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Robert E. Bonner

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Interview

CWBR AUTHOR INTERVIEW: MASTERING AMERICA: SOUTHERN SLAVEHOLDERS AND THE CRISIS OF AMERICAN NATIONHOOD

Bonner, Robert E.

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Interview with Dr. Robert E. Bonner, Associate Professor of History at Dartmouth College

Interviewed by Christopher Childers

CWBR: The topic of southern and Confederate nationalism has fascinated historians for much of the past 100 years, if not longer. What led you to revisit southern nationalism?

Robert E. Bonner (REB): That's a big question. I was always interested in issues of the South's relationship to the rest of the country. But the work that I was doing in graduate school thinking about the national crisis and thinking about southern identity and American identity led me to be skeptical of some of the conventional wisdom of how we frame the question of nationhood and slavery and the American South. Out of these, I developed some general skepticism towards the leading propositions on the issue. One interpretation presented southern slaveholders as distrustful of the federal government and distrustful of centralization. The second interpretation presented them as becoming increasingly alienated from the national project in cultural terms. My approach came from looking at the evidence and not really finding it matching up all that much to standard interpretations. By looking at case studies by specialists on the 1850s, one recognizes that the nation really witnessed an escalating series of claims upon the national government rather than individuals exhibiting skepticism of the national government. At the same time, we see white southerners as being key players in the development of a more robust strain of American nationalism rather than only being about a regional retreat from the federal government. And so in that respect, you have both Unionists and also

fireeaters playing a role in national affairs. For example, what in the world is William Yancey doing being a fundraiser for Mount Vernon? And what is Robert Barnwell Rhett doing sort of glorifying the Boston Tea Party and trying to reappropriate it for proslavery causes? So these notions of nationalism in the cultural realm sort of intrigued me. The challenge of writing the book was trying to put these into conversation trying to put the idea of nationhood as pertaining to federal power into conversation with a piece of nationhood that had to do with the cultural endeavors of the 1850s, in which white southerners played such a central role.

CWBR: Whereas many, if not most, scholars have focused on either southern nationalism or Confederate nationalism, you take the unique step of investigating nationalism both before and after the creation of the Confederate States of America. What new insights did you gain from incorporating both in your study?

REB: That certainly was one of the main things I wanted to do. In fact, early on I wanted to go in past Confederate defeat into the Reconstruction period. But as is often the case with dissertations, ambitions catch up with research and force the writer to scale back. But certainly having two-thirds of the book roughly getting up to secession and then using the last one-third to think about Confederate nationhood has paid dividends in terms of the overall project. In the past twenty years, we have gained a richer literature on Confederate nationhood. And you can ascribe a lot that to Drew Faust's book, which really shook things up in terms of thinking about different Confederate nationalizing endeavors. Faust thinks about Confederate nationalization as a process. I tried to follow the Confederate nationalists that she's concerned with and trace them back before the Civil War. I looked at people who were crucial to forming wartime narratives of what Confederate nationhood was all about, and it seemed like over and over again these were the people who were staunch Unionists who in the 1850s were involved in all sorts of endeavors that transcended the slave South. The clergy were certainly important in Faust's perspective and they had really interesting things to say about American nationhood in the 1850s. Tracing and going over the divide between the antebellum period and into the Confederate period, seemed to make a lot of sense because this is a book that focuses on nationalists rather than on the larger collective identity problems in traditional studies of nationalism. By focusing on nationalists and on individualists, the sharp departure that Lincoln's election and secession represented comes into clear perspective. And so the people who were trying to shape American nationhood

up to Lincoln's election seemed to have played a disproportionate role in trying to articulate notions of Confederate purpose and policy in the aftermath.

CWBR: Your study focuses chiefly on the development of "master class nationalism," as you call it, both within the federal Union and then in the Confederacy. But what difficulty did the master class face in convincing southerners with little to no stake in the institution of slavery that slaveholder interests matched the concerns of common folk? Or did the overwhelming majority of southerners identify with slavery regardless of their slave holdings?

