

Cwbr Author Interview: A Generation At War: The Civil War Era In A Northern Community

Nicole Etcheson

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Interview

CWBR AUTHOR INTERVIEW: A GENERATION AT WAR: THE CIVIL WAR ERA IN A NORTHERN COMMUNITY

Etcheson, Nicole

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Interview with Nicole Etcheson, Alexander M. Bracken Professor of History at Ball State University

Civil War Book Review would like to congratulate Nicole Etcheson on winning the 2012 Avery O. Craven Award for this title, given by The Organization of American Historians, for most original book on the coming of the Civil War, the Civil War years, or the Era of Reconstruction, with the exception of works of purely military history.

Interviewed by Nathan Buman

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Civil War Book Review (CWBR): Today, we are pleased to speak with Professor Nichole Etcheson, the Alexander M. Bracken Professor of History at Ball State University and author of *A Generation of War: The Civil War Era in a Northern Community*. Professor Etcheson, thank you so much for talking with us today.

Nichole Etcheson (NE): Thank you for having me.

CWBR: Historians have spent so much time looking at the factory owners and the laborers in the Northeast and slaveholders and non-slaveholders in the South, but you show us the farmers and the wider agricultural community of the Midwest and the Old Northwest. Of all the counties and all of the northern states, why is Putnam County, Indiana an excellent area to study in order to understand how the American Civil War altered an entire generation of people?

NE: As I say in the introduction, no county is going to be totally perfect and I did choose Putnam County, in part, because of a famous speech that was given there by a Copperhead politician, Dan Voorhies, right before the war began. But, it seems to me, that Putnam County does a fairly good job of representing the North. It's a largely agricultural community, it is divided between Whigs and Democrats (and later, Republicans and Democrats), in an era, and in a state (Indiana) where the inter-party competition was quite fierce, and a lot of the home front studies of the North have looked at cities: Chicago, Boston, and Philadelphia. And those are all wonderful additions to what we need to know about the northern home front but we have not had many studies that have looked at the northern home front and that have looked at rural areas, small-town areas that were more typical of the North. Putnam County comes closer, I think, to being what much of the North was like.

CWBR: In terms of your methodology, what is the value of a county study in our broader, more complete understanding of the Civil War era?

NE: I call this a micro-history, meaning looking at a very tiny place, although I do take a larger slice of time than many home front studies of the Civil War which will concentrate on 1861-1865. I look from, about, the end of the war with Mexico through the end of Reconstruction so I think that swath of time is a contribution. But, in terms of micro-history, I really wanted to get a sense of how the war impacted individuals: soldiers, farmers, women, the black community in Putnam County because, really, this war swept up real people. And it is hard to get a sense of that when you're looking at the big political studies we have or the big military studies that we have. The way that this impacted the lives of real human beings and I would suggest that, even though we are looking at very particular human beings in a very particular place, the kinds of things that happen to them-imprisonment, widowhood, gaining more rights-are taking place all over the country.

CWBR: You very cleverly begin the book with an account of the murder of Martha Ann Sublett Mullinex by her husband Greebury. How does this incident illustrate the inter-party conflict, that you mentioned earlier, in the years leading up to the war?

NE: Yes, Martha was murdered by her husband; they had not been married very long and he may have been mentally disturbed. That is a little hard to tell in the newspaper accounts; he comes across as not quite "all there," and he murders

her with an axe. But what interests me about that, it is a turning point in the county history-it is the last execution in the county-but the story is picked up by a young man, Miles Fletcher, who is a professor at the local university, and Miles Fletcher comes from a very prominent Indianapolis family. And Miles turns, what might ordinarily be a very tragic story, into a revelation about the problems of the Democratic Party because the Mullinexes are Democrats, Fletcher is a rising Republican, and Greenbury drank, and his family manufactured liquor, and they were not interested in education, and the murderer's uncle had ties to the governor of Indiana who was a Democrat, who managed to get a temporary stay of the execution through his Democratic political connections. So Fletcher turns this all into a parable about how terrible the Democrats are, the way in which this is politicized, to reveal the differences between the two parties, I thought, was very interesting in the period before the Civil War. It seemed to me that one of the constants throughout the Civil War period, issues about gender that were there in the marriage, issues about alcohol, all of these things continue through but Fletcher has no interest in, and there is no role played by race in this tragedy, but it will come to be the case over the years that race becomes a more and important of a factor to the life of the county.

