

## ESSAY REVIEW

### *Carpetbaggers, Freedmen, and the Unfinished Revolution: Reconstruction and the American Mind*

*Those Terrible Carpetbaggers: A Reinterpretation.* By RICHARD NELSON CURRENT. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988. xii, 475p. Illustrations, index. \$24.95.)

*The Confederate Carpetbaggers.* By DANIEL E. SUTHERLAND. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988. xviii, 360p. Illustrations, appendix, bibliography, index. Cloth, \$40.00; paper, \$16.95.)

*Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877.* By ERIC FONER. (New York: Harper & Row, 1988. xxx, 690p. Illustrations, bibliography, index. \$29.95.)

It is a curious thing how politeness can distort the historical record just as effectively as the harsher emotions often associated with Reconstruction. As the later decades of the nineteenth century wore away the immediacy of the postbellum era, reconciliation healed the worst sectional wounds. Fealty to the mythology of the Lost Cause, however, continued to preserve memories of Confederate defeat, black emancipation, and Yankee occupation while stories passed down from generation to generation, cherished like precious family heirlooms kept in velvet-lined boxes, continued to keep alive vivid images of northern soldiers, Freedmen's Bureau agents, and political and economic buccaneers all conspiring to deprive a proud people of their freedom. The Confederacy had suffered military defeat, but southerners understood that bloodshed brought honor even to an enemy, common ground by which participants in battle could take measure of each other's manhood. Reconstruction was something different; it was the unnecessary humiliation of the South, the ill-used victim of Yankee spite. No wonder some southerners who could overcome the influence of its memory considered it polite to forget if not completely forgive select individuals of their unholy transgressions.

The life and death of Pennsylvania-native John Randolph Lewis provides one interesting case in point. A carpetbagger by any measure, Lewis lived

among Georgians who politely forgot and allowed him to be buried in peace. Lewis's adult life reads like a parable illustrating the shifting concerns of the nation during the Civil War era. Giving up a career in dentistry, he accepted a commission in the Union army, rose rapidly through the officers' ranks, and served with the Army of the Potomac until May 1864, when a ball shattered his left arm at the Battle of the Wilderness. Lewis would suffer the ill effects of a poorly healed amputation years after Georgians accepted him as a respectable neighbor.

Colonel Lewis, however, needed more than one chance to earn that respect. His first stay in Georgia, lasting from early 1867 through early 1872, involved service with the Freedmen's Bureau and with the administration of Republican governor Rufus Bullock as state school superintendent. Lewis was an honest advocate of Georgia's ex-slaves, fighting for fair work arrangements but committed to the idea that education provided the key to freedom; unsurprisingly, the white residents of the state gladly rid themselves of the man after the autumn 1871 downfall of his sponsor Bullock. Time eventually worked its charm. In 1881 Lewis returned with different priorities, which this time proved acceptable to his old antagonists. For most of the last nineteen years of his life, business and boosterism, not blacks, occupied his time. Like Lewis, many of his northern counterparts, turned aside by the distasteful complications of Reconstruction and distracted by more profitable concerns, also had forgotten about their section's commitment to fulfilling the promise of emancipation.

When Lewis died in February 1900, the *Atlanta Constitution* mourned the loss of the once-shunned carpetbagger with a flattering obituary. The etiquette of sectional rapprochement allowed the *Constitution* to write about Lewis's valorous war record and his activities in the Grand Army of the Republic, but it neglected to mention the Bureau service of its city's adopted son, probably out of respect for the deceased. According to the paper, Lewis simply "came to Georgia to reside" after the war.<sup>1</sup>

Other Yankees who made the South their home during Reconstruction did not fare as well as John Randolph Lewis. Victims of an often inhospitable, frequently violent social climate and losers in the game of politics or in planting, many lacked the opportunity for a second chance or simply had no stomach to try for one. Their reputations remained sullied in the South while northerners, too, accepted the distorted image of the carpetbagger as constructed by their alleged victims. Vile, uneducated political soldiers of fortune, they were. Perhaps this was one reason why some northern

<sup>1</sup> *Atlanta Constitution*, Feb. 10, 1900.

papers also failed to mention Reconstruction activities in the obituaries of some citizens. When the wealthy Brigadier General Davis Tillson, one of Rockland, Maine's town fathers and benefactors, passed away in 1895, the *Daily Kennebec Journal* of Augusta, Maine, and the *Daily Eastern Argus* of Portland, as well as the *New York Times*, ignored the fact that he had been a Freedmen's Bureau officer in Tennessee and Georgia. They also courteously omitted his failed cotton planting venture during 1867 in Bryan County, Georgia.<sup>2</sup> An unpleasant memory? An embarrassment? Regardless, it was a past that had and, outside of scholarly circles, still retains its bad image.