REB: That's a great question. And to the extent that my story is about proslavery nationalists and trying to represent their interests on the national and world stage, I also acknowledge but do not explore this to the extent that I could and that others have. They also have a challenge in presenting their vision of the country, the region, and the main developments in their way of life to the population to those outside the master class. They can't take that for granted that they're going to get a solid support even within their own regions. One of the reasons I didn't develop that as much as I could have is because other scholars have developed that theme with such effect in other works. The works of Bill Freehling, Eugene Genovese, and others have explored the master class's relationship to other white southerners. And so that wasn't my topic. I had some ideas of following them and their work, and I would certainly footnoted them in terms of thinking about these ideas. Certainly race, the political system, and evangelical religion, among other factors had something to do with it. These are all ingredients that led me into thinking about how other people have shaped that key problem. In the last chapter, I explore the key challenges of Confederate nationhood and the sort of rumbling class conflict that the war brings. At that point the crisis of Confederate nationhood can be defined as a crisis that follows master-class nationalism that has to depend a lot more on the master class and in the end doesn't measure up.

CWBR: *Mastering America* focuses not only on the idea of nationalism itself, but the individuals who created and advanced the nationalist idea. But in truth, can we speak of a unitary idea of nationalism? To what extent did individual southern nationalists differ in their writings and in their agenda not only for American nationalism but of course after 1861 for what became Confederate nationalism? **REB:** That's another great question that's at the heart of how I approached the multiplicity of different notions of what nationhood as a concept is really all about and the variance even within the master class. The

variety is I think the key. And so the chapters, the way I laid them out, really try to explore both the main categories of thinking about nationhood and even within those categories the differences of opinion. So you have lots of different perspectives. There's a great array of approaches and again much of this book is an accumulation of research by other historians. In that respect, I'm really fond of Michael O'Brien in terms of thinking about all the different riches and complexity and lack of uniformity that southern writers in particular have in approaching almost every problem. So you have this array of different ways of thinking about the world and conjectures of different modes of social organization, political organization, and economic organization. As I organized the book into chapters, I did do it thematically and so I have chapters that in terms of those who predominately think, write, and act in behalf of the nation as a constitutional unit or as a body of individuals that are subscribing to republican ideas or evangelical ideas or efforts to create a notion of nationhood around shared historical memories. And so I do think that again it is maybe the heart of what I'm up to try to sort of break this down and to think about the variety.

When we get to the Confederacy, I've got a chapter called "Reckoning with Confederate Purpose," and there I schematize most explicitly these three main strands of thinking about Confederate purpose that perhaps do not have much to do with one another. So there's three ways of thinking the Confederacy as a new endeavor and what it meant. Is it a replay of American Revolution? Is it an opportunity to reject the American Revolution and develop new modes of thinking about authority? Or is it an opportunity to perfect certain notions of paternalism? Part of the objective is to lay out the breadth and the rigidness of thinking about nationhood. When we think about nationalism, we tend often times to pair it with notions of identity. And so thinking about southern nationhood is thinking about becoming more southern, or thinking about our American nation as becoming more American, or thinking about Confederate nationhood becoming more Confederate. And that's certainly something that in the 19th century, people were talking about; but they were talking about a lot of other different things in terms of what nationhood represented as well. And so I'm trying to recapture the 19th century understanding of nationhood in all its complexity. Part of the reason it's such an appealing concept in the 19th century is because building a nation or engaging in a national project meant so many different things to different people.

CWBR: The most ardent proslavery spokesmen have gained the lion's share of attention from scholars of the Civil War. Yet you argue that, in many ways,

the conservative Unionists of the South held the key to southern nationalism and southern politics. How did they influence the course that the South took both within the Union and without the Union?