CWBR: I was struck by the degree to which Putnam County seems to provide a micro-history, as you mention, in the presidential election of 1860 in which we see residents positioning themselves in four different corners. It's not simply a Lincoln-Douglas debate and I wonder, what made politics so complex as the county considered their choices in 1860?

NE: Putnam County, one of the reasons I chose it, is that a state like Indiana, and a county like Putnam, had a substantial migration from the upper South. So all through the 1850s you see these very strong, loyalties to Kentucky, to the South, that people in Indiana and people in this county feel that the growing Republican Party is picking on the South, that southern rights are under attack, and there is not much sympathy for abolitionism or antislavery. At the same time, though, you do have the Whigs moving towards the Republican Party, not out of an antislavery sentiment, but out of the sense that it is the North that is the aggrieved party, that the North has been bullied constantly by the Slave Power of the South. So when we get to 1860, it is mostly Douglas men versus Lincoln me-northern Democrat versus Republicans-arguing about which one of them can best represent the South. There is a tiny, infinitesimal Constitutional Union, Bell movement but, what I found out and find quite interesting, was that there is a small Breckinridge movement led by some prominent local county officials, a

Judge named Delana Eckels went about the county and about the state making speeches for the Southern Rights' Democrats and John Breckinridge and that the margin that the Breckinridge voters polled in that county pushed the county to the Republicans. It allowed the Republicans to win the county. To my knowledge, we have tended to dismiss the Breckinridge movement in the North, but I wonder, if we did these kinds of micro-histories and looked at these results county-by-county, if we might find that some of the Republican margin of victory is owed more to the Southern Rights movement than we have heretofore known.

CWBR: Looking at the war, it seems to me that many of Putnam's residents opposed Republicans' use of emancipation as a war aim. If that is the case, what does that tell us about the long-standing slavery v. union debate? Did Putnam County residents fight a different civil war?

NE: They fought an internal civil war as well as a national civil war. And certainly many, many hundreds of young men from Putnam County went off and they fought with Sherman and they fought with McClellan, and they fought under Grant, and they are owed a great deal for the victory that the Union eventually won. But the county was very deeply divided and there was a very strong Copperhead, anti-war, Peace Democrat movement within the county. And it mainly played out over issues of the draft and of emancipation, which is to say that the violent incidents that occurred in the county—draft officers being mobbed and draft officers being shot at—were about the draft. People were organizing; the Copperheads of Putnam County were organizing. They were forming mobs, if you want to call them that, that had a consistent pattern of intimidating the draft officials and trying to prevent the carrying out of the draft. With emancipation, it was much more on the level of rhetoric of party resolutions that this was barbaric of the Lincoln administration to do this, that it confirmed what the Southern Democrats had been saying all along: that the Republicans were really an abolitionist movement. So, I think there was war at both levels, on the local level and then on the national level.

CWBR: In that tone, you seem to show that statewide, Indiana experiences a great deal of debate over the Thirteenth Amendment, and the state is the only one that chooses not to repeal its black laws. Why does Indiana seem so racially conservative?