The early historiography of Reconstruction generally confirmed the popular view that grew out of the sectional rapprochement embodied in John R. Lewis's second southern career. So ingrained was this view that W.E.B. Du Bois's important 1935 study *Black Reconstruction*, a radical departure from the norm, for the most part remained a curiosity when it was not completely ignored by the white majority. Published when racial etiquette still expected black deference to white society, Du Bois's work reviewed the Reconstruction era from a black perspective. Reconstruction, for Du Bois, was a time of hope for ex-slaves who honestly and intelligently strove for their rightful place in a democratic society. Even scholars initially missed the significance of Du Bois's arguments.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, as late as 1947, when E. Merton Coulter published his book *The South During Reconstruction*, the southern view continued to prevail. Coulter's book—with its unreconstructed treatment of blacks, carpetbaggers, and federal policy—became a favorite survey of the era.<sup>4</sup>

By the 1960s, such new syntheses as John Hope Franklin's *Reconstruction After the Civil War* and Kenneth Stampp's *The Era of Reconstruction, 1865-1877* revealed a growing body of revisionist work. With increasing sophistication, historians over the past two decades have now moved beyond revisionism, which had salvaged the reputation of Reconstructionists, and through post-revisionism, which damned them as inadequate in their efforts,

<sup>2</sup> *New York Times*, May 1, 1895; *Augusta Daily Kennebec Journal*, May 1, 1895; *Portland Daily Eastern Argus*, May 1, 1895. For details on the lives of Tillson and Lewis, see Paul A. Cimbala, "The Terms of Freedom: The Freedmen's Bureau and Reconstruction in Georgia, 1865-1870" (Ph.D. diss., Emory University, 1983), *passim*.

<sup>3</sup> In part, Du Bois's Marxist perspective is also to be blamed. See the revisionist survey by Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Era of Reconstruction, 1865-1877* (New York, 1965), 218.

<sup>4</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880* (New York, 1935); E. Merton Coulter, *The South During Reconstruction, 1865-1877* (Baton Rouge, 1947). For John Hope Franklin's reaction to the popularity of Coulter's work, see his essay, "Whither Reconstruction Historiography?" *Journal of Negro Education* 17 (1948), 446-61.

to produce a rich corpus of material that seeks to understand as much as to explain the period on its own terms.<sup>5</sup>

Popular prejudices still lag behind professional scholarship, but recent works that assess the new literature, and incidentally turn up as History Book Club selections, may change that situation. Richard Nelson Current's look at Reconstruction through the eyes of the carpetbaggers and Eric Foner's long-awaited innovative interpretation and synthesis are two of those club selections that should have some impact beyond the academy. Another History Book Club selection, Daniel E. Sutherland's study of ex-Confederates who ventured north to make new lives for themselves, lacks the broader interpretive scope of these works, but it is a delightful example of the kind of imaginative monographic scholarship that makes surveys possible and that continues to make the era of Reconstruction one of American history's most exciting fields.

In *Those Terrible Carpetbaggers*, Current musters his considerable talents and a wide range of resources to launch an attack on the lingering unsavory image of the Yankee and his work in the postwar South. In the process, he presents a different kind of survey of the period. Rather than constructing a collective biography of a large sampling of carpetbaggers, as Lawrence Powell has done with Yankee planters, Current challenges the carpetbagger stereotype on its most significant points, examining key Reconstruction events through the lives of ten of what he considers the most notorious of the lot.<sup>6</sup> This is an effective approach. After all, these prominent individuals, who stood at the center of key episodes of the Reconstruction drama, provided more than sufficient occasion for their southern antagonists to spew forth venom about Yankee perfidy and rapaciousness.

Specialists of the period will be familiar with Current's argument and many of his stories. Otto Olsen's biography of North Carolina carpetbagger Albion W. Tourgée and Ruth Currie-McDaniel's life of Georgia carpetbagger John Emory Bryant, among other biographies and monographs, have

<sup>5</sup> John Hope Franklin, *Reconstruction After the Civil War* (Chicago, 1961). For an earlier important survey of the literature, see Bernard A. Weisberger, "The Dark and Bloody Ground of Reconstruction Historiography," *Journal of Southern History* 25 (1959), 427-47. The best recent survey of the new literature on Reconstruction is LaWanda Cox, "From Emancipation to Segregation: National Policy and Southern Blacks," supplemented by Harold D. Woodman, "Economic Reconstruction and the Rise of the New South, 1865-1900," both in John B. Boles and Evelyn Thomas Nolen, eds., *Interpreting Southern History: Historiographical Essays in Honor of Sanford W. Higginbotham* (Baton Rouge, 1987), 199-307.

<sup>6</sup> Lawrence N. Powell, *New Masters: Northern Planters during the Civil War and Reconstruction* (New Haven, 1980).

shown that these people were more complex than their political enemies would have allowed. Ted Tunnell's gripping chapter on carpetbagger Marshall Harvey Twitchell in his study of Louisiana Reconstruction proves that carpetbaggers were often the victims of Democratic intolerance instead of victimizers of southern Democrats.<sup>7</sup> Still, Current's work is a valuable contribution in that it pulls together many strands to present a forceful, comprehensive argument while retaining the humanity of the individual participants, a work made all the more enjoyable by the author's graceful telling of the experiences of his colorful characters. Perhaps it will even convince descendants of John R. Lewis or Davis Tillson to fill in the blanks left by their ancestors' obituaries.

Far from being a ragged crowd of impoverished, ignorant cowards who came south to make their fortune in politics, these Yankees generally were a sophisticated group. On the whole, they were better educated than their Democratic opponents. They arrived as soldiers, businessmen, professionals, and planters. Some even brought considerable wealth to invest in their new homes. Most were honest, though some fell short of the ideal, and most had positive views of the freedmen, though some only hesitatingly accepted them as allies. Generally, they wished to see justice done.

Carpetbaggers generally were war veterans who arrived in the South expecting their lives to progress quite differently than they actually did. Some prospered and made homes in their adopted states while others left the South, embittered by their experiences. Henry Clay Warmoth, for example, became a prosperous Louisiana sugar planter, living to witness the rise of Huey Long. On the other hand, the only wealth that Albion Tourgée could extract from the South was the experiences that would find their way into his novels.

For most of these men, politics took them by surprise. Daniel Chamberlain, educated at Harvard and Yale, traveled to South Carolina not to take advantage of a fallen civilization but to look after the remains and affairs of a deceased classmate. South Carolina winters—he arrived in January 1866—can be seductive sirens to folk used to Christmas in Maine, so Chamberlain stayed. He took up planting and after two unsuccessful seasons turned to politics as a job through which he could secure an income.

Violence and the lawlessness that these men encountered at the hands of their southern hosts together provide a refrain to which Current returns

<sup>7</sup> Otto H. Olsen, *Carpetbagger's Crusade: The Life of Albion Winegar Tourgée* (Baltimore, 1965); Ruth Currie-McDaniel, *Carpetbagger of Conscience: A Biography of John Emory Bryant* (Athens, 1987); and Ted Tunnell, *Crucible of Reconstruction: War, Radicalism and Race in Louisiana, 1862-1877* (Baton Rouge, 1984).

throughout the book. The incidents in which the carpetbaggers found themselves—like the 1868 “militia wars” that the Klan forced Arkansas carpetbag governor Clayton Powell to fight, or the Mississippi plan of 1875 that troubled Adelbert Ames, or South Carolina’s Hamburg and Ellenton Massacres of 1876 with which Chamberlain had to cope—along with the examples of the North’s retreat from Reconstruction provide the best occasions for fully appreciating Current’s approach to the study of Reconstruction. These dramatic and frustrating incidents allow Current to define clearly the individual while illuminating the larger problem. Readers will better understand the impact of President Rutherford B. Hayes’s hands-off policy by witnessing the frustration that led Tourgée to label his work a “fool’s errand” or Chamberlain’s realization that a New England audience to which he was speaking in 1877 had little interest in his words on Reconstruction.