REB: They were able to be influential in part because they were just more of them. We do get that notion, especially once you get outside of South Carolina, that prior to Lincoln's election there was a small concentrated secessionist movement. And even after Lincoln's election, I suppose, conservative Unionists, who you could define as people who have a vision of cutting a better deal within the Union, had so many different maneuvers. Even those people who go to Montgomery to write a Confederate constitution are sort of holding this up as a means to get the rest of the states back into the Union maybe without New England! So they're influential because the southern populace, I think, does share a certain American feeling that bigger is better that always wanting to bring in more territory is better than less territory. And if they could do that on their own terms, if they could gain greater protections for slavery, especially with slavery expansion, then there's not much to argue why that wouldn't be a good idea. For the secessionists, it's better to have a smaller, more compact, and more overtly proslavery Deep South alliance independent of the rest of the states. I think the conservative Unionists are winning the argument because they are getting a lot more throughout the 1850s; they're getting Kansas-Nebraska, Dred Scott, the administration of James Buchanan the government sort of at their beck-and-call. So the fireeaters have a hard argument to make until you have the Republican Party take power, and suddenly their argument makes sense.

CWBR: Don Fehrenbacher, who in his book on the Dred Scott case, which you just mentioned, noted that in antebellum political history so many political issues became constitutional issues, issues over interpreting the founding charter. And you seem to suggest that in some ways the development of southern nationalism represents the search for a southern version of constitutional theory, one that's built on inherited political forms but that secures important inherited rights, to use some of your words. To what extent did southern nationalists use the U.S. Constitution for their aims and what ultimately did they reject from the founding document?

REB: I did incorporate a lot of things about the Constitution into the book, especially in thinking about constitutionalism. Let me maybe try to generalize the source of ideas I have about proslavery constitutionalism as I have articulated. The constitutionalism that we generally think about regarding slavery is

something along the lines of the fact that slaveholders showed up in Philadelphia in 1787, and by threats of various sorts, gained a lot of what they wanted written into the Constitution the fugitive slave clause, the perpetuation of the slave trade, or the three-fifths representation of slaves. So proslavery efforts in Philadelphia gained a disproportionate role to slavery in politics. One of the things that I'm trying to do is to maybe agree with that, but to think about constitutionalism as an ongoing process that involves continually trying to up the ante and trying to make an increasingly proslavery interpretation of the Constitution the predominant one as handed down by the Supreme Court and other governing institutions. I follow that process and try to think about how, beginning with the paring of states' rights and proslavery arguments in the 1820s and then moving forward to how that plays itself out in the 1850s.

There hasn't really been much written about sectional rights as a mode of constitutional argumentation. And so a long time ago, Arthur Bestor, in a couple of classic articles wrote about states' rights as a doctrine of positive power. His work formed a lot of my thinking of how states' rights can be not just about blocking but compelling the federal government into action in certain ways. And so from that original insight, I'm sort of spinning this out and saying that actually the language of the people in the 1850s is not so much states' rights, but southern rights. This notion of southern rights is never something that is brought before the Supreme Court, but it does become part of a constitutional logic and a popular constitutionalism that incorporates the story of what happened in Philadelphia, not just separate states forming a union, but actually two well defined regions coming together and making a truce or a treaty between two regions. And this is something that filters into popular consciousness and forms a sort of political dialogue in the late 1850s that I found really interesting. A lot of things going on in constitutional history now attend to popular constitutionalism. So I'm sort of picking up there. You have a body of law school professor types who are thinking about how popular constitutional dialogue shapes politics as much as it shapes court cases, and that's certainly true of the 19th century. So thinking about southern rights falls into this pattern. But that's something you'd never take before a court because of the court ruling could not understand that because there is nothing essentially fabricated on a thin textual basis, but it makes a compelling story to sort of show in a sense that slaveholders have rights because there was an original agreement between a South and a North, and that the North is sort of failing to live up to their agreement by, for instance, returning fugitive slaves to a South and that they're breaking this bargain.

