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Stephen V. Ash. *A Year in the South: Four Lives in 1865.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002. ix + 289 pp. $26.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-312-29493-9.

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Four Seasons of Transformation

As the calendar turned to 1865, four Southerners faced an uncertain future. Louis Hughes, Samuel Agnew, Cornelia McDonald, and John Robertson participated in, and observed, the Civil War entering its final stages. Hughes, a Deep South slave; McDonald, a Virginia Confederate army wife and mother of seven; Robertson, an East Tennessee former Confederate soldier; and Agnew, a Mississippi preacher and son of a prominent planter, each experienced the dying days of the Confederacy with varying degrees of despair, hope, restlessness and serenity. The stories of these four Southerners comprise Stephen Ash's *A Year in the South.* Ash traces the lives of these "ordinary" Southerners through the entirety of 1865, using the changing seasonal motif to examine the myriad challenges and opportunities that befell the South in the year the Confederacy died. Dividing the chapters into "Winter," "Spring," "Summer," and "Fall and Winter Again," Ash implores the reader to trace the tribulations of these four individuals as "they stepped across the threshold between the old world and the new" (p. xiv). Each Southerner's narrative is compelling in its own right.

Louis Hughes spent much of the Civil War as a hired slave on the salt works along Alabama's Tombigbee River. Though trained as a butler, Hughes adapted quite well at the salt works just north of Mobile. He and his wife, Matilda, hired as a cook in the works, soon became favorites of the state Salt Commissioner, Benjamin Woolsey. Within the local slave community, Hughes established a significant economic nitch by selling tobacco plugs. With Woolsey's blessing, Hughes operated his business for much of the latter period of the war and made a sizable income. But the collapse of Confederate authority in South Alabama brought this "happy interlude" to an end (p. 28). Hughes's owner took him and his wife from the salt works to Mississippi and trapped them in bondage for months after the war's conclusion. In the remote section of northern Mississippi where Hughes toiled into the summer months of 1865, no Federal troops arrived to enforce the Emancipation Proclamation. Though his master refused to submit to the new order, Hughes managed to escape to Memphis, summon two Union officers, and take them back to Mississippi to free the remaining slaves on the plantation. When Hughes and his wife returned to Memphis, they prepared for a new journey to Cincinnati, where Matilda's mother had escaped in 1855. The Hughes family continued on to Canada after reconnoitering with Matilda's mother; though many former slave-emigres in Canada returned to the United States following the war's completion, Hughes never felt confident that his freedom would be protected in post-war America. He would later return to the United States and settle in Milwaukee, but his movement to Canada after the war's completion reveals an intriguing counter-migration largely ignored by historians. Indeed, his odyssey illustrates two phenomena that historians would do well to explore in greater depth: the refusal of many masters in the Southern interior to accede to emancipation for months after the war's completion and the sizable migration of African Americans to the cities of the North and West.

Whereas Hughes suffered the first half of 1865 in bondage, only to fulfill his ambitions of freedom later in the year, Sam Agnew's emotional trajectory followed an opposite course. The son of a Mississippi planter named Enoch Agnew, Sam served the Tippah County community as a minister from the beginning of the war. Exempt from Confederate military service because of his occupation, Sam Agnew avoided some of the harrowing battlefield experiences of his fellow Confederates. Like others in the Confederate interior Agnew remained confident of the South's military fortunes as late as February 1865. The economic strains of war and the increasingly destructive Federal raids into the community finally destroyed the edifice of plantation life that the Agnews had come to take for granted. Not only did the Agnews'

crops fail in the summer drought of 1865, but the entire workforce abandoned the lands they had tilled for decades. Unlike in the remote plantation district where Louis Hughes toiled into the summer, Federal troops immediately descended upon the Agnews' plantation with orders to enforce the Emancipation Proclamation. The Agnew plantation slaves did not flee or threaten the Agnew family in any way, but they "simply quit working except as it suited them" (p. 82). Like other ex-slaves in Mississippi, the Agnews' freedmen and women negotiated sharecropping arrangements that galled the sensibilities of planters unaccustomed to bargaining with blacks. The ex-slaves worked the Agnew plantation until the end of the year and, in a symbolic reminder of the changing times, eschewed the customary "Christmas gift" offered by the paternalistic household head; by New Year's Day, all of Agnew's former slaves left the plantation for places unknown. In many ways, Sam Agnew's story is a familiar one, recounted most famously by historian James Roark in his book *Masters without Slaves* (1977). But Ash personalizes the sense of loss, despair and alienation among the master class with particular clarity and emotional resonance.

