

K. Michael Prince. *Rally 'Round the Flag, Boys!: South Carolina and the Confederate Flag.* Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2004. x + 291 pp. \$34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-57003-527-2.



Reviewed by Matthew Barbee

Published on H-South (May, 2006)

K. Michael Prince writes with the critical nostalgia common to ex-southerners. A native of South Carolina, Prince currently lives in Germany; this geographic distance has enabled both critical investigation and a newfound appreciation of his home state (p. 2). With *Rally 'Round the Flag, Boys!*, Prince examines South Carolina's recent history through a close reading of the contestation of the display of the Confederate Flag at the State House in Columbia. First raised in 1961 as part of the Civil War centennial celebrations, the flag became a crucial symbol in the political, cultural, and racial conflicts that defined South Carolina throughout the 1990s. In 2000, after a hard-fought compromise, the flag was removed to a less prominent area on the State House grounds.

Prince writes lucid, poetic prose and has a journalist's flair for rendering readable, engaging narrative out of complex materials. *Rally 'Round the Flag, Boys!* will certainly be of interest to historians of South Carolina and the Confederacy. Its comprehensive overview of an important era in South Carolina history provides a useful guide for later studies. In addition, the author's analysis of

flag semiotics helps elucidate the various political and cultural attachments and meanings made out of the display of the flag. This is an important contribution to the ongoing discussion of the roles of heritage and memory in southern politics and culture. Prince's historically informed discussion of the multifaceted debates brings to light the range of southern heritages. He places these modern debates within the longer history of southern heritage and helps us understand the origins of the deeply felt emotions it evokes.

In chapters 1 and 2, Prince gives us a thorough overview of the history of the flag prior to 1961 that helps ground an in-depth analysis of the debates and their participants. Drawing from a range of secondary sources, chapter 1, "Dixie's Conquered Banners," describes the flags that have flown over South Carolina: the Palmetto Flag; the first, second, and third Confederate national flags; and the multitude of homespun, unofficial battle-flags. Prince demonstrates that the Confederate flag as we know it was one of many flags flown across the Confederacy and was not commonly used in South Carolina. Prince's discussion of the

variety of Confederate flags will be familiar to many of his readers, especially those with a keen interest in the Civil War. However, it might be slightly confusing for a reader who is not particularly attuned to or interested in the specifics of Civil War flags. Images of the numerous flags he mentions, either photographs or drawings, would have helped clear the waters.

Chapter 1 traces the history of these flags up through the Civil War and Reconstruction, to the turn of the century, the Lost Cause, and Jim Crow segregation. At fifteen pages, it is not long enough to include an in-depth analysis of the political, cultural, and social reverberations that enabled the restoration of the antebellum racial order. It does, however, effectively demonstrate the post-war development of a narrative of southern and South Carolina heritage that is familiar to most students of southern history. By demonstrating the small role the Confederate Flag played, Prince foreshadows the irony in the mid-twentieth century embrace of that symbol. In chapter 2, "A Land Primed for Fatality," Prince traces the rise of the flag as a symbol of Dixiecrat identity from the New Deal through the 1960s. He provides a thorough overview of the key figures of South Carolina politics and, with particular nuance, examines the centennial celebrations of the Civil War as a key moment when contemporary heritage practices such as the display of the flag and battle reenactments gained popularity.

In 1961, the South Carolina legislature began to fly the flag above the Capitol dome. Prince carefully places this decision within the contexts of the centennial while connecting it with the regional and racial or sectional tensions of the Civil Rights movement. The centennial provided the rationale for a symbolic display which reasserted a racial order that was fast crumbling. And, as Prince demonstrates, it grew out of pure and simple Carolina Cussedness. The national Civil War Centennial commission resisted all events which would have awakened racial tensions. Independ-

ent to a fault, South Carolina was determined to dismiss outside intervention and, as Prince reminds us, unfurled the flag as a means of resistance to external pressures.

