

# The Literature of Reconstruction, Not in Plain Black and White

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## Interview

### The Literature of Reconstruction: Not in Plain Black and White

Brook, Thomas

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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 to you. I enjoy reading your publication.

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 literary critics. There is a huge, vast number of excellent revisionist scholars working in Reconstruction in history, but there's been relatively attention given to it by literary critics. So I wanted to remedy that disparity, but also because I thought that attention to literature can actually give us a different perspective on this really important time in our history from what, traditionally historians, would be giving us. So when I'm bringing literature—too often people use literature as a reflection of a period. But if all literature is doing is reflecting history, why go to literature? Just go straight to history. So I wanted to talk some ways about what could be added to our understanding of this period by looking at various works of literature.

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 allude, that the subtitle, "Not in Plain Black in White" is an allusion to the famous response that the segregationist Henry Grady gave to George Washington Cable argument for a freedman's case in equity. And this was right after the civil rights cases of 1883. And then Cable looked and said, "Okay, in positive law, African Americans are not getting the legal support that they should, but we can make a case for them in equity. They should be full-fledged citizens of the United States." And Grady responded and said "No, the really equitable solution is in plain black and white. That is separate but equal." It is a punning title because he

also goes that "in plain black and white" also means it's just common sense. By me saying that no "Not in Plain Black and White" is actually an allusion to a work of literature by William Dean Howells, in which he has a character—So the "plain black and white" has two elements in Grady. One, is that the color line should be along plain black and white lines, separate but equal; but also that this is just plain black and white—it's just common sense. Howell's *Imperative Duty* has a character, a woman in that book, who Howell says, "Views moral issues in plain black and white." Well, in fact there's—they are much more grey; they tend to go into one another, so it is not just right and wrong.

This is in a book about a mixed race character who can pass as white. So there's both the racial issue, so plain black and white doesn't really account for the fact that we have these mixed race characters, and that of course is a complication along the color line. But also, he's challenging the view that moral judgment should be plain black and white. So I both wanted to raise the racial issue against the color line, but also the way in which Reconstruction is historiographically—in terms of our culture—has tended to be looked at first in plain black and white terms, morally. Oh, for years it was considered the nightmare, the Tragic Era—horrible—and then revisionist critics have turned it around, quite rightly and importantly. But what I wanted to do is use literature to try to show that the—both on the racial element and also on the moral judgment element—things are a lot more murkier and complicated than we tend to do if we only see in plain black and white terms. Sorry, this is a long winded answer.

So again the literature in my title is linked to in plain black and white because I'm hoping that by paying close attention to works of literature we can see how much more complicated and muddled the period was in racial terms and in our moral judgments about it.

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 from 1863-1877—that's Eric Foner's subtitle of his book—those are the dates he uses. And it is really important that he uses '63 because traditionally people would talk about Reconstruction starting with the end of the war, but Foner emphasizes very importantly—that no, actually, Reconstruction, talk of Reconstruction happened during the war. Now since Foner's work there have been a number of critics, Greg Downs among them, but many others—including Heather Cox Richardson and so forth—who have pointed out that, well yes, 1877, which is Hayes election, marks an important point in Reconstruction, but it wasn't quite the dramatic end people thought it was, that there was a long Reconstruction. There is still continued efforts going on for quite some time.

In fact, if we look at chronology another way—is to realize that in some ways, officially Reconstruction was over when Georgia was admitted to Congress in 1871 because now all of the states had been reconstructed. And so the dates—the idea that these dates are much more fluid and longer has me give a—make a distinction between what I call the period of reconstruction, which would be Foner's period, and the era of reconstruction in which the issues that were raised

