

## Reconstruction's Ragged Edge: The Politics of Postwar Life in the Southern Mountains

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**Reviewer:** Bruce E. Baker

Reconstruction, we are told, has moved on. A few years ago now, the historiographical pioneers, such as Heather Cox Richardson, boarded up the little old log cabin in the lane, hastily painted 'GTT' across the door, and headed west.<sup>(1)</sup> More recently many others have followed, finding new forms of forced labor and new venues for the expansion of and opposition to federal power.<sup>(2)</sup> These immigrants were greeted a few old settlers who had been there already, arguing that Reconstruction's future was in the West for years, glad of the company.<sup>(3)</sup> Restless souls are even now gazing across the Pacific.<sup>(4)</sup>

Our old friend, the freed man, has had to make room for others. 50 years ago, the northern working man demanded equal treatment, and more recently Native Americans have joined the scene.<sup>(5)</sup> Mountaineers, many of them moonshiners, who had been believed to have emerged in 1880 from a timber camp or a coal mine through a process of parthenogenesis, have been discovered in an earlier epoch.<sup>(6)</sup> New characters have crowded the stage, and that stage itself has expanded to accommodate them. There is a lot going on all over the place, and the plots multiply at a confusing rate. The freedom narrative, which has now endured nearly as long as slavery itself endured under the Constitution, is being unwritten.<sup>(7)</sup>

And yet. Blank spaces remain on the map. While all the expansions noted above are welcome, and help us understand Reconstruction better by conceiving of it less narrowly, we should be glad that some historians are not packing up the wagon and joining the migrant trail but staying put and trying to wrest another harvest from well-tilled ground. For every Edgefield County or Granville County or southwest Georgia, there remain other places with their own stories, similar in some ways yet distinct in others both subtle and profound.<sup>(8)</sup> Until quite recently, the biggest, blankest space on the map of Reconstruction historiography was Appalachia. As Andrew Slap explained, the revisionist historians of Reconstruction had been indifferent because there were never enough African Americans to exert meaningful political power, and the Appalachian historians were unable to fit this period into the narratives of capitalist exploitation that defined their field, with its activist roots. A key exception to this sweeping generalization, of course, was Gordon McKinney's study of Republicans in the mountains, which encompassed the complex politics of seven states in fewer than 300 pages.<sup>(9)</sup>

Steven E. Nash's *Reconstruction's Ragged Edge: The Politics of Postwar Life in the Southern Mountains* fills in an important part of this space in splendid fashion, covering 20 counties in western North Carolina;

essentially everything from the Blue Ridge westwards. In doing so, Nash draws on much of the best work on Reconstruction across the South in recent years and provides new insights on many key questions.

It is a book of fundamental significance to the history of North Carolina, but many of its points help us understand broader processes in the region and the nation.

One of the strengths of Nash's book is that he has chosen a chronological frame that gives the period real coherence and allows him to bookend the story of dissent and democratization with the dominance of local elites. There is tremendous change, but ultimately it is harnessed to the service of continuity, at least in terms of who directs and ultimately benefits from the change. The first chapter of *Reconstruction's Ragged Edge* sets out the antebellum scene in the region through careful census work a bit like Stephen Ash did for middle Tennessee, Susan O'Donovan did for southwest Georgia, or T. R. C. Hutton did for Breathitt County, Kentucky.<sup>(10)</sup> This fleshes out the picture sketched by Wilma Dunaway, Durwood Dunn, and others of a region dominated by powerful local elites who controlled the best land, tended to own slaves but not on the scale of their counterparts in the flatlands, profited from an economy of mixed farming slanted towards livestock, and kept politics as a patronal system for their own sort of people.<sup>(11)</sup> Below them was a yeomanry of self-sufficient farmers who, unlike those in Lowcountry South Carolina, for instance, managed to be fairly economically independent of the elites, though they deferred in political matters.<sup>(12)</sup> Tenancy was well established before the Civil War. A small but not insignificant population of enslaved people also occupied western North Carolina. Only three of the counties had more than 20 per cent of their population enslaved, and in none of the counties bordering Tennessee was the population of enslaved people greater than seven per cent. It was a region connected to the outside by roads but not railroads, limiting its economic development and making internal improvements a perennial issue in politics.

The Civil War changed much of this. Here Nash makes less of the patronal power relations Gregory P. Downs found to characterize the state as a whole and instead emphasizes the strength and durability of Unionism and its near kin, anti-Confederatism.<sup>(13)</sup> In such a local world, as in East Tennessee, disputes became both personal and persistent, with the local elites tapping into, and supporting, the power of the Confederate state. The massacre at Shelton Laurel was extreme, but indicative of the kind of war western North Carolina had. Local Confederate elites tended to see all stripes of Unionism, desertion, and dissent not simply as parts of a political or military dispute, but as the sort of character flaw and moral failing that was to be expected of the lower classes, an attitude that was to shape Reconstruction politics. Between the Confederate tax-in-kind and the wanton destruction of Stoneman's Raid in 1865, the economy of the mountains of North Carolina was left badly damaged by the war's end.

