

A Separate Civil War: Communities in Conflict in the Appalachian South

Robert Tracy McKenzie

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

Recommended Citation

McKenzie, Robert Tracy (2007) "A Separate Civil War: Communities in Conflict in the Appalachian South," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 9 : Iss. 2 .

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol9/iss2/5>

Review

McKenzie, Robert Tracy

Spring 2007

Sarris, Jonathan Dean *A Separate Civil War: Communities in Conflict in the Appalachian South*. University of Virginia Press, \$55.00 hardcover/\$22.50 softcover ISBN 9780813925493

Appalachia's Civil War

The War's Impact on Communities

More often than not, historians of the Civil War have acted as if the Confederacy's Appalachian areas did not exist. It is hard to blame them. The southern mountains have such an irritating way of frustrating facile generalizations about the South or the Confederacy that by far the easiest course is to ignore them entirely. Scholars like Jonathan Sarris are making that increasingly difficult, however. Sarris joins a small but growing number of historians who, in taking the region seriously, are complicating and enriching our understanding of the South during the Civil War. The author's research is meticulous and his argument judicious; the result is a fine monograph that succeeds on two levels, not only shedding light on an understudied area, but also pursuing questions and offering insights that will influence how historians think about the Confederacy as a whole.

The geographical focus of *A Separate Civil War* is the historically Cherokee regions of the North Georgia mountains. For his most detailed analyses, Sarris concentrates particularly on the contiguous counties of Lumpkin and Fannin, an area largely uninhabited by whites until the discovery of gold there in the late 1820s. From the start, the author takes dead aim at the longstanding perception of Appalachian distinctiveness by exploding a number of hoary stereotypes about the area, namely, those relating to its physical isolation, economic backwardness, aversion to slavery, commitment to the Union, and unusual penchant for violence. Acknowledging the forbidding terrain, impediments to transportation, and comparatively minor importance of slavery that distinguished the area from much of the rest of the state, Sarris nonetheless argues that the

white inhabitants of Lumpkin and Fannin counties forged important links to the larger world through their involvement in the market economy, their commitment to the institution of slavery, and their active involvement in state, regional, and national politics. Although whites disproportionately opposed secession in the immediate aftermath of Abraham Lincoln's election, most rallied to the southern cause once the state had seceded and, after the battle at Fort Sumter, they enlisted in the Confederate service in impressive numbers. Even from the beginning, however, there was considerable latent opposition to the Confederacy, and as war weariness, serious economic deprivation, and Confederate conscription policies brought such opposition into the open, both communities were increasingly characterized by internal conflict. This inner civil war was not immediately brutal and bloody, Sarris stresses. Rather, local Confederates first looked to the civil authorities to protect them from treason within their midst, and it was only after they had lost faith in the system that they resorted to extralegal violence and precipitated a cycle of ever more vicious retribution and revenge. The hellish deeds that resulted stemmed not from cultural retardation or innate savagery but from a series of identifiable events that gradually turned highlanders against each other in the most violent ways (101, 184).

One of the most valuable aspects of *A Separate Civil War* is the author's careful delineation of the mountaineers' divided sympathies. Admitting that North Georgians often proclaimed broader loyalties, Sarris is emphatic that beneath these loyalties, the local always lurked (102). Local, largely non-ideological values and commitments were paramount. Pro-Confederates viewed Tories as threats to community law and order. Their opponents observed the imposition of conscription and impressment and concluded that the Confederacy was a threat to local autonomy (72). Strictly speaking, the latter were rarely true Unionists, and Sarris consistently refers to them as anti-Confederates. In the North Georgia mountains, he persuasively demonstrates, Unionism could mean many things, but rarely did it mean a philosophical commitment to the ideals of national unity (79). This did not prevent a later generation from romanticizing their dissent, however, and remembering such apolitical anti-Confederates as almost religiously devoted to the Stars and Stripes. In a delightful concluding chapter on *The War They Knew*, Sarris summarizes the postwar struggle to establish the meaning of the war and chronicles the efforts on both sides to purge their past of its inconvenient complexity.

Jonathan Sarris has written an important book, not only for Appalachian specialists but for any student of the Civil War interested in the seminal issues of loyalty and remembrance as well as the complex intersection of sweeping national developments and intimate local experience.

Robert Tracy McKenzie is a professor of history at the University of Washington and is the author of Lincolnites and Rebels: A Divided Town in the American Civil War (2006).