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Interview

The Literature of Reconstruction: Not in Plain Black and White

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Interview by: Tom Barber

Civil War Book Review (CWBR): Today the Civil War Book Review is pleased to speak with Brook Thomas Chancellor's Professor of English at the University of California—Irvine and the author of several books including *Civic Myths: A Law and Literature Approach to Citizenship* and *American Literary Realism and The Failed Promise of Contract*. Today we are here to talk with him about his new book, *The Literature of Reconstruction, Not in Plain Black and White*. Professor Thomas, thank you for joining us today.

Brook Thomas (BT): Thank you so much. It is a pleasure to talk with you. Your reviews are a great aid to my scholarship.

CWBR: Thank you so much. And we'll go ahead and dive into the questions. With your new book, why emphasize literature as perspective when looking at Reconstruction?

BT: One reason I wanted to do so is because of the disparity between the amount of attention given to Reconstruction by historians and by literary critics. Many excellent revisionist scholars work on Reconstruction in history, but there's been relatively little attention given to it by literary critics. I wanted to address that disparity. I also thought that attention to literature can give us a different perspective on this important time in our history. Too often people use literature as a reflection of a period. But if all literature is doing is reflecting history, why turn to it? Instead, go straight to history. I wanted to make a case for how looking at various works of literature can supplement our understanding of Reconstruction.

CWBR: Great. How that—how does did Reconstruction then come to be viewed in black and white? You said in the book, it is sort of a long process, started by Henry Grady, but also continued into the literature about the era itself.

BT: As you note, my subtitle— "Not in Plain Black in White"—is an allusion to the response by the segregationist Henry Grady to George Washington Cable's "A Freedman's Case in Equity." Cable wrote soon after the Civil Rights Cases of 1883 that struck down the Civil Rights Act of 1875. Acknowledging that African Americans had lost support in positive law, he made a case for them in equity. They should be full-fledged citizens of the United States with full political and civil rights. Grady responded by arguing that the truly equitable solution is "In Plain Black and White." That is separate but equal. But his title is also a pun. "In plain black and white" evokes common sense. The common sense solution to the "race problem" was segregation. My "Not in Plain Black and White" is a challenge to that argument. It is also an

allusion to *An Imperative Duty* by William Dean Howells. That work has a character who views moral issues in plain black and white terms, whereas for Howells they are grey. This occurs in a book about a mixed race character who can pass as white. For Howells neither race nor morality can be understood in plain black and white terms. My book deals with all of these issues. How did the promise of Reconstruction transform into the segregation of Jim Crow? Why do we think of race in black and white terms? And importantly, I wanted to challenge the tendency the nation has had to judge Reconstruction morally in black and white terms.

Sorry, for this long-winded answer. To sum up, the literature in my title is linked to “not in plain black and white” because I'm hoping that close attention to works of literature can help us see how much more complicated and muddled the period was in racial, moral, and political terms.

CWBR: Now what I found I really interesting, and before we go over the content of your book, if you could talk a little bit about how literature and law informs your chronology of Reconstruction because many of our listeners might think Reconstruction is an era typically defined from 1863 to about 1877, give or take, and so how do you come to define Reconstruction chronologically, and why is that important for the overall argument in your book?

BT: The dates 1863-1877 are the subtitle of Eric Foner's magnificent book. 1863 reminds us that Reconstruction began during the war. 1877 refers to the reputed end with the election of Hayes. Since Foner's work, however, Greg Downs, Heather Cox Richardson, and others have argued that 1877 wasn't quite the dramatic end people have thought. For instance, when the lawyer Albion W. Tourgée wrote Reconstruction novels after 1877 he hoped they would renew momentum for reform. A number of Reconstruction measures were not undone until later in the century. 1877 is, therefore, more of a pivot than an end. At the same time, officially Reconstruction was over when the last state, Georgia, was readmitted to Congress in 1871. In other words, the dates demarcating Reconstruction are fluid. In my book I distinguish between the period of Reconstruction and an era of Reconstruction. The period is 1863 to 1877. The era extends to the founding of the NAACP on Lincoln's birthday, 1909. At that point, the dream wasn't abandoned, but it was now necessary to fight not only the legacy of slavery but also what people have called the “retreat from Reconstruction.” That retreat was marked legally by *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) for the 14th Amendment; *Hodges v. US* (1906) for the 13th Amendment, and *Giles v. Alabama* (1903) for 15th Amendment. I designate the literature of Reconstruction as any work written during the era of Reconstruction engaging issues raised during the period of Reconstruction.