NE: I think it was that southern migration; that was one of the major divisions for people. I would go back even further to the origin of the black laws, as I talk in the book, to the Constitution of 1851, where Indiana instituted Article 13 of the Constitution which prohibited African Americans from coming into the state. So, as you say, Indiana was a black law state; it had various prohibitions against equal rights for African Americans and that Article 13 had been ratified by an even bigger margin-it was ratified separately from the Constitution-and it got a bigger margin of victory than the Constitution itself. So, I think that was due to the strong southern-roots population of Indiana. And then what you're referring to is that the state had a lot of difficulty shedding those attitudes and didn't even get around, until constitutional revision until the 1880s, to repealing these black laws that had been ified by the Civil War. But I would also like to point out that, despite those attitudes, amazing things happened in Putnam County with race. Republicans who, before they were Republicans, back when they were Whigs in the county in the 1850s, did *nothing* for black rights-actually were opposed to black rights-through the Civil War period and, perhaps for self-interested motives, they actually come, by the 1870s, to be recruiting African Americans to moving into the county. So there is this legacy of racism but the Civil War era brings, I think, enormous strides.

CWBR: You see, immediately after the war as you reference, Putnam residents seem as if they want to disassociate themselves from the discussion of race entirely and they focus, instead on economics or their support of or opposition to the war. I wonder if I'm reading that correctly and, if that's the case, why do politicians, locally, often push race to the periphery?

NE: Well, there are still these long-standing issues. One of the things I found was that temperance is always there; it is kind of pushed to the background during the Civil War but, after the Civil War, it emerges and it is just an incredibly big deal. And women are very involved with the temperance movement so, although I don't see women seizing upon the Civil War to get their rights-the kind of narrative that we have had, someone like Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who looked at the Civil War as an opportunity to seize political rights for women-Putnam County women don't want that. Most of them just want the men to come home and then, sometimes when the men don't come home, they have to cope with the realities of getting on with life. A lot of things that had been there before the war, the concern with economic development, the concern about temperance emerge again after the war, but the reality is that the war has changed the status of African Americans. One of the families that I talk about in

the book, the Townsends, are the long-resident free blacks, and for much of the period, the only free blacks in the county, their son serves in the 28th United States Colored Troops; he has a very tragic experience: he never sees combat, he becomes ill, he dies. But nonetheless, there are people coming into the county, like the Townsends, who have served in the military. Now that blacks are mobile, people are coming up from Kentucky and from other southern states and some of them have military service and they have the Fourteenth Amendment and the Fifteenth Amendment and they have a status that now has to be recognized. People in the county have to come to terms with that. So I think, yes, white people in the county would like to go back to the set of issues that had always preoccupied them but they have had a new set of issues has emerged. And they have increasing numbers of people in the county who are going to push for those rights.

CWBR: I was struck, particularly, by how the Civil War changed gender roles. Women had to work when men went to the war and when the men returned they, often, could not work. How did pensions serve to maintain veterans' manhood by enabling them the hope of providing for their family with their service during the crisis. And, at the same time, how did pensions, on the other hand, alter the gender roles or the traditional role of a dependent woman? I'm thinking specifically about Jennie Fletcher, whose husband and father-in-law failed to enable her to be an independent woman.

NE: The Fletchers were very wealthy so ultimately Jennie Fletcher, when Miles dies, inherits enough money, and then when her father-in-law dies, she inherits enough from that estate that she is seemingly independent. On the issue of pensions, pensions had different ramifications, I think, for different groups of people by race and class. Some of what is interesting is that men who apply for these pensions don't see it as a hand-out from the government. One of the things that is interesting about these pension rolls is that, as these men age, they have more and more problems which, I think it would be fair to say, is probably related to the fact that they are getting old; they can't hear. Lucius Chapin's pension rolls, his teeth are falling out, he is getting into his seventies, he is having trouble hearing, he is having some mobility issues, and yet his pension applications take these all back to when he was in the army in Tennessee and Georgia and he had heat stroke, and *that* is why his teeth are falling out or he had a malarial fever back during the war. So this is the cause of losing teeth and bad hearing. We would probably say, well you're aging; that's why these things are happening to you. The veterans want to see this, not as I'm getting older and I'm

