

North Carolinians in the Era of the Civil War and Reconstruction

Cheryl A. Wells

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Review

Wells, Cheryl A.

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Civil War and Reconstruction in North Carolina

Abraham Lincoln did not appear on the ballot in North Carolina during the 1860 presidential election. Instead, the state's popular support went to Southern Democrat John C. Breckinridge. When South Carolina called for North Carolina's secession from the Union, the Old North State defeated secession by a slim 651 votes. A second secession convention comprised only of regional representatives convened on May 20, 1861, and, without the benefit of a popular vote, removed North Carolina from the Union. In spite of secession's rocky and contested greeting, North Carolina "suppl[ied] one-sixth of the Confederacy's soldiers[,] . . . nearly one-fourth of all its conscripts," and furnished "an uninterrupted stream of tax revenues, food from the tax-in-kind, and impressed commodities of all sorts" in support of the cause (2). Despite these undeniably critical contributions to the Confederate war effort, the state remained deeply ambivalent over the nature, meaning, and legacy of the War. While segments of society overwhelming and steadfastly supported the Confederacy, other constituencies remained intensely and unyieldingly loyal to the Union while still others' loyalties fluctuated. Such are the subjects of editor Paul D. Escott's new work. In nine interrelated essays, *North Carolinians in the Era of the Civil War and Reconstruction* investigates the complicated and deeply personal internal civil war North Carolinians waged against themselves.

Examining such diverse issues as conflicting loyalties, guerilla warfare and the evolution of Union military policy, African American agency, Zebulon Vance's highly contested 1864 gubernatorial election, gender, race, and the evolution of the legal system, and the construction of a pointed and particular memory of the Civil War and of Reconstruction, this collection makes it abundantly clear that North Carolina's vicious inner civil war hinged on

localism's triumph over nationalism. In short, 19th century North Carolinians "viewed regional or national issues through a North Carolina lens," itself subject to alteration in response to local events and developments (3).

Historian David Brown rightly argues for the centrality of family in shaping lower class loyalties during the War. Poor landless whites, seduced perhaps by the economic gains of enlistment, joined the Confederacy more readily than yeomen who viewed enlistment as detrimental rather than beneficial to their family. As local conditions on the homefront fluctuated so too did the loyalty of lower class whites. Likewise, Chandra Manning attributes Zebulon Vance's astonishing victory in the 1864 gubernatorial election to local conditions, which permitted Vance to exploit white fear over emancipation. John C. Inscoe and Laura F. Edwards suggest continuity between locally constructed war events and those of reconstruction. Indeed, Cornelia Phillips Spencer's postwar narrative, *The Last Ninety Days of the War in North Carolina*, describes the war through the deeply personal and intimate lens of her own experience. Yet as Inscoe argues, Spencer's work, situated in a local milieu, helped to create a particular Confederate memory of the war, which honored her state and southern masculinity while expanding the role of women. In short, local examinations of the war, like Spencer's, helped to shape the larger ideology of the Lost Cause. As Edwards argues, the local context also shaped how North Carolinians experienced the antebellum legal system. Lacking a centralized location for courts and proceedings, North Carolina offered antebellum residences a portable legal system as courts moved around the state. Such mobility created a uniquely local and flexible legal culture, which blurred the gendered boundaries between the private and public spheres as local customs trumped national social mores and opened the legal process to white and black women. Reconstruction saw the extension of local antebellum legal practices as white and black women continued to seek "the assistance of the legal system before they were formally emancipated or granted civil rights" (155). Scholars Barton A. Myers, Judkin Browning, Karin Zipf, Paul Yandle, and Steven E. Nash likewise stress the profound influence of localism in shaping nineteenth century North Carolinians responses to regional and national events.

Although Escott's collection successfully "remind[s] us that the world of these North Carolinians, in contrast to our own was intensely local," such an argument is not unique to the Old North State (93). Surely, local matters trumped national and regional ones to inform opinions and actions in other areas of the Confederacy as well as in the Union. Nevertheless, this book's sensitivity to the

nuances, complexities, diversities, and contingencies of life on the homefront offers scholars fresh avenues of historical inquiry into the complicated and fluid worlds of nineteenth century North Carolinians.

Cheryl A. Wells is an associate professor of history at the University of Wyoming. She is the author of Civil War Time: Identity and Experience in America 1861-1865 (2005) and the editor of A Surgeon in the Army of the Potomac: Francis M. Wafer (2008).