CWBR: In doing so, your book seems to embrace, and talk about, the many sort of contradictory assumptions of the era's authors. So for example, you talk about Ruiz de Barton's disgust with railroad monopolies in the East, while she advocated for them in the West. What were some of the other contradictory positions that surprised you to learn about, and where you felt they made the most impact in terms of actual political practice?

BT: First, another point about periodization. Periods are constructed. Thus, I also want to question a commitment to black and white definitions of periods.

Now to contradictions. Claude Levi-Strauss argued that myths arise in response to social contradictions. Confronted with contradictions people tend to tell stories to explain them. Many of the narratives I analyze respond to contradictions. My authors are full of them. Thomas Dixon is often said to epitomize white southern thinking. In fact, he frequently takes positions many southern whites opposed. On some economic issues he was closer to the Republicans. Far from idolizing the Old South, he has protagonists who battle its representatives. Dixon, Joel Chandler Harris, and Thomas Nelson Page were all against Reconstruction but often disagreed on other issues. Of course they were united in disagreeing with Tourgée and African American novelist Charles W. Chesnutt. But all five supported Teddy Roosevelt in 1904. Tourgée was a carpetbagger in North Carolina, Homer Plessy's attorney, perhaps the most vocal white advocate of African American rights in the era and also a novelist, *A Radical*, he would certainly be expected to have supported the 1875 Civil Rights Act. But when it was proposed in 1874, including a provision mandating integrated schools that was later dropped for being too radical, he opposed it, aware of the backlash it would create. His fiction tries to imagine a way to be both radical and pragmatic

CWBR: Now talking about—it is good that you bring up backlash because my next question was about Klan violence. Because a lot these novels, and heroes, thinking of Dixon, but you also talk about Joel Chandler Harris and Thomas Nelson Page. So, how did these authors justify Klan violence? And why is it important that we take their justifications for trying to understand why this era was so complicated?

BT: Obviously, the Klan was one of the most virulent forms of backlash. Today, we are seeing new reiterations of backlash. The three southern writers give us insight into different reasons for backlash. Page distinguishes between what he sees as illegitimate activities of the Klan, such as the burning of schools, lynchings, and so forth, and legitimate activities. Made in the name of the Klan, the former do not represent the southern people. In fact, the leader of the illegitimate Klan is a scalawag. The good southern people were concerned with one thing and one thing only: armed black militias. Disarming them was a legitimate use of the Klan. In contrast, Dixon saw the Klan as an active force in redemption. Much more sympathetic to centralized power, he also imagined it as a more organized network than did Page. Yet even Dixon's hero says that after Redemption, the Klan should be disbanded. The Klan, he felt, had too much power and it shouldn't be used by unscrupulous people. If white Southerners were treated fairly and blacks kept in their place, it is implied, no violence would have been necessary. In my book, I made sure that I put these views of the Klan in dialogue with views expressed by African American writers like Chesnutt and by Tourgée, who published an attack called *The Invisible Empire*. Creating dialogue between different points of view was important for me. That is why I did not organize the book by chapters on individual authors, but instead by topics so that I could bring different views together. Literature may not reflect reality but it does express what people were thinking.

CWBR: And that's how people tended to justify their actions. I think the narratives that people tell themselves are very important to understand.

BT: Of course some people object that a work of literature cannot express what all people were thinking. That is why it is important to treat a variety of points of view. Furthermore, these works did not express only the views of authors. They also shaped the views of people at the time.

CWBR: Now you also brought up another theme that I thought was interesting, which was this notion of federalism, and how contested different visions of federalism were. And the question about Harris and Page and Dixon made me think of how similar their argument about disbanding the Klan, and its alleged work was done, reflected Lincoln's argument about how the Confederacy was really just a bunch of bad apples, and that once we had gotten rid of the bad apples, the states could be restored. Is there any connection between these things? How did extralegal violence and notions of federalism, that you talk about, interact with each other?