Therefore to withdraw from the Union is legitimate because the original treaty has already sort of been broken. It's striking how much you hear of the refusal to return slaves during the secession crisis, as the predominant explanations for why secession is legitimate. It's maybe even more important than the fact that Union is a compact of states, that every state has the sovereign power to withdraw and that's certainly an important argument that's being made in 1860-1861. It's not just about the power, but why it has come time to withdraw. Again and again, it's the North that has failed to live up to its constitutional obligations; therefore the South and the defenders of southern rights have a duty to withdraw if this isn't going to get any better, which it doesn't look like it is. So that's sort of a loose answer to thinking about constitutionalism. One of the things that also struck me is the dialogue about constitutionalism during the Confederacy. A lot of nationalists began to think about constitutionalism as something that can really be set aside and so increasing the power of the Confederate government, increasing the power of executive within the Confederate government, not having a Supreme Court that would put the brakes on the enhancement of Confederate power all seem to me to be worth writing about. This is something that people who have written about the Confederacy have pointed out before, but in light of earlier constitutional issues, they're right about the bottom line is that constitutionalism is about southern rights.

CWBR: That's a fascinating insight because when you then discuss the idea of southern rights over states' rights, and you cross that bridge of 1861 into the years of the Confederacy, does that then suggest that perhaps a number of people within the Confederacy itself might have been more amenable to a stronger Confederate government a strong national government that nevertheless protected their rights? And this of course is not withstanding the states' rights policies of men like say Joseph Brown in Georgia who's probably the most famous case of obstructionism in the Confederacy.

REB: You can't, and I don't, minimize the importance of states' rights, in certain constituencies both during the 1850s and in fact during the Confederacy. I suppose that beginning with Calhoun, there are ways that people perceive that sort of strict states' rights approach might not accomplish all that slaveholders needed. I suppose more than anything else, the southern rights position is a more advanced argument, even if it's not as prevalent. But it's also a very instrumental argument. In saying that there are southern rights that you are basically saying that there are ways that the South can call upon the federal government to protect

slaveholders rights. During the Confederacy there are some noises about the fact that slaveholders need explicit protection against the government. There are some interesting movements to introduce legislation at the state level to say the state government can never abridge slaveholders' rights, nor can the Confederate government abridge slaveholders' rights. And so there's a fear that a government, the new Confederate government, will disregard the sanctity of the institution of slavery in the same way the federal government disregarded the sanctity of the institution of slavery. To the extent that there's a big debate at the end of the war about whether or not pair a program of slave enlistment with a program of general slave, that skepticism is well placed because the Confederate government at the end of the Davis administration is arguing for the preeminence of the sanctity of government over the sanctity of slavery. They're no longer talking in terms of southern rights; a lot of individuals at that point more going back to the states rights, especially the loud voices against slave enlistment about the program of emancipation and enlistment coming out of the South Carolina.

CWBR: Though southerners developed their own theories on constitutional law, they still maintained an attachment to the American past and the Revolutionary heritage. Indeed, you note that southern masters sought to rescue the Revolutionary experiment from the "apostate Yankee Republicans" and to "redeem the tomb of Washington from the dominion of that fanatical rule to quote Charles Colcock Jones, Jr. Did attachment to the American Revolutionary heritage help or hinder the development of Confederate nationalism?

REB: This portrays the sliver of the project, where I draw on the insights of David Potter on the conflicting loyalties of region and nation and interest in the 1850s. Potter includes some off-handed remarks about the Mount Vernon movement, the American Revolution, and the fiercely proprietary claims that southerners are making on the revolutionary heritage. And so Potter's work was really influential especially in framing the project to begin with. Thinking about the revolutionary heritage makes a lot of sense. As you get into the Confederate period, it becomes even more so I suppose and that may be a little bit more well known in terms of other historians have written. Faust and Anne Rubin, among others, have really thought about how Confederates answered these questions and made it a benefit to have an American revolutionary past at their disposal by popularizing the notion that this is the Second American Revolution, a moment of great historical importance that future generations will remember and identify with in the same way that this generation identified with the revolutionary period creating a whole cast of heroes and heroic episodes and so on and so forth. That

hot house environment of war does escalate and intensify the connections, but certainly in thinking about the identification of antebellum Americans with the revolutionary past.

CWBR: Thank you.