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W. Scott Poole. *South Carolina's Civil War: A Narrative History.* Macon: Mercer University Press, 2005. xiii + 187 pp. $32.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-86554-968-5.

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Missed Opportunity

W. Scott Poole asserts that no state better encompasses "the tragedy of the Confederate experience" than South Carolina (p. 1). There is much to support his claim. For most of the antebellum era, the Palmetto State constituted the states' rights, pro-slavery vanguard of the South, climaxing with its dramatic withdrawal from the Union in December 1860. The attack on Fort Sumter in Charleston harbor in 1861 initiated the fighting, while Sherman's march through the state in early 1865 underscored the futility of further resistance after four years of war. In between, South Carolina was the site of some of the earliest and best-remembered combat involving Union soldiers of African descent, as well as the first steps toward emancipation, the destruction of slavery, and the end the South's slave-holding society. South Carolinians fought in every major theater of the war, and an uncommon proportion of them made the supreme sacrifice for their cause. Given this embarrassment of historical riches with which to indulge himself, Poole unfortunately contents himself with merely scratching the surface rather than digging deeply to detail the myriad layers and elements that comprised the state's Civil War experience. As a result, although Poole attempts to cover a lot of ground with his thin book (just 168 pages of text), *South Carolina's Civil War* will probably disappoint most readers, providing little to capture the eye of academic historians or the casual history buff. Indeed, the book leaves one wondering why Poole did not take the task he assigned himself more seriously.

Poole starts his book on a decidedly wrong foot with an ill-conceived and unnecessary defense of his decision to present his work as a narrative. According to the author, academic historians undertake "an enormous risk" when they attempt to gear their material for a wider audience, and that many "reject out-of-hand" the use of narrative to present history (pp. ix, x). In my opinion, these assertions are well off the mark. Many academic historians, even such acclaimed scholars as David M. Kennedy, James T. Patterson, Eric Foner and Sean Wilentz (not to mention James McPherson and Joseph Ellis), have produced majestic histories and biographies that have both sold well and received the accolades of their peers. Indeed, such works have generally had a lock on the Bancroft, Pulitzer, and other prestigious awards. If academic historians have a problem with narrative histories per se (and I do not think they do), its because so many are such lousy history; poorly written, thinly researched, and simplistically or polemically argued. Poole's book is far from lousy, but it falls well short of the deep research, broad vision, and elegant prose of the best narrative histories.

South Carolina's Civil War is arranged in rough chronological fashion. Chapter 1 opens Poole's story with an overview of antebellum South Carolina politics and society, arguing bluntly that secession was a top-down decision by the state's rabidly anti-democratic leadership to defend the institution of slavery. Small slaveholders and yeomen farmers garner little attention from Poole. This argument is true as far as it goes, but does nothing to enlighten the casual historian to the enormous complexity of South Carolina's white society in the years before the Civil War, nor does it present any information to readers on such watershed moments as the nullification crisis, the Bluffton movement, the secession crisis of 1850-51, or the impact of the boom-bust cycles of the state's cotton economy. Instead, Poole opts to focus on a handful of individuals as representative of larger social, political, or racial groups. Wade Hampton and Robert Barnwell Rhett are put forth as typical of the

ruling class in the state; Lucy Holcombe Pickens represents elite white women, while the lives and achievements of Robert Smalls and Prince Rivers are put forth in place of any meaningful discussion of the slave experience in the state (aside from a few paragraphs on the Denmark Vesey conspiracy). Poole's use of this mini-biography format is at times interesting and frequently entertaining, but does not really advance his narrative or present any sort of nuanced understanding of politics and society in the Palmetto State. One can also question his choice of subjects. Even with South Carolina's admittedly strong penchant for radicalism, Rhett was too extreme in his opinions and actions to have developed a serious political following. Poole's descriptions of Lucy Pickens's social life make for some juicy gossip (such as when he suggests that she may have had an affair with the tsar of Russia), but what of it? Why not focus on Louisa McCord, Mary Chesnut, Mary Amarinthia Snowden, or another woman of higher achievement or character than Lucy, whom Poole delights in portraying as a stereotypical spoiled Southern belle.

The remainder of *South Carolina's Civil War* focuses primarily on the military aspects of the state's wartime experiences. (Poole feels compelled to defend this decision as well in his introduction.) Even casual students of the Civil War will find little new in Poole's presentations of the fall of Fort Sumter and Port Royal, the siege of Charleston, the experiences of black soldiers in the 54th Massachusetts and the 1st South Carolina regiments, or in Sherman's march through the state in early 1865. In addition to martial activities inside the state, Poole adds an entire chapter on the experiences of South Carolina troops in other Confederate theaters of war. This is not entirely to be criticized. Poole covers these topics well, but in doing so he largely ignores the non-military aspects of South Carolina's wartime experience. Politics are largely confined to a few pages on the state's experiment with an "Executive Council" to manage the state's initial war effort. The economic aspects of the war are never discussed in any meaningful way, nor are the experiences of South Carolina women (except for Lucy Pickens) or slaves (unless they wore a Union uniform). There is some good material presented on the class divisions created by the enactment of conscription laws in 1862, as well as some fine insights on how actual wartime experiences differed from the memories evoked by disciples of the postwar "Lost Cause" theology. But, again, such moments are few and fleeting.

Southern sympathizers will draw little comfort from Poole's narrative. On more than one occasion he calls secession an act of treason. In different places he shows contempt for the achievements of South Carolina's military leaders, describes the slaughter of black prisoners by Confederate troops defending Battery Wagner, and points out that civilians were as likely to be plundered by Confederate cavalry under Joseph Wheeler as they were by Sherman's bummers. The story of the *Hunley* is presented as a tragic-comic act of desperation rather than as a heroic example of Confederate valor and ingenuity.

Mercer University Press must be called to task for some of the book's shortcomings. Throughout its pages, *South Carolina's Civil War* is marred by indifferent copy-editing and sloppy typesetting. Typographical errors abound, and the editors at the press should have caught some of the book's more egregious errors, such as repeatedly referring to the Confederate Army of Tennessee as the "Army of THE Tennessee" (its Sherman-led, Union counterpart) or anachronistic references to the *Hunley* as a "U-boat." Nor were most of the buildings of South Carolina College destroyed during the burning of Columbia (indeed, they stand on the campus to this day).

This should have been a better book. Perhaps Poole would have been better served by waiting another decade or so before attempting to undertake such a substantial task. A young professor of history at the College of Charleston, Poole's previous scholarship has garnered positive reviews, and deservedly so. But his heart never seems to have been in this work, writing on the defensive and producing a work that reads like it was hastily assembled and rushed into print. In the final paragraph of the book, Poole writes that we need "a large, perhaps multi-volume, history of the Civil War in South Carolina" and he hopes that his brief work might "incite and inspire" some future scholar to undertake the challenge (p. 179). Maybe the shortcomings of *South Carolina's Civil War* will inspire Poole himself to make a more earnest effort sometime in the future