Current’s carpetbaggers are the heroes of the era, not its scoundrels. Consequently, their southern antagonists are to blame for the unfulfilled promise of Reconstruction. Current, who is squarely in the older revisionist tradition, is a staunch defender of his subjects in part because he allows their detractors to pick the battle’s terrain, but his desire to rehabilitate the carpetbaggers’ reputations does not allow him to skirt their failings or their weaknesses. In the end, he succeeds in getting inside the carpetbaggers’ minds, revealing their personalities, and making them human. Thus, readers learn that Warmoth enjoyed a party and a ribald joke, that Robert K. Scott had an opium dependency, and that Tourgée came close to falling for the charms of a seductress while his wife and daughter were away. A bonus here is that Current pays attention to the wives of his carpetbaggers, further illuminating from a feminine perspective the trials and tribulations of Yankees living in the South.

People change over time, and Current’s examination of his characters’ post-Reconstruction careers allows him to complete the story. Albion Tourgée continued to advocate the black man’s cause, becoming involved in the famous 1896 Supreme Court case *Plessy v. Ferguson* and in 1905 posthumously receiving recognition as a “Friend of Freedom” from W.E.B. Du Bois and other members of the Niagra Movement. But the former North Carolina carpetbagger was not in the mainstream. More reflective of the country’s racial attitude was the changing mind of Daniel Chamberlain. By the end of the century, Chamberlain, a man who once claimed that freedmen had never sustained corrupt officials and that carpetbaggers, scalawags, and blacks had provided their states with good constitutions, had moved into the ranks of those who acknowledged the folly of black Reconstruction. If he could accept the myth, no wonder the white North could only apologize for his past.

In January 1881, New York City lawyer William Royall published a book-length reply to Tourgée's Reconstruction novel, *A Fool's Errand*. Contradicting the Yankee carpetbagger's interpretation of the era, Royall presented what was becoming the standard harangue against Reconstruction with all its indignities of federal oppression, black rule, and the "vultures and harpies" who went south to direct the whole sordid business.<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, Royall had much in common with his intellectual sparring partner; both he and Tourgée had left their respective regions to make new lives for themselves in the heartlands of their former enemies. Royall was, in fact, a Confederate carpetbagger.

Daniel E. Sutherland's *The Confederate Carpetbaggers* is an extraordinarily engaging study of the former rebels who for one reason or another decided to make their way in the North. More systematic than Current's work, it uses data collected on the lives of 571 men who made up what Sutherland terms a "core group" of émigrés. Though Sutherland provides a statistical profile of the group based on extensive primary research on such variables as place of origin, antebellum education, antebellum and postbellum occupations, war service, and northern destinations, he, like Current, understands the value of using the experiences of individuals to illustrate larger truths. In this case, Sutherland relies heavily on the lives of Jefferson Davis's private secretary Burton Harrison and Harrison's wife Constance to explore themes of identity, adaptation, survival, and success in the land of the former enemy.

Royall and his compatriots should have been more understanding of the Yankees who traded places with them, since both groups shared some common traits and ambitions. Like their Yankee counterparts, a significant majority of Confederate carpetbaggers were war veterans. Opportunity lured the ex-rebels from their homes, and they hoped to make their way as merchants, businessmen, professionals, and farmers. A surprisingly large percentage of these men had made the decision to leave their stricken region well before the commencement of Radical Reconstruction. By 1866, over one-third of Sutherland's core group had arrived in places like New York City, a haven for ambitious young men and individuals seeking the anonymity of the crowd, or the Midwest, where enclaves of southern sympathizers could provide a congenial environment for their endeavors. By 1870, 70 percent of the thousands of ex-rebels who ventured north after the war had arrived at their new homes.

