

Beyond Redemption: Race, Violence, and the American South After the Civil War

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Recommended Citation

Silkenat, David (2013) "Beyond Redemption: Race, Violence, and the American South After the Civil War," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 15 : Iss. 4 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.15.4.07

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol15/iss4/7>

Review

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Fall 2013

Emberton, Carole *Beyond Redemption: Race, Violence, and the American South after the Civil War*. University of Chicago Press, \$45.00 ISBN 978-0-226-02427-1

An Exploration of the Maze of Redemption

Carole Emberton opens her new book on Reconstruction with the conviction of Edgar Ray Killen in 2005 for the murder of civil rights activists in 1964. Murdered black activist James Chaney's younger brother Ben said that the conviction would not bring closure, as many of the people involved in his brother's murder remained at large, claiming that "it's more like the Civil War is being fought again" (p. 2). Emberton starts with the Killen trial and Ben Chaney's response to it because she, like Ben Chaney, sees deep connections between violence, justice, manhood, and redemption running throughout Southern (and indeed American) history. While the Killen trial was intended to "redeem" a wrong committed forty years earlier, that redemption was at best incomplete.

Redemption, it turns out, was a lot more complicated than we thought. During the 1870s, white supremacist Democrats styled themselves "Redeemers," using political intimidation and violence to reclaim political power in the Reconstruction South over the bi-racial Republican coalitions that governed most Southern states. Their choice of title reflected their belief that their objectives were not merely political, but moral and spiritual, creating a new birth of Southern society. This redemption narrative helped to justify the violence perpetrated by vigilante groups such as the White League and Red Shirts. They equated their victory over black Southerners and Radical Republicans as a means of redeeming themselves after their loss in the Civil War.

Emberton argues that this familiar usage was only one of many ways in which the language of redemption featured in Reconstruction. Black freedpeople also saw themselves as participating in a redemptive narrative, making claims to

citizenship after centuries of slavery. Radical Republicans also saw their policies as part of a redemptive narrative, atoning for the violence of the recent war and the sin of slavery. By reconstructing the South, they believed they could create meaning out of violence and trauma. In each of these competing redemption narratives, Emberton argues, ideas about manhood and citizenship helped to justify violence and the suppression of violence.

Emberton emphasizes the relationship between citizenship and the right of self-defense. In crafting the Civil Rights Act of 1866, Radical Republicans responded to the vulnerability of black Southerners by making the “security of person and property” a right of citizenship (p. 23). They used images of black suffering to rally popular support for continued political action in the South. At the same time, white Southerners feared that emancipation would bring about a race war and claimed that only through violence could the black population be controlled. African Americans, many of them Union veterans, formed militias to defend themselves and their families. Just as black military service helped to justify black citizenship and suffrage, continuing to bear arms after 1865 and asserting the right to self-defense became one of the ways in which African Americans claimed and held onto the ballot. White supremacist Democrats responded to black martial manhood by seeking to disarm and thereby dis-man the freed population.

There is much to recommend about this original and challenging book, one that engages with the scholarship throughout the text. One wonders, however, if Emberton could have done more with the religious imagery of redemption. How did the myriad ways in which white and black Southerners employ the language of redemption shape Southern religious thought? How did the pervasiveness of redemption imagery influence the development of the Bible Belt? Did it change the ways in which black and white ministers described spiritual redemption?

David Silkenat is a lecturer at the University of Edinburgh. He is the author of Moments of Despair: Suicide, Divorce, and Debt in Civil War Era North Carolina (UNC Press, 2011).