by efforts to reconstruct the nation continued to be actively debated and that the dream of reconstruction for people in that generation had not actually—they didn't really give up on it. There were people like Albion W. Tourgée who were clearly still thinking things could still be turned around. So era of Reconstruction actually for me then goes as long—I use a date—this is somewhat arbitrarily—but it's the founding of the NAACP on Lincoln's birthday, 1909. And at that point, the dream wasn't given up, but it was recognized that now one had to work against the grain of what people have called the Retreat from Reconstruction—all the legal decisions. For instance, *Plessy v. Ferguson* for the 14th amendment; for the 13th amendment the *Hodges* case in which it basically the 13th amendment loses control. And then the case in Alabama, in which, the 15th amendment has lost its power—has basically becomes an empty read. That the Supreme Court is not willing then to enforce the 15th amendment anymore. So at that point the NAACP says, "Okay, Reconstruction, founded on these constitutional grounds of these Civil War amendments, we now have to fight against that." And so for me, the era of Reconstruction, while literature even in that era even after 1877, it was a favorite topics of many writers. And so what I look at is the writing of these works of reconstruction during the era of Reconstruction, they're engaging what is going on in 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: Before I go to that, one other point about the periodization. Periods, of course—periods are things that we make—and another part of my title "Plain Black and White" that there are not plain black and white beginnings and endings to periods—which they tend to be much more fluid and complicated than that.

Back to contradictions. Part of what I was trying to do was help understand—we tend today to think of Reconstruction that there were the Radicals on one side and those opposed to them. I try to find much more complicated positions on those. For instance, who were the Radicals? Well, the Radicals were those for instance who had supported the Reconstruction Act of 1867—use of military rule. But as Greg Downs, in his recent book *After Appomattox*, pointed out, they had very different views for justifying that role of military rule. So they, even within, the Radicals themselves, and those opposing the Radicals, there were multiple different positions. So I try to use works of literature to point out some of those.

And so what were some of the surprises? Well for me—in some ways the hero of my book is Albion W. Tourgée—who was a carpetbagger in North Carolina, an attorney—ended becoming an attorney for Homer Plessy, and was perhaps the most vocal advocate white advocates of African American rights in the period and also a novelist. So I would have assumed that Tourgée would have supported the Civil Rights Act of 1875 which was a watered down version of this supplementary civil rights bill that Charles Sumner wanted to have. It is watered down because it does not have the provision of schools. Turns out, that Tourgée thought it was not a good idea. Why? Because he understood what the response to the bill would in the South, and he recognized that it would then create a horrible backlash. And so it is some of these

complicated positions, where sometimes even the people who seem the most radical are taking issue with some of the position that today we would assume would be the progressive ones, which were of interest me. Others are, for instance, the horrible Thomas Dixon. Terrible racist. So one would think that he was a pure states' rights person, actually he was very much in favor of various power in the national government. And so, how to work out these various complicated positions, which rather than have just this plain black and white view of what was going on at the time.

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: One reason it is important is, again to get rid of some stereotype, because backlash is extremely important. Obviously, the Klan is one of the most virulent forms of that backlash. Today, we are seeing reiterations of backlash. One reason I think it is extremely to take seriously of the novels of these three writers—who in different could be said to justify the Klan—is that we aren't going to understand the backlash—and deal with it—if we don't try to understand what they are saying. What their points of view are. So I felt it was very important to then to understand them and also to see that they were not unified in their views.

One of the strategies that, for instance, Page uses, is to make a complete distinction between what he sees as illegitimate activities of the Klan, in which he then disparages those activities. Those are all the views that today we would identify as burning of schools, lynchings, and so forth. He would say yes that was under the name of the Klan, but actually that was not really what the southern people were believing in. And in fact, the leader of that illegitimate Klan, in his work, is actually a scalawag, so it's not the good southern people. The good southern people were concerned with one thing and one thing only, which was making sure that there were not—that black militias were not armed. And that he felt was a justified use of the Klan, but it was not that used violence. That's inaccurate, but it is important to see what the ideological justification was.

In Thomas Dixon, what people don't know, his hero, the Klan hero, says that after Redemption has come, the Klan should be disbanded. We don't want the Klan anymore. Because he recognized the Klan had too much power and it shouldn't be used by—that power—by unscrupulous people. That view, it is important, what their justifications was, and if all I did was look at these characters and their point of view, it wouldn't be enough. It was also absolutely crucial to put in dialogue their view with Albion W. Tourgée's view of the Klan—he had written a book *The Invisible Empire*; and with African American writers like Charles W. Chestnut and their view of the Klan. So it is putting all of those in dialogue which seems to me is to help understand what the debates were in the period, can be very helpful. Literature does give us this sense of giving us an inside of what people were thinking, and I think that is important to understand. Not because they are reflection reality as it was, but that was how people thought about those issues.