Many aspects of the aftermath of slavery were no different in western North Carolina than anywhere in the South, but the structure of the antebellum economy did lead to some distinctions. Whites had a hard time adjusting to the loss of mastery, and family networks were important sources of support to slavery survivors, just as we might expect. African Americans were vulnerable to violence in the chaotic months after the war. The economy, though, had never relied that heavily on black labor, and landowners had plenty of white labor to call upon, somewhat lowering the stakes and the pressure associated with the question of black labor elsewhere. For the most part, freed people slotted easily into the structures of tenancy that had long accommodated their white neighbors before the war. Geography was a factor, limiting participation from western North Carolina in the freed men's convention in Raleigh in October 1865. When the Freedmen's Bureau finally opened an office for the state's western district in November 1865, it was in Salisbury, over 200 hard miles from the westernmost corner of North Carolina. Local agents in western counties, once they got in post, were ordered to make it up as they went along rather than wait for instructions from headquarters.

Presidential Reconstruction saw swings of power back and forth in western North Carolina, with every swing of the pendulum bringing Unionists closer to an alliance with the Republicans in the North. As Union soldiers returned home in late 1865, some sought vengeance against Confederate neighbors, but not on the scale of East Tennessee. Many consistent Unionists resented Governor W. W. Holden's appointment of local elites whose Unionism had been very conditional and, indeed, undetectable during the war itself, to positions

of local authority. They responded by strongly supporting anti-Confederates in both the October 1865 constitutional convention and the election a month later. This all was the result of a fundamental pivoting of the region's political alignment. As Nash explains:

A prewar political culture that stressed local relationships and a kind of patron-client relationship between the wealthier mountaineers and their poorer white neighbors broke down, as Unionists rallied lower-class support and looked outward for help. . . . No longer willing to work with the former governing elite, the mountain Unionists looked for new patrons and asserted their own power. (pp. 66–7)

Things got worse for Unionists in 1866, as Conservatives made gains in that year's election. By the time the Reconstruction Acts were passed in March 1867, western North Carolina Unionists were willing to embrace the Republican Party. Still, Conservatives continued to persecute Unionists, especially through the courts. In addition to maintaining local power, this was an unsubtle way of directly challenging federal authority. A key figure in this was David Coleman, Solicitor of the Eighth Judicial Circuit until General E. R. S. Canby removed him in late 1867. Another prominent Conservative, Judge Augustus Merrimon, resigned rather than accept military interference with state laws.

Nash makes a strong case that the Freedmen's Bureau was the principal agent of federal power in the mountains and deserves much of the credit for whatever success and security the Republicans (now African Americans as well as white Unionists) enjoyed during Reconstruction. Although Nash does not frame it this way, the Republican Party becomes one of the patrons described by Gregory P. Downs in *Declarations of Dependency*. White Unionists and freed people both become clients of the same patron, and this experience draws them into a functional alliance that would have been much harder to establish otherwise. This alliance became crucial to the Republican Party since the African-American vote, small though it was, could swing elections in several counties along the eastern edge of the region. The beginning of Congressional Reconstruction brought a new constitution to North Carolina that for the first time made county governments elective, taking power away from local elites. But while African Americans were trying to accomplish things like building schools, with the help of the Freedmen's Bureau until it closed in late 1868, Conservatives were beginning to court the poor whites by opposing the federal tax on distilling.

With the removal of federal power in the form of the Freedmen's Bureau, Conservatives used the violence of the Ku Klux Klan to crush the Republicans in the mountains. The attacks began in response to the elections in April and November 1868 and included the public beating of a solicitor who had dared to prosecute the Ku Klux Klan. Violence intensified in 1870. In one incident sparked by distilling enforcement, the husband of a victim, James McGahey, tracked down the Klansman who had assaulted his wife and killed him. On a larger scale, Governor Holden recruited 600 men from western North Carolina to break the power of the Ku Klux in the central Piedmont counties. Nash provides a careful analysis of these young men, mostly poor farm laborers and largely from Madison and Mitchell counties. What becomes clear from this account of Ku Klux violence is that the courts offered no relief but instead only prompted further attacks. Nash's account here shows what happened when the federal government did not intervene directly to stop the Ku Klux as it had in South Carolina. The Kirk-Holden War proved the undoing of Holden and only briefly paused the onslaught, which reached a peak in early 1871. Ku Klux violence in western North Carolina did not have dramatic, immediate electoral effects, but it broke down the ties between the Republican 'party's grassroots supporters and the national government', according to James Justice, a state legislator from Rutherford County (p. 148). The only thing that might have saved them, Justice believed, was more victims like McGahey taking immediate vengeance and stopping the Ku Klux Klan before it grew out of control.