Despite the lack of corn bread and the abundance of cold weather, most of the transplanted southerners adapted quite well to their new environment.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Current, *Those Terrible Carpetbaggers*, 381.

Many prospered, almost proving the adage that one must leave the South to succeed. The Confederate carpetbaggers' experience should have suggested to Yankee carpetbaggers like Davis Tillson, Albert Morgan, and Albion Tourgée that success might come easier in the booming postbellum North than in the prostrate South. Consequently, one cannot accept completely Sutherland's sympathetic treatment of the trials and tribulations that his subjects confronted. The short-lived prejudice and hostility, the inconveniences, and the other difficulties greeting them in such places as New York and Chicago pale beside the inhospitable climate their southern cousins provided for their Yankee counterparts. No matter how suspicious Yankees might have been, a northern version of the Klan did not rise up to threaten the safety and security of hearth and home for southerners who in fact became more than sojourners in a strange land.

Once established in the North, the Confederate carpetbaggers were able to maintain their southern identities even as they constructed new ones out of their northern professional pursuits and their busy social calendars. They visited the South, socialized in various organizations like the New York Southern Society and the United Confederate Veterans, and wrote their memoirs defending, perpetuating, and explaining their past. Still, people like Burton Harrison made it known that they were "reconstructed," that they accepted the outcome of the war. Perhaps Sutherland exaggerates the impact they actually had on sectional rapprochement; racism, weariness, and business all made it easier for the North to forget about its commitment to remake the South. Regardless, their contact with their Yankee neighbors and associates did grease the wheels of reconciliation at an important personal level. Moreso than a month of speeches, day-to-day contact proved to Yankee neighbors that erstwhile Confederates held to no hidden southern agenda.

Obviously, there is irony here. Yankees soon took to explaining away their neighbors' Confederate pasts, or obscuring those pasts with polite references to their "wartime service," while they became increasingly critical of the mission of Tourgée and company. The writings of men like Royall and, by the new century, Thomas Dixon superseded those of Tourgée, whose dramatized version of *A Fool's Errand* was hissed from the stage of Philadelphia's Arch Street Theatre in less than two weeks in 1881. As Richard Current points out, the views of Royall, not Tourgée, survived well into the next century, and the grandchildren of Union veterans and Yankee carpetbaggers learned about their "unfortunate" past in schoolrooms throughout the North.

Men like Tourgée were well aware of the ambiguous context, full of irony and stalled promise, in which they offered their sacrifices and made their compromises. They also understood that despite their individual reasons for becoming involved in the life of the postwar South, they were partici-



pating in a phenomenon of national scope influenced by people and events far beyond the borders of their adopted states. The frustration visited upon Current's carpetbaggers and the very existence of Sutherland's suggest as much. Yet, of the works considered here, Eric Foner's richly textured, comprehensive volume *Reconstruction* best reveals the irony, the complexity, and the breadth and depth of the postwar drama. It will set the standard for all future work on the subject.

Foner assumed an awesome task when he commenced work on this book. Mining repositories across the country, he has succeeded in bringing a fresh perspective to much familiar primary material and discovering new information in overlooked collections such as various state governors' papers. Confronting an almost unmanageable amount of monographic literature that tends to fragment the study of the period, he has been successful in combining their modern approaches to social, political, and economic history with an old-fashioned desire to produce a coherent synthesis.

His accomplishment defines *Reconstruction* as being something more than simply a historical period encompassing a dozen or so years after Appomattox. Rather, Foner reminds us that *Reconstruction* was a new departure, the beginning of America's unfinished effort to integrate its ex-slaves into a freer republican society. He also reminds us that one should not confuse the results of failure with original intentions by refocusing our attention on the revolutionary quality of such a commitment, something that W.E.B. Du Bois had once noted and that some present-minded post-revisionist historians writing in the wake of the Great Society have obscured.

Foner interlaces several themes that provide coherence to the complicated events of *Reconstruction*, including the black quest for autonomy, the growth of a strong nation-state with a commitment to protecting the rights of its citizens, race relations and the connection between race and class, and the North's economy and class structure. Such a schema allows Foner to clarify familiar themes and expand the ground previously traversed. Thus, by examining southern society as a whole, Foner finds a place in the *Reconstruction* story for the white yeomanry of the region. The role of the ex-slaves and the federal government's concern for the rights of its citizens, however, are the two themes that bring the revolutionary qualities of *Reconstruction* into bold relief.

Dissatisfied with a passive role in postwar affairs, freedmen strove to define the terms of their new status in ways that expanded and protected their autonomy. Throughout the South, black churches, fraternal societies, fire companies, and other community organizations testified to the freedmen's desire to control their own affairs. Group action such as the strikes organized by Savannah stevedores and Richmond factory workers and the efforts of plantation workers to wrangle concessions from their employers

further emphasize the active roles the freedmen assumed in shaping their own lives. More than anything else, however, the quest for land and the labor arrangements that developed in the wake of that quest revealed the freedmen's understanding of the potential and the requirements of their new status.

Most freedmen failed to achieve the goal of landownership, but that failure and the subsequent development of black economic subordination should not distract us from the revolutionary implications of the compromises made along the way. Sharecropping, for example, eventually left blacks beholden to white landowners, but it was not the ideal mode of labor management as far as planters were concerned, either. As Foner notes, despite its poor modern image, it actually ushered in a shift in power in the labor relations of the South. Sharecropping encouraged blacks to perceive themselves as partners in the crops they tended and increased black autonomy by providing the freedmen with "a degree of control over their time, labor and family arrangements inconceivable under slavery."<sup>9</sup>

Too often historians have criticized the federal government and its representatives in the South for failing to champion effectively or even to understand the freedmen's desires. Foner identifies the self-imposed limitations that explain if not excuse this failure. By placing Washington's actions within the context of the nineteenth century, he convincingly argues that the postwar years witnessed a significant departure from the status quo. Republican state governments and the Freedmen's Bureau, for example, recognized the freedmen's first lien on the crops they cultivated, thus reinforcing the ex-slaves' assumption that they were partners in the fruits of their ex-masters' plantations, not simply hired help. On a larger scale, the Republican party's growing acceptance of the federal government's responsibility for protecting a national citizenship defined by the Fourteenth Amendment and its efforts to secure the freedmen their civil and political rights made Congressional Reconstruction "a stunning and unprecedented experiment in interracial democracy."<sup>10</sup> If the policies of the Freedmen's Bureau or the laws of Republican state legislatures had not threatened the position of white southerners, why the violent, desperate reaction that contributed to Reconstruction's demise?

In answering such questions, Foner weaves together the political, social, and economic aspects of his story in such a way as to illustrate clearly how his themes interacted. Again, the ambiguities, ironies, and contradictions of the Reconstruction process become all too clear. Free labor ideology, born

<sup>9</sup> Foner, *Reconstruction*, 406.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 278.

of the antebellum era, for example, propelled the Republican concern for civil rights but failed to secure economic changes: it simply placed too much faith in the power of civil equality to work its magic in a society where white southerners were not as concerned with democracy or justice as were the freedmen and their northern allies. Furthermore, Andrew Johnson's inability to accept an active role for black Southerners in Reconstruction prevented the North from initiating programs that would have destroyed the economic and political power bases of the planters, which in turn could have led to lasting economic reform. Finally, the class conflict resulting from the 1873 depression contributed to the decline in the northern belief in the efficacy of free labor ideology, the engine that had driven the Republican quest for justice in the South.

The image of Reconstruction that grows from the work of Foner, Current, and Sutherland upsets popular images of a beleaguered postwar South rendered poor but proud by Yankee and black injustice. One wonders, however, if the American mind will accept a challenge that has stimulated such rich scholarship and lively academic debate. Victimized carpetbaggers who actually tried to rebuild the South, a government that actually tried to secure justice for the freedmen, violent planters who easily ignored republicanism—what would Margaret Mitchell say about this kind of history?

These very accessible accounts of the period together make a strong case that should have some impact beyond the usual scholarly audiences. If not, America may be condemned to conjure up memories of one of the most critical periods in its history filtered through Tara's Hollywood haze and the folklore of the Lost Cause. One can only hope that more people in this era of resurgent racism will understand the true significance of Reconstruction and be convinced of the value of completing America's unfinished revolution.

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