In chapter 3, "Standing Guard at the Gates of Southern History," and chapter 4, "The Other South Carolina," Prince's journalistic writing serves him well as he describes the widely divergent meanings attached to the Confederate Flag. He gives equal space to the vast array of positions that draw from and seek to influence the uses of southern history. In his recounting we hear from neo-confederates, white supremacists, political and cultural conservatives, mainstream Democratic and Republican politicians, the NAACP, and African-American political and religious leaders, to name but a few. While his eyes remain on the flag debates, these chapters point to some of the broader goals of those invested in particular visions of southern heritage. In Prince's careful prose, these various voices are given equal space and consideration. This multitude of voices does not explode in cacophony; rather, Prince's deft prose provides careful balance and capably exposes the variations and commonalities across this discourse. The complexity of the debates is effectively illustrated and the reader gains a sense of its development and the difficulties South Carolinians faced in sorting out a compromise.

Chapter 5, "Taking Their Stands," and chapter 6, "Old Times There Are Not Forgotten," take on the difficult task of recounting the decades-long siege that eventually brought down the flag. It is a long, complex story and Prince ably chronicles its development. He pays particular attention to the legislative practices through which the flag was both attacked and supported. Cultural politics play a supporting role in these sections, though Prince does refer to the ongoing rhetorical struggle that framed and influenced the various bills, amendments, and compromises offered forth by various governors and state legislators. Most of these plans were variations on the 1994 Heritage

Act, which would have moved the flag from the dome to another site on the Capitol grounds. Among the various protests and public actions that influenced the debates, Prince pays particular attention to the role of the NAACP. In July 1999, the national board of the NAACP acted upon a longstanding threat to boycott the state. Embraced by a variety of African-American business and civic associations, the boycott ultimately cost South Carolina millions of dollars in revenue lost due to canceled conferences and vacations. While these costs were only a small portion of the state's tourist industry, the publicity it stirred up had an overwhelmingly negative effect. In 2000, the state legislature took up a revised version of the Heritage Act. It passed both houses of the state legislature and in July of that year the flag was removed from the dome.

In his postlude, Prince points to the lowering of the flag as a step in the ongoing struggle for racial equality that, more often than not, is fought through the medium of heritage and memory. His account of the contestation of one symbol contributes much to our understanding of a long historical struggle and its possible future dimensions. Of course, as with any work of history and reportage, Prince does not tell the whole story. While he pays careful attention to the numerous voices that weighed in on the debates, those voices tend to be political or economic elites. We hear from leading African-American politicians, but not African-American residents of Columbia and Charleston. This holds true for the white voices he includes. Part of this absence is certainly a result of his resources. Prince depends heavily on articles and polls published in the *Columbia State* which, it appears, featured elites and broad generalizations.

Further, Prince's close focus on South Carolina frustrates what might have been fruitful comparative analysis. While he does refer to similar flag debates in Georgia and Alabama, Prince makes no mention of other, similar battles over memory in the South.[1] Thus, we lose sight of the

larger, regional battles taking place and their relationship to national politics and culture. For example, the flag debate became a crucial question in the hotly contested 2000 South Carolina Republican primary between George W. Bush and John McCain. While the flag debate was only one of many topics through which Bush defeated McCain, it was an important part of that election.[2]

While the flag became the crucible through which South Carolina negotiated change, those changes were not limited to a small southern state or the slow unwinding of Carolina Cussedness. Prince provides a well-written, thorough overview of the development of this unwinding. What remains unanswered is that unwinding's relationship to larger shifts in political and culture paradigms.

Notes

[1]. To cite two examples from another southern state capital, between 1994 and 1996 Richmond, Virginia, was deeply divided over plans to add a memorial to recently deceased, African-American tennis star Arthur Ashe to the all-Confederate Monument Avenue. In 1999 plans for a set of public murals which would have featured Robert E. Lee were defeated.

[2]. For one overview of this history, see Jake Tapper, "John McCain to Condemn Confederate Flag," *Salon*, April 18, 2000, <http://www.salon.com/politics2000/feature/2000/04/18/mccain/>.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-south>

Citation: Matthew Barbee. Review of Prince, K. Michael. *Rally 'Round the Flag, Boys!: South Carolina and the Confederate Flag*. H-South, H-Net Reviews. May, 2006.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11719>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.