Although the Republicans held the governorship in the 1872 election, the writing was on the wall for the party in western North Carolina. There, with no meaningful federal support, many of the party's previous supporters turned their attention more towards the future of the region's economy. As Nash explains, 'white mountaineers crossed party lines in support of internal improvements, building class-based coalitions

without the taint of federal interference or racial divisions' (p. 155). As Conservatives regained control, a newly constituted local elite with heavier representation from middle-class professionals took charge, 'hop[ing] to integrate the region into the national market, embracing outside investors and foreign capital to develop the region's natural resources and build its railroads without threatening their local control' (p. 150). From here on, it is a story of competing railroads, the Western North Carolina Railroad inching westwards, and the Spartanburg and Asheville climbing up the Blue Ridge escarpment from the south through the end of the 1870s, bringing rail connections to both Asheville and Hendersonville by 1880. With yet another new constitution in 1877 ending county home rule, the new elite were firmly entrenched, and the Republicans were no longer a significant force. In summary, 'Whereas the predominantly pro-Confederate plantation belt unified in opposition to federal power and social change regarding former slaves, white mountaineers worried less about the future of labor and more about what class of whites would govern' (p. 181). The region's elites offered the rest of the residents a stark choice: continued progress towards the egalitarian goals of Reconstruction, at the cost of continual violence and chaos, or a future in which a slightly reconfigured set of antebellum elites ruled and everyone got railroads and prosperity.

This is the part of the review where the reviewer traditionally quibbles with what is wrong with the book, but that seems a disingenuous way to conclude. Nash has produced a very effective study that does more than just fill in one of the blank spaces on the map of Reconstruction historiography in the South. It provides an interesting and instructive story on its own terms, but it also gives us a useful comparison to other regions across the South. What happens to Reconstruction in an area where the African-American population is not crucial to the labor supply but can operate as a swing vote? How important was the suspension of the writ of habeas corpus in controlling the Ku Klux Klan? These questions are much easier to answer now that we have a detailed study of Reconstruction in western North Carolina.

## Notes

1. Heather Cox Richardson, *West from Appomattox: The Reconstruction of America after the Civil War* (New Haven, CT, 2007).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Stacey L. Smith, *Freedom's Frontier: California and the Struggle over Unfree Labor, Emancipation, and Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2013); Stacey L. Smith, 'Emancipating peons, excluding coolies: reconstructing coercion in the American West', in *The World the Civil War Made*, ed. Gregory Downs and Kate Masur (Chapel Hill, NC, 2015); *Civil War Wests: Testing the Limits of the United States*, ed. Adam Arenson and Andrew R. Graybill (Berkeley, CA, 2015).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Elliott West, 'Reconstructing race,' *Western Historical Quarterly*, 34, 1 (Spring 2003), 6–26; Elliott West, *The Last Indian War: The Nez Perce Story* (New York, NY, 2009).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Stephen Hahn, Stacey L. Smith, Elliott West, and audience, 'The Boundaries of Reconstruction,' Southern Historical Association Annual Meeting, 14 November 2015, Little Rock, AR.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. David Montgomery, *Beyond Equality: Labor and the Radical Republicans, 1862–1872* (New York, NY, 1967).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. *Reconstructing Appalachia: The Civil War's Aftermath*, ed. Andrew L. Slap (Lexington, KY, 2010); Bruce E. Stewart, *Moonshiners and Prohibitionists: The Battle Over Alcohol in Southern Appalachia* (Lexington, KY, 2011).[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Carole Emberton, 'Unwriting the freedom narrative: a review essay,' *Journal of Southern History*, 82, 2 (May 2016), 377–94.[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. Orville Vernon Burton, *In My Father's House Are Many Mansions: Family and Community in Edgefield, South Carolina* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1985); Sharon Ann Holt, *Making Freedom Pay: North Carolina Freedpeople Working for Themselves, 1865–1900* (Athens, GA, 2000); O'Donovan, *Becoming Free in the Cotton South*.[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. Gordon B. McKinney, *Southern Mountain Republicans, 1865–1900: Politics and the Appalachian Community* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1978).[Back to \(9\)](#)
10. Stephen V. Ash, *Middle Tennessee Society Transformed, 1860–1870: War and Peace in the Upper South* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1988); Susan Eva O'Donovan, *Becoming Free in the Cotton South*

(Cambridge, MA, 2007); T. R. C. Hutton, *Bloody Breathitt: Politics and Violence in the Appalachian South* (Lexington, KY, 2013).[Back to \(10\)](#)

11. Wilma A. Dunaway, *The First American Frontier: Transition to Capitalism in Southern Appalachia, 1700–1860* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1996); Durwood Dunn, *Cades Cove: The Life and Death of an Appalachian Community, 1818–1937* (Knoxville, TN, 1988).[Back to \(11\)](#)
12. Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Lowcountry* (New York, NY, 1997).[Back to \(12\)](#)
13. Gregory P. Downs, *Declarations of Dependence: The Long Reconstruction of Popular Politics in the South, 1861–1908* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2011).[Back to \(13\)](#)

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

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