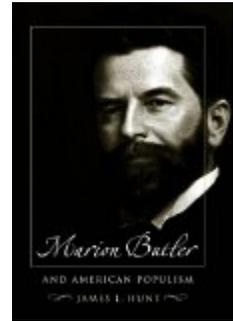


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

James L. Hunt. *Marion Butler and American Populism*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003. xiii + 338 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2770-3.

Reviewed by Gordon B. McKinney (Department of History, Berea College)  
Published on H-SHGAPE (April, 2005)



## Promise and Frustration

James L. Hunt, an Associate Professor of Law at Mercer University, has written the first complete political biography of North Carolina Populist leader Marion Butler. Using both printed and manuscript sources, Hunt has traced the public career of one of the most prominent political figures in the state from 1890 to 1920. At the same time, Hunt addresses several major historical controversies that surround Populism and North Carolina politics in this eventful period. Major figures like William Jennings Bryan, Tom Watson, and Theodore Roosevelt play prominent roles in this account, and Butler's role as organizer, spokesperson, party leader, and legislator is carefully documented.

Marion Butler was the oldest son of a prosperous Sampson County, North Carolina, farmer. He was a fine student who entered the University of North Carolina hoping to train as a lawyer. His father's unexpected death forced him to return home, where he ran the family farm, edited a newspaper, and directed a school. In 1890, at age twenty-seven, Butler was elected to the state legislature as a Democrat who favored the policies of the Farmers' Alliance. By 1892, Butler had joined the Populist Party and had become its leader in the state. Hunt is quite convincing in showing that this dramatic shift in allegiance was the product of both a firm commitment to reform and enlightened political self-interest. After the election, Butler and other Populists realized that they held the balance of power between the two traditional parties.

For the next six years, North Carolina politics was

in turmoil and Butler was in the middle of it. In 1894 and 1896, Republicans and Populists combined for legislative elections and gained control of that body. As a result, Butler and Republican Jeter Pritchard were elected to the United States Senate. At the state level, Republican Daniel Russell won the governorship, and North Carolina's election laws were made more democratic. Hunt does a terrific job of describing the rabidly racist and physically intimidating campaign of 1898 by the Democrats. No previous account of this horrific development is so graphic in describing the terrorist tactics employed by Furnifold Simmons and his lieutenants.

Hunt also provides a clear account of Butler's efforts on the national stage. He spends a great deal of time describing and analyzing the maneuvering that took place during the 1896 presidential campaign. Hunt is at great pains to dispel the notion that the Populist nomination of William Jennings Bryan was a betrayal of the party's principles. Hunt is quite convincing when he portrays Butler as a consistent reformer, but his account makes it clear that the Populists had few good options. Hunt also describes Butler's legislative work as a United States Senator. While this material is necessary for a full biography, there is little of substance in these sections of the book.

Essentially the same could be said for Butler's career after 1900. Butler joined the Republican Party in North Carolina after the demise of the Populists. The party was consistently in the minority and badly divided by ideological and patronage factions. Hunt dutifully describes

this infighting in considerable detail. For most readers, the only information that will rise above the mundane in this part of the book is the description of Theodore Roosevelt's impact on southern Republicans. As Hunt acknowledges, by the time of his death, Butler was a largely ignored figure in his home state and adopted political party.

Hunt's assessments of Butler and his career are both

judicious and insightful. He addresses the major historiographical controversies surrounding Populism at the national and local levels. He covers all aspects of Butler's public career—apparently there is virtually no information about his private life. He does not claim more for Butler that can be justified by the evidence and common sense interpretations. This work should stand as the standard biography of an important local and national reform leader for the foreseeable future.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-shgape>

**Citation:** Gordon B. McKinney. Review of Hunt, James L., *Marion Butler and American Populism*. H-SHGAPE, H-Net Reviews. April, 2005.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10453>

Copyright © 2005 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu).