

Reconstructing Appalachia: The Civil War's Aftermath.

Ralph Mann

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

Recommended Citation

Mann, Ralph (2010) "Reconstructing Appalachia: The Civil War's Aftermath.," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 12 : Iss. 4 .

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol12/iss4/12>

Review

Mann, Ralph

Fall 2010

Slap, Andrew L. (ed.) *Reconstructing Appalachia: The Civil War's Aftermath..*
The University Press of Kentucky, \$40.00 ISBN 978-0-8131-2581-7

A New Focus for Reconstruction History

This much needed and very useful collection highlights the Appalachian region's diverse responses to the Civil War and complicates, while it illuminates, several long-standing historical debates. The Appalachians were not isolated from the rest of the nation, but clearly, the degree to which a section was integrated into the economic systems of the deep South or the industrializing North affected loyalty during the war, and therefore experiences after the war. And some sections were hardly nationally integrated at all. An all-white Appalachian South was a myth, willfully constructed, yet, in some sections, the national intruders being resisted were the agents of the Internal Revenue, not the Freedmen's Bureau. Kentucky, West Virginia, and Pennsylvania were not "reconstructed" at all, but even there conflicts flourished between traditional Appalachian elites and modernizing newcomers, pitting old ways against new legislation. In Kentucky and West Virginia, the demands of freed African Americans clouded struggles between white mountain Unionists and ex-Confederates, just as they did in reconstructed states like Virginia and North Carolina. Overall, sectional and status loyalties gave way to issues raised by rapid industrialization and its power brokers. All this suggests that "aftermath" is a more useful term than "reconstruction" in describing the Appalachian experience from war to the turn of the century—as its people supposedly were transformed from fictionalized Union stalwarts to sensationalized degenerate hillbillies.

The introductory essays are invaluable to those new to Appalachian studies. Gordon McKinney expertly summarizes the region's history from guerrilla warfare through industrial depression, stressing how the Civil War, Reconstruction, industrialization, and urbanization connect the mountains to the

rest of the nation. New roles for women, new black and European migrants, newly powerful financial and political influence from outsiders--all abrupt and far reaching changes--were imposed on a largely traditional agricultural society. Violence, later characterized as peculiarly Appalachian, accompanied the whole process. Andrew L. Slap illuminates the course of Appalachian historiography, stressing the persistent debates over isolation and the origins of poverty, exposing myths and methodologies alike. He also articulates the purpose of this collection--new scholarship on the less studied period immediately after the war can create a chronological bridge, thus clarifying the debates over farm and industrial Appalachias.

The essays sometimes take contradictory positions, especially on questions of race and local versus national causes of behaviors. Keith S. Hebert shows that the Mossy Creek (Georgia) Klan focused first on reducing Republican influence in White County, but spent most of its existence trying to maintain local autonomy in the face of increased Federal efforts to control moonshiners. While Federal efforts failed to protect African-American rights in Georgia, they did ultimately curtail the illegal liquor trade in White County. In western North Carolina, however, Paul Yandle argues, the Klan concentrated on disfranchising blacks, as did Conservative vigilantes statewide. The willingness of Conservative Democrats in the state legislature to protect western Klansmen's seats, even while Federal forces dispersed Klan organizations, suggests that state politics were central to Reconstruction's demise in North Carolina, not Thomas Dixon's romanticized mountain KKK. T. R. C. Hutton also finds that race and politics were central to Klan violence and "Red String" counterviolence in Breathitt County, Kentucky, but he adds the element of class. A coalition of freedmen and landless whites battled Klansmen, seeking to restore the old landed Democratic leadership. Outside observers, however, reacting to Unionist Kentucky's supposed freedom from Reconstruction battles, chose to characterize the violence as unique to brutal mountaineers, and not as part of power struggles that pervaded the South.

