

The Literature of Reconstruction: Not in Plain Black and White

Sarah E. Gardner

Mercer University, gardner_se@mercer.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Gardner, Sarah E. (2018) "The Literature of Reconstruction: Not in Plain Black and White," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 20 : Iss. 3 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.20.3.11

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol20/iss3/11>

Review

Gardner, Sarah E.

Summer 2018

Thomas, Brook. *The Literature of Reconstruction: Not in Plain Black and White.* Johns Hopkins University Press, \$40.00 ISBN 9781421421322

In the spring of 1956, C. Vann Woodward counseled his graduate student Otto H. Olsen, who had begun a dissertation on Albion W. Tourgée, to brush up on the fiction of the postbellum period. Woodward made clear that he judged Tourgée a minor player in the field of American letters, but that was immaterial. Any treatment of Tourgée, Woodward insisted, must include a consideration of his fiction. And “once committed to fiction,” he warned, “you are at the same time committed to an understanding of the author’s position in American literature in the period. This means more than simply a cursory acquaintance with other fictional interpretations of Reconstruction.”¹ Though conversant with certain scholarly trends in mid twentieth-century literary criticism, Woodward was hardly the person to advise Olsen in this work. Olsen fumphered around, putting together a reading list of prominent literary critics that included Alfred Kazin and Ludwig Lewisohn, neither of whom had made a career exploring late nineteenth-century American literature. To be sure, Olsen was familiar with the canonical works of the period. But as his exchange with Woodward suggests, he lacked a critical framework for reading this literature *qua* literature. Olsen needed Brook Thomas’s masterful new study, *The Literature of Reconstruction: Not in Plain Black and White*. So do we. Fortunately, we have it.

Meticulously researched and cogently argued, *The Literature of Reconstruction* offers a compelling account of the ways in which imaginative literature both commented on and informed discussions of the political, economic, and social arrangements of Reconstruction. Importantly, Thomas distinguishes the Reconstruction period, typically defined as the years between Confederate surrender in 1865 and the “corrupt bargain” of 1877, from the era of Reconstruction, which has a much longer arc. Those who argue for a “long Reconstruction” point to any number of end points: the *Plessy* decision, the Wilmington massacre, the fiftieth anniversary of Gettysburg. Thomas takes as the symbolic end to Reconstruction the NAACP’s founding in 1909. As he writes in the introduction, “The NAACP clearly did not give up on the hopes of Reconstruction, but it acknowledged that to fulfill its dreams it needed to overcome not only the heritage of slavery but also the betrayal of the promise of the Civil Rights amendments as disfranchisement and legally supported Jim Crow prevailed” (26). Thus, Thomas takes a long view, considering those works, mostly (although not exclusively) canonical, written during the extended era of reconstruction that depict the most pressing issues that confronted Americans

¹ C. Vann Woodward to Otto H. Olsen, April 11, 1956, in the C. Vann Woodward Papers, MS 1436, Sterling Memorial Library Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut.

during the Reconstruction period. Often those issues centered on race. But not always, as the subtitle of his work suggests.

Thomas's approach to his material accounts for one of the study's many strengths. Rather than centering each chapter on a particular author or text, the *modus operandi* of many literary scholars, Thomas takes certain themes, such as federalism, westward expansion, citizenship, and violence, as the core of his study. By doing so, he highlights the preoccupations of Reconstruction-era Americans. In other words, Thomas allows the concerns that animated the period, rather than those that animate our own time, to drive the narrative. (He is quick to point out, however, that many of the vexing questions faced by postwar America remain unsolved and continue to plague contemporary society.)

This approach allows readers to see the ways in which a variety of authors were in conversation with each other as well as with the policies of the period. In some cases, those conversations hardly surprise. Most students of Reconstruction are accustomed to discussions that emphasize the outsized roles played by Joel Chandler Harris and Thomas Nelson Page in advancing the plot of sectional reconciliation, for example. But the two authors did not agree on all points. Thomas makes clear that where and how they differed matters. The two were not interchangeable and we would do well to remember that.

In other cases, the conversations do surprise. Albion Tourgée and Thomas Dixon, for example, agreed on some matters of policy, albeit for different reasons. By organizing the study topically, Thomas persuasively demonstrates that any given author – Charles Chesnut, for example – cannot be understood without appreciating his critical engagement with other writers. Chesnut considered Tourgée and George Washington Cable his mentors, and his work reflects their influence. He also rejected the writings of Harris, Page, and Henry Grady, with whose works he was also intimately familiar. These connections, intersections, and refutations would be easy to miss had Thomas followed a more conventional approach to his subject.

Thomas is an astute and sensitive reader of his material. His deeply contextualized analysis is refreshing, often overturning commonly held understandings of the works under consideration. There is nothing lazy about this book. Too, *The Literature of Reconstruction* introduces non-canonical authors, such as María Amparo Ruiz de Burton and Constance Fenimore Woolson, to those not steeped in the imaginative literature of the era. And here, Thomas's deft and engaging plot summaries prove especially useful. These are not to be glossed over. Thomas has crafted summaries with a purpose.

In short, this beautifully written and revelatory study commands our attention. It models the best kind of scholarship that has a great deal to say to literary scholars and historians alike.

Sarah E. Gardner is Distinguished Professor of History, Mercer University. Her works include Blood and Irony: Southern White Women's Narratives of the Civil War, 1861-1937 (University of North Carolina Press) and Reviewing the South: The Literary Marketplace and the Southern Renaissance, 1920-1941 (Cambridge University Press). She is currently writing book that examines reading during the American Civil War.