BT: Federalism is a complicated issue not often addressed by literary critics. But we cannot understand Reconstruction without attention to it. All of the southern writers try to delegitimize the Ku Klux Klan Act that gave the national government enforcement powers previously reserved for the states. In contrast, Tourgée and Chesnut argue for more national power to combat racial violence. But federalism raises another issue. There is no doubt that more national power was needed to protect African American rights. Yet increased national power was a mixed blessing. Not embracing states' rights in all areas, Dixon welcomed increased national power to control immigration. So federalism is another of the period's paradoxes. On the one hand, increased national power was necessary to bring about the goals of Radical Reconstruction. On the other hand, it gave the national government more power over Native Americans, more power over Chinese immigrants, and more power to wage imperialism. A staunch imperialist, Dixon welcomed some of that concentrated power.

CWBR: So this leads into another tension in your book, which was all the writers that you deal with, essentially have conversation about whether Reconstruction will be merely restoration or a recreation of society. How did this tension between reconstruction and restoration define the era's literature?

BT: Thank you for bringing up those terms. An appropriate comparison is Great Britain. After its Civil War, it had restoration; it wanted to restore the monarchy. In the United States, some people said that now that the war is over the Union should simply be restored to what it had been. But most agreed that it needed some reconstruction. There was, however, disagreement about the extent of reconstruction. President Johnson felt that all that was needed was the Thirteenth Amendment to abolish slavery. Radicals insisted on a more extensive reconstruction and called for the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. For Johnson this was a revolution, not a reconstruction. I use various works to recreate these different views and how different authors felt they affected the lives of individuals and different groups. There was a wide range of views. Some reactionaries, like Bedford Forrest, opposed any form of reconstruction, refused to accept the Confederate defeat, and kept fighting a war for southern independence. In contrast, many white Southerners and some white Northerners agreed with Johnson's and--they claimed--Lincoln's mild, Presidential Reconstruction. At the opposite extreme, some supported Radical Reconstruction. There were numerous intermediate positions. Some opposed Johnson

because he vetoed the Civil Rights Act of 1866, which provided for various economic rights, such as the right to own property and enter into contracts, but then opposed the Civil Rights Act of 1875, which guaranteed civil rights in various social relations. Some supported the Fourteenth Amendment but did not feel that the equal protection clause prohibited states from mandating separate accommodations on racial grounds, so long as they were equal. Some supported the Fifteenth Amendment, but opposed universal male suffrage, arguing for a color-blind literacy requirement that would have disfranchised many African American males. Back to my title: it's not just in plain black and white.

CWBR: Did these disagreements, to me, I see them in the devices and plots used by authors to dramatize the period. So what I'm thinking about here, all these books, or many of them rather, contain plots about inheritance, and I'm wondering if you can explain why that's significant, and how it relates to these people who cannot find consensus in the present, so they look either toward the past, or the future, with these plots that deal with inheritance in some way.

BT: In almost every one of the works of literature that I treat, there is a question about inheritance. The last two chapters of the book I read those inheritance plots allegorically as a debate about the rightful inheritance of a reconstructed nation. For Thomas Nelson Page, former plantation owners and guarantors of the community's order and harmony are cheated out of their former land by corrupt Reconstruction policies. For African American writers, African Americans are deprived of the inheritance their labors and efforts deserve. There is another question as well. How much will the New South inherit from the Old? Will the Old South be reconstructed or restored? I end with inheritance because Reconstruction is our inheritance. We write about works of literature in the present tense, not the past. Literature can help us relive the decisions various characters had to make and force us to ask ourselves how we would have acted and how those actions would have affected the future, which is our present. In that way, literature can combat a sort of presentism that judges the past by our moral standards of today and finds it lacking. Instead, read as I try to read them, works of literature can help us use the past we inherit to judge where we stand today.