For western North Carolina Steve Nash finds, however, that race was not at the heart of postwar politics--relatively few African Americans lived there, and white Unionists and Confederates alike wanted to keep them in their place. A struggle for local control was central and war loyalty paramount, as the wartime leaders continued to fight Unionists willing to reach beyond the mountains for allies in the Republican Party. Like Breathitt, western Carolina suffered through personalized conflict; absent race, new styles of partisanship prevailed. All of

these authors agree on the pervasiveness of social chaos; in north Georgia, Mary Ella Engel suggests life had become so precarious that a determined Mormon missionary, John Morgan, could convince many to risk a new life in the west. What is more certain is that Morgan's conversions followed family networks defined by war—first Unionist, then Confederate.

If any politician was identified with social chaos, revenge, and battles to establish post-war primacy, it was East Tennessee's much-maligned William "Parson" Brownlow. Before and during the war, he had espoused Union without abolition, and had accepted emancipation only as an inescapable result of the fighting. However, as Kyle Osborne argues, he needed a biracial constituency to hold power, and his racial rhetoric and politics evolved. His administration offered suffrage, civil rights, and police protection to the freedmen, and sold these actions to his white supporters by publishing a very positive image of black people in his newspaper. But Brownlow's Radical program was quickly abandoned by his successor, and by the end of the century, East Tennessee's guerrilla travail and racial politics had become an embarrassment. As Tom Lee demonstrates, Brownlow's congressman nephew Walter led a successful campaign to create regional unity and attract northern sympathy and federal funds by promoting a myth of a unified, Unionist East Tennessee. Race disappeared from the equation.

By that time, all over the mountains, outsiders were discovering an Appalachian America, peopled by "contemporary ancestors" deserving benevolence. John C. Inscoe's survey of the literature these men and women produced likewise finds mythology more useful than the violently contested reality of the Civil War. Most writers only briefly touched on the war, and then only to reinforce the standard tale of a Unionist mountain society. Philanthropy and tourism demanded an innocent, "other" Anglo Saxon Appalachia remote from conflicts of the modern world. Ultimately, the myth of a white mountain society transcended all others. Anne E. Marshall finds in contemporary Floyd County, Kentucky, the history of mountain Unionists and Republicans and racists lost in a created memory of whiteness and racial innocence. In this context, Confederate symbols have no racial connotations, but the created image of eastern Kentucky itself evokes individualism and traditional culture.

The discovery of "otherness" was accompanied by the discovery of exploitable natural resources; rapid industrialization, like racial mythology, obscured the mountain past. Robert M. Sandow shows how the war had sparked

resistance among Appalachian Pennsylvanians already seeing traditional livelihoods undermined by Republican industrialists. The draft represented more incursions by the same forces; community based resistance, however, was crushed, and the people characterized as backward, ignorant, and disloyal. The war accelerated industrialization in the mountains, and mining, timbering, and immigration all further reshaped the social economy. An 1875 miners' strike once again called on community modes of resistance; violence ensued and the mountaineers were again demonized as ignorant and brutal. But despite failures, the memory of the struggles survived industrial domination.

In West Virginia, created by Copperhead Unionism, Reconstruction centered on ex-Confederate loyalty to the new state more than African-American rights. Disfranchisement and legal proscriptions aimed to uproot loyalty to Virginia. But over time, moderate Democrats and Republicans began to see economic development—railroads—as more important than the residue of war. Enfranchisement of ex-Confederates and that of African Americans were linked, and even when newly dominant Democrats rewrote the state constitution, statehood and equal suffrage prevailed. Railroads, land policy, and business interests in general united the parties. By the early twentieth century, Ken Fones-Wolf maintains, industrialists' control over tax policy had beggared county government; Progressive-style reformers demanded tax policies that provided social capital. They failed. So too did Democrats hoping to regain power by a Jim Crow platform. In sum, these essays show a diverse, often localized Appalachian postwar society, with a contested, mythologized, but still relevant past, and increasingly dominant outsiders' stereotypes and capital.

Ralph Mann teaches Civil War and social history at the University of Colorado, Boulder, and studies war, subsistence, and peacemaking in Appalachian Virginia.