asking the government for money, as no, the government owes me this because this is happening to me because of what I did for the country thirty or forty years ago. The pension file of one of the black veterans, Wyatt James, who was related to the Townsend family, who suffered some terrible-looking wounds in the Petersburg Campaign in 1864 and, on the one hand, historians have pointed out how black veterans can apply for these pensions and they can get remuneration just the way that white veterans do, so it makes white and black manhood equivalent. On the other hand, Wyatt James is a laborer and the requirement is that he has to be disabled from laboring in order to qualify for the pension. So, it seems to be a little bit harder for him to be getting a pension than for Lucius Chapin, who is a lawyer and doesn't, presumably, need to work as physically hard to make this case as he is getting older for increased pensions. The women who get pensions, Charity Townsend, who is the mother of the black soldier, Robert, it is kind of hard to find out what happened. She apparently filed for a pension and didn't get anything for a long time and then got a good pension agent who got her back payments—a couple thousand dollars—an extraordinary sum for a poor black woman in that period. I think that testifies, again, to the government's emphasis on equal rights: she is the mother of a soldier who died, she apparently had some difficulty navigating the pension application process at first but, when she gets there, she gets the back payment of a substantial amount. And then, another woman, Elizabeth Applegate, she, I think, is the case where the pension allows her to be fairly independent. Her husband had been a prisoner at Andersonville, he came home sick, he died shortly after the war, and she views this pension as *her* money and, over the years, it becomes divorced from this idea that it is her husband providing for her in perpetuity; she never remarries, she lives largely off of the pension, it seems, and is fairly independent. Although, that is not ever what she wanted; she wanted John to come back from the war and provide for her as a man is supposed to do. So it is an unintended consequence of the pension that she becomes a very independent-minded widow.

CWBR: You mention some of the strides that African Americans are able to make in the years after the war in the way that Putnam County alters the way that its viewpoint on race. I wonder, generally speaking, does post-war Putnam County's experience help explain African-Americans' struggle to make social headway nationally leading into the Jim Crow period? It seems to me that, while they are making strides, many white residents are simply apathetic about race in this period in Putnam County.

NE: Yes, some are. There are two things going on. One, of course, is that African Americans during the Civil War and during Reconstruction are seeking to better their condition. So, by the 1870s, in particular, there builds up, in some areas of North Carolina dissatisfaction with the end of Reconstruction, with the re-imposition of discriminatory measures by the state of North Carolina, and so African Americans there start thinking about leaving. But then there is also a coordinate movement in Indiana, and ultimately in Putnam County, to recruit blacks to come to the county. And the white Republicans who do this-some of them are self-interested- want cheap labor, so they think former slaves from the South may work for less than white laborers in the county. Some of it is, this is a very closely divided county, and local Republicans are looking to bring in Republican voters; everyone denies that this is going on. That doesn't seem to be how it started. Local Democrats will say that they went out looking for voters; they're importing voters. It does not seem to have, then, the genesis of the movement but it certainly was a nice added side effect. And so you get these white Republicans who were bringing in, or hoping to bring in, these North Carolina African Americans. And local Democrats are certainly not indifferent about it; they are mad as hell and we talk about the Exoduster movement to Kansas and there was a national, congressional committee to investigate what was happening with the movement of blacks out of the South. Because our focus has largely been on the movement from the Deep South to Kansas, we have tended to miss the fact that the whole reason to call this congressional committee into session was that they were worried (Democrats in Congress were worried) about black movement into Indiana. That was really the origin of the congressional concern and a lot of the testimony was about Kansas but a lot of it was about Indiana as well, and in that local testimony you see local Democrats organizing to drive African Americans out. Now, ultimately what happens is, a lot of these Exodusters who come to Putnam County, they end up leaving. Many of them go to Indianapolis, some of it because racial prejudice was stronger in the countryside than they had been led to believe. I think a lot of it has to do with there being less economic opportunity than they had been led to believe so they go to Indianapolis which is a larger, growing metropolis and there are more jobs there. But some of these Exodusters stay in the county, some of them marry into the Townsends and form the real beginnings of the black community in the county.

CWBR: Professor Etcheson, I want to thank once again for taking the time to discuss your book today, *A Generation at War: The Civil War Era in a*

Northern Community.

NE: Well, thank you very much for having me.