CWBR: It also seems that you are arguing that Reconstruction left an inheritance of its own. We tend not to give [the period] its due in that aspect. I feel that historians tend to look at the Civil War era as the thing, the event, the action, that we should consider when talking about inheritance, but you make a great case throughout the book that Reconstruction left a tangible footprint, and folks at the time still couldn't agree on how to resolve these issues. And the other thing I didn't see much in the book on, was religion. And I was wondering if this was a theme writers actively avoided because perhaps felt it was immaterial to the problems or maybe they dealt with it in a more subtle way. Did religion play a role at all when thinking about Reconstruction?

BT: First, I think that you are absolutely right. Many people well aware that slavery continues to cast its shadow over the nation tend to let the Civil War overshadow Reconstruction in their understanding of the past even though it was the first concerted effort to remedy the nation's most egregious wrong. On religion you point to one of the limits of the book. Arguing for the importance of literature, I start with William Dean Howells who claims that novelists can make political arguments. Not in the way you make a stump speech in a campaign or in the

Senate or in Congress. Instead, they make an argument by giving us a sense of the crucial forces at work in a particular period. In addition to selecting the most important forces, they construct a plot that puts them in their proper proportion and relation. For instance, different authors might agree that economic, racial, and gender forces are the most important but give different weight to them in their plots. If an author can construct a convincing plot with convincing characters, he or she has made a successful political argument about which forces are the most influential. I did not select religion as one of my organizing topics. That's not because it lacked importance. But the book was already too long, so religion is present only as a subplot. But it is a significant subplot. Thomas Dixon after all was a minister. Tourg ee was very aware of the importance of religion in the African American community. One of his main characters, Uncle Jerry, gets lynched. For Francis Harper religion binds the African American community. In contrast, Joel Chandler Harris portrays an African American minister as superstitious and the butt of jokes. For a better understanding of the role of religion, you need to turn to the work of Edward Blum.

The question of selection is, nonetheless, a reminder of a point I tried to make. Today, quite rightly, we consider race the crucial issue. But part of my argument is, and I try to use these novels to support it, that race gets entangled with so many issues, economic, social, legal, etc. that a singular focus on race will not allow us to understand what was going on. Race can only be understood in relation to those other issues and vice versa. Works of literature give us different "arguments" about those entanglements. Religion only deepens the plot.

CWBR: I didn't see it as a shortcoming. As someone not familiar with these works, only in passing, those extra words helped me understand the novels had and how they were in discourse with each other, so I think it was a good choice. My final question, what is gained by not by not viewing the era in black and white?

BT: This brings me to the present. When you write a book you always hope to intervene into what is going on today. As you note, there have been numerous memory studies of the Civil War, and for good reason. But when people say that with the Confederate monument controversy we're still fighting the Civil War, I counter that what we are really still fighting is Reconstruction. For instance, when were those monuments created? They began to be erected in the era of Reconstruction, after the end of the period of Reconstruction when northern whites and southern whites reconciled. They had the blessing of the nation, not just former Confederates. To frame the controversy as refighting the Civil War is to put all of the blame on the South and forget the responsibility of the North. Today we celebrate Lee and Grant shaking hands at Appomattox. The postal service issues commemorative stamps of the Civil War. But there was no celebration of the Reconstruction Act of 1867. It would still be too controversial.

Historians rightly debate what actually happened after the Civil War. Works of literature I argue, give us access to the variety of possible worlds that could have emerged. The nation continues to debate the latter, which is why Eric Foner calls Reconstruction the nation's "unfinished revolution." If we persist in seeing the issues involved in black and white terms, we have no chance of finishing that revolution successfully.

BT: For instance, I end with a point made by David Blight in his marvelous *Race and Reunion*. "The tragedy of Reconstruction," he argues, "is rooted in this American paradox: the imperative of healing and the imperative of justice could not ultimately cohabit the same house." But perhaps the house has, not one, but multiple, notions of justice. To have any hope of reconciling

the nation with the ideal of racial justice, we need to be willing to have a dialogue about competing senses of justice. I try to use literature to advance that dialogue.

CWBR: Professor Thomas I appreciate you taking the time to sit and discuss your most recent work: *The Literature of Reconstruction, Not in Plain Black and White*.

BT: Thank you very much I really appreciate you taking the time to talk with me.