Confederates became involved later still with the Socialist party, with Warren running for Congress in 1912. Others abandoned orthodox Christianity as well, rejecting the Baptists and Methodists to become Mormons, Seventh-Day Adventists and Universalists, all part of the dissenting pattern of their lives that Bynum explains so well.

The story of these little-known and unsung dissidents of the Confederate war and of the late nineteenth-century Jim Crow South makes for an intriguing tale. And for the author, who is related to some of the Jones county dissenters (several are named Bynum, in fact), it is a personal and inspiring story to tell. Too often, however, the drama of the unfolding narrative is overwhelmed by genealogy as the author explains the connections and relationships within and
between the families that generate the large cast of characters in each of these three communities. Because so many figures make an appearance, the stage gets crowded with people having names and connections to each other but possessing little individuality and having little role to play.

Nevertheless, several figures do stand out, and Bynum has unearthed enough evidence about them to be able to describe their activities and often their motivations as well. Three in particular are very memorable—Newt Knight, Jasper Collins, and also Anna Knight, one of Newt’s daughters. Anna’s life was quite remarkable. She became an Adventist missionary to India, and later a nurse and a teacher of black children, all the while living an ascetic existence and developing a shrewd strategy for dealing with the hostility toward, and stereotyping of, black women like herself. These three characters are wonderfully sketched and they become the major figures in the book.

Victoria Bynum’s interest in Anna Knight is especially understandable, since one of her fields is women’s history and her first book was *Unruly Women: The Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South* (1992). In fact, two chapters of the six in *The Long Shadow of the Civil War* focus on women, while a third deals with women and race. Chapter two emphasizes the part played by women, primarily in the Quaker Belt, within the resistance against the Confederacy. Not only did women support this dangerous defiance but they acted on their own in many aspects of it, in particular harboring deserters and encouraging their sons to refuse to enlist. Chapter six is about “The Women of the Knight Family” and it explores the very complicated and independent maneuvers that these mixed-race women employed to deal with the conventions of race and gender in the Jim Crow South. And lastly, chapter three examines the resistance in North Carolina’s Quaker Belt that was mounted during the post-war period of Reconstruction against the former Confederates and the Ku Klux Klan who were determined to remove the Republicans from control of their state and to restore the freedmen to the subordinate position they had endured as slaves. In this contest, black women in particular challenged attempts to control their autonomy especially their sexuality, even defending themselves in court, a remarkable development so soon after emancipation.

These chapters can be justified, it would seem, because they demonstrate how broad the dissent in these three pockets of southern resistance was. In effect, the men were not the only dissenters, for women, both white and black, were also acting with independence and defiance. But when dissent is construed so
broadly and includes such a large number of people and actions, it begins to lose coherence. Any act of insubordination or protest seems to be eligible for inclusion within this undifferentiated phenomenon of dissent. Furthermore, the sources of this gender and racial dissent cannot be traced back directly to the anti-Confederate insurgency that was the origin of the dissenting tradition within the kin networks of the Knights and Collinses.

This lack of priority and specificity in defining dissent is also attributable to another feature of the book, its organizing principle. While a loosely defined dissent is present throughout the narrative, the book is structured around the Knight and Collins families and the communities that they lived in. Three chapters are devoted to them—the first on the wartime resistance in Jones and Big Thicket, the fourth on Newt Knight’s decades-long but unsuccessful petition to the U.S. Court of Claims to obtain recognition and financial compensation for his battle with the Confederacy, and the sixth on the Knight women. In addition, the Epilogue, “Fathers and Sons,” recounts how the children in these families later remembered and assessed their fathers’ exploits in the war and afterwards. Since the last section of *The Long Shadow of the Civil War* returns to these dissident and unusual families, it is likely that readers will assume that the book is essentially about these kinfolk. Yet it is also very much a discussion of dissent in the South (the subtitle is, after all, “Southern Dissent and Its Legacies”). But the volume does not conclude with an evaluation of the role of dissent in southern history or a discussion of what dissent is, as opposed to the less organized and more individual protest that might be categorized as dissidence, rebelliousness, or insubordination, which perhaps describes better what appears mostly in this account. Although the South is often characterized as a region where racial and political orthodoxy has stifled opposition, dissent has actually been persistent, though rarely successful. As Carl Degler observed at the conclusion of his 1974 book on southern dissenters, “the story of the Other South has no end as long as there is a South” (The Other South, 371). But dissent comes in different shapes and sizes, and so the dissent in this book needs to be identified and assessed.

The achievement of Victoria Bynum’s book is its succinct presentation of a broad array of manifestations of dissidence and protest occurring at the local level, among communities and families, in three distinct geographical areas of the late nineteenth-century South. In the process, the reader encounters many of the insights and approaches of the new social history, such as family and community history and the history of race and gender. But so much is going on
throughout several generations that the reader, this one included, is left wondering what should be taken away from the book in the form of a historical theme, perspective, or interpretation that ties together the various episodes and developments depicted in this revealing and richly detailed book.

Michael Perman is Professor of History and Research Professor in the Humanities at the University of Illinois at Chicago and the author, most recently, of Pursuit of Unity: A Political History of the American South and co-editor, with Amy Murrell Taylor, of the third edition of Major Problems in the Civil War and Reconstruction.