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: And again, well you say, "Okay, well, why literature?" What were the real people thinking? These works were popular because many people shared their views. So not only were they expressing the views of people, but were also shaping 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: Well, first so the different views of federalism and what I'd wanted to point out in the work, by looking at those three southern writers, was that they actually had views of federalism. Dixon, as you can tell from the fact that, his novels were then the basis of *The Birth of the Nation*, was in many ways, not as said before, was in favor of certain powers to the federal government. Therefore, for instance, the power of the federal government during imperialism to, he's in favor of that. He's also in favor of the power of the federal government to control immigration. Chinese immigration is going on here. So one of the paradoxes, and you talk about contradiction, but I'm not if it is a contradiction but it is at least a paradox that I wanted to explore, was about the increase in the national government's power during the period. On the one hand, it was absolutely necessary to bring about the goals of Radical Reconstruction, but on the other hand that increased also gave the national government more power over Native Americans, more power over Chinese immigrants, and more power to wage imperialism. And so, from the southern point of view, they thought they were quite consistent at times—we're anti-imperialist because the North was a form of imperialism in conquering us afterwards; and we're also opposed to the extension of imperialism abroad after the Spanish-American war. They felt themselves consistent. So again, the paradoxes of these questions, of federalism and increased national power, again not just in plain black and white; sometimes used for good and sometimes for more detrimental reasons.

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: Again I think, I do try to make, and thank you for bringing up those terms, is after the British Civil War, it had restoration; it wanted to restore the monarchy. In the United States, some people in the South said that now that the war is over, let's just restore the Union as it was, but the very notion of Reconstruction, which actually is a term Lincoln starts using, is making it clear that just a restoration of the Union as it was, minus slavery, will not be enough. We actually have to reconstruct it on a new constitutional foundation, of the Civil War amendments—13th, 14th, and 15th. What's interesting, to me, is then not only the difference between a restoration

and a reconstruction, but for me, a major issue at the time, which again I think these works of literature can help us relive, is how should the nation, or the union, be reconstructed? There was no agreement on that. Today we tend to use Reconstruction as a shorthand for Radical Reconstruction, but it is important remember of course that there was also, not just congressional and radical reconstruction, but presidential reconstruction. Andrew Johnson, a great unionist, takes over for Lincoln and claims he is following Lincoln's view of Reconstruction, which was to be malice towards none and forgiveness—bring the South back as soon as possible. That is not saying the nation should not be reconstructed, it is merely saying it should be reconstructed a different. The number of positions that come from Radical Reconstruction, to Johnson's view, are numerous. For instance, in Johnson's administration the first civil rights act, 1866, is proposed; he vetoes it. Many people said he shouldn't, but some people who said that the 1866 civil rights act, should have been brought about, and Johnson shouldn't have vetoed, were skeptical, more skeptical say, about the 15th amendment. A number of people who supported the 1866 Civil Rights Act did not support the 1875 Civil Rights Act, so there's this whole range of different positions that are there. And again by looking at different works of literature I try to give a sense of what those range of positions were. Again, 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: So the last two chapters of the book deal with inheritance plots. In almost every one of the works of literature that I treat, there is a question about inheritance. Whether it be of an estate, whether it be—wills get involved. And what I try to do is make significance about that. So to simplify, some, one of the questions is, then, who will inherit? Who is the legitimate inheritor of the world that we live in? In African American works, which are so important for an understanding of this period, almost in every plot an African American is denied a legitimate inheritance. So, whether it be a house, whether it be money, in some ways they are—they have a legitimate inheritance, which either through legal realms, or just through pure violence, they've been denied that. And so that's extremely then to understand their sense of disinheritance and how radical reconstruction was a way of giving a proper inheritance. From the southern, it is often, we would have a house, a plantation, or something, which was denied the southerner because of the machinations of Radical Reconstruction through higher taxes, and so forth. So I wanted to explore those different senses, in both people opposed to Reconstruction and those for it, having a sense what was the true inheritance? And that of course—one reason that I end with those is because, I want us to reflect because works of literature, of course, unlike history—we write in the past tense; works of literature we write about in the present tense. So that action in some ways is always unfolding. So for one reason I wanted us—These works of literature, I'm hoping, will raise the question about of what is our inheritance from this period of reconstruction? How are those issues still with us 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: You're pointing to one of the limits of the books. One of the arguments I make about the importance of literature, I start with William Dean Howells who says what novelists can do is that they can make a political argument. And they make a political argument not in the way you make a stump speech say on the campaign or in the Senate, or in Congress. But they make a political argument by giving us a sense of what were the crucial forces at work in particular period. And so they select which are the most important forces and then, not only do they select them, they have to put them in the proper proportion and relation. And I, in my realm of selection, I did not select religion as one of the topics; and that's not because the issue is not important but it was partially because my book was already too long, but also it shows perhaps my own bias. But the questions of religion were of course extremely important. Thomas Dixon after all was a minister. Tourgée, one of his most important characters, is an African American who—Uncle Jerry—who ends up getting lynched. He is a religious leader in the community, in the African American community. So we get to see how important religion was in the African American community, but also on the other hand, by people like Dixon and so forth. So indeed it played an absolutely crucial role and in my narrative of the period it should—to give a full view of the period—I should have had a chapter on that well. Since you've read the book and it is already long enough as it is, I went way over what the press was giving me in terms of pages, that shows one of the weaknesses of my own selection. Which is another reminder, on this though I do justify it, my argument is in this period, which we tend to think in terms of Reconstruction quite rightly, the crucial issue was race. But part of my argument is, and I try to use these novels to show, is that race gets entangled with so many issues, economic, social, legal at that time that a singular focus on race will never allow us to understand what was going on, and religion would be another one of those areas in which that interconnectedness and entanglement occurs.

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 I think the present. When you write a book you always hope to have some intervention in what is going on today. And you raised the issue before, there has been a lot of memory studies, numerous memory studies of the Civil War, and for good reason. But in some ways the United States, we had the Confederate monument controversy and so far, and people often tend to think that is about we're still fighting the civil war. My argument is that we're still fighting Reconstruction. For instance, when were those monuments created? They were created in the era of Reconstruction, or in my era of Reconstruction, if not necessarily the period of Reconstruction. Southerners in creating those monuments were perfectly willing that



they had lost the war. That's why it is called the Lost Cause. It was lost. They weren't refighting the Civil War, they were merely saying we need to have our honor, of troops respected. What they were fighting against, what none of them would give into, was Radical Reconstruction. Reconstruction to my mind is still as Eric Foner, and we are so lucky for his work, it is an unfinished revolution. The nation is still trying to come to terms with it. And therefore why then, "Not in Plain Black and White" is important not just to see this in plain black and white, but it is important to see how complicated those issues so we can come to wrestle with them and still try to come to terms because the radical goal, its utopian element has still not been fulfilled in the country.

CWBR: Given the ending of your book where you point out the contradiction what radical reconstruction was trying to do with asserting, balancing liberty and power, do you think it is a utopia that can be obtained, in spite of its antagonistic character?

BT: The end, I take on perhaps certainly one of the best—a point made by David Blight, who wrote this remarkable work—his study of memories of the Civil War and Blight says, that the tragedy of reconstruction was that the imperative of justice and the imperative of healing, that is trying to bring white and north, white and southern, southern and northern whites together again, could not inhabit the same house. Clearly, he's thinking there that justice would be racial equality, but what I try to point out is that there is not one and only one vision of justice. The United States and its civic ideals, to an earlier book, has one ideal of liberty, another ideal of equality. Those two notions of justice, as I try to argue, come into contradiction during this era. Because many of the arguments against Radical Reconstruction, the attempt to bring about equality, were claimed to violate notions of liberty. That was certainly what a lot of the opponents felt.

So we have these contradictory ideals, and your question is: can they be resolved? I'm not sure that they can be completely resolved, we'll probably always be working with them, but they can certainly be—we can certainly look for better remedies that we have in the past. And that brings maybe to another point. Fredric Jameson made to my mind a very important argument at one time, which is still with me, which is that there is dialectic between utopia and ideology. Any ideology needs to have a utopian vision, otherwise people wouldn't follow. At the same time, utopias have to have ideologies to try to implement them. I believe that the utopian image of Reconstruction is there, but we need to also recognize that there were certain ideological components to it. Just as we need to understand the ideology of anti-Reconstruction had certain utopian elements in it, and until we can understand those, we won't really understand our present situation.

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 talking to you and you taking the time to talk with me.