In the Upper South the Civil War and its aftermath embroiled the population in a different sort of struggle than that in Alabama and Mississippi. Rampant guerrilla war and the destruction of civilian life by passing armies characterized the Civil War experience in the Upper South states of Virginia and Tennessee. Cornelia McDonald's beloved Shenandoah Valley served as the "breadbasket of the Confederacy" and, for that, suffered a bitterly punitive expedition by Union General Philip Sheridan in the fall of 1864. Cornelia McDonald lost her husband, Confederate Colonel Angus McDonald, to disease shortly after he was released from a military prison in 1864. A widow and mother of seven children, Cornelia McDonald endured the downfall of the Confederacy from the vantage point of Lexington, Virginia. Her friends in the tightly-knit college town of Lexington, including the wife of General William Pendleton, helped Cornelia survive the difficult winter and spring of 1865. She eventually took a job as an art teacher and hired her boys out to the army quartermaster to chop wood. Though she survived the financial hardship borne by war and the loss of her husband, Cornelia's spirits dampened considerably with the demise of the Confederacy. Cornelia McDonald was a "reluctant Confederate," siding with the Union until the war broke out.[1] But once the war began in earnest she adopted the Confederate cause with zeal. In the spring of 1865 the Confederate dream died, leaving Lexington an impoverished town hosting a stream of refugees, black and white. Cornelia was especially haunted by the new social order that liberated the town's slaves and required her son to perform degrading duties as farm laborers in order to survive. In many ways, Cornelia McDonald found her voice in protest against the imperious Union officer occupying the town. In defiance of Union authorities, but always careful to avoid rebuke, she was a "master of the cold stare, the condescending voice, the subtle insult" (p. 159). Her own family's struggle to survive prevented her from engaging in the momentous events of the city, beyond an occasional glare of dissent directed toward Yankee soldiers. But her reliance upon communal ties, cultivated through four years of war and increasing deprivation, nourished her spirit as she struggled to survive.

The most intriguing story in *A Year in the South* involves the life of John Robertson, a Confederate soldier in heavily Unionist East Tennessee. For much of the war, the state's Confederate government established a considerable foothold in East Tennessee despite the region's Unionist majority. As a Confederate East Tennessean, John Robertson was a member of a potent, though increasingly endangered minority; rampant guerrilla warfare gradually undermined Confederate authority in the eastern section of the state. Once the Union army established control of the east in late 1863, Confederates like John Robertson found themselves on the run. By late 1864 Robertson surrendered to Union authorities and took the new oath of loyalty. John Robertson tried to end his war in 1864, but ongoing guerrilla and counter-guerrilla struggles in East Tennessee continued to encompass Robertson for another year. He turned increasingly to religion, and hoped to settle down with a woman he recently met and start a family. But Unionists under the sway of the Radical William Brownlow refused to allow former Confederates like Robertson to retreat into the private world. In the summer of 1865, Unionists accused him of participating in a Confederate raid years earlier and threatened revenge on him. Robertson knew that his life was endangered and that he could no longer survive in post-war East Tennessee. Robertson then began a journey not unlike that of Louis Hughes; he headed North to Indiana and Chicago, and then he headed west into Iowa. If the postwar migration of African Americans from the South to the old Northwest is a largely understudied phenomena, the flight of former Confederates–especially those fleeing local Unionists–to the North, garners even less attention from historians. The irony of fleeing to the land of the former enemy did not escape John Robertson, but for him the war was as distant as the Old South. He was ready to move on, even if those

around him were not.

A Year in the South is a meticulously researched and beautifully written narrative that weaves together the lives of four intriguing individuals with larger, often under-appreciated elements of the post-Civil War South. The delayed emancipation in many remote regions of the South, migration of blacks and whites to the North and West, reassertion of community ties in the midst of widespread destruction, and the spiritual awakening of Southerners vexed by such a cataclysmic loss, all characterized in some way or another the lives of John Robertson, Cornelia McDonald, Louis Hughes and Samuel Agnew. If there is any shortcoming to this book, it is Ash's refusal to make explicit the thematic connections between these four Southerners. Perhaps Ash feels that the four mini-biographies alone paint a compelling portrait of Southern life in 1865. Certainly Ash offers a "balance of breadth and depth," by focusing on the lives of these four "ordinary" individuals (p. xiii). But some discussion, on Ash's part, regarding the overall struggles common to all Southerners would have helped place each individual story in the context of larger changes in postwar Southern life. Still, even without explicit analysis of the common themes across the lives of these four biographical subjects, Ash's book succeeds in telling us "how the New South came to be" and "what the Old South was" (p. xii).

Note

[1]. Daniel Crofts uses the term "reluctant Confederates" to refer to those individuals who supported the Union during the secession crisis, but then supported the Confederacy once the war broke out. Daniel Crofts, *Reluctant Confederates: Upper South Unionists in the Secession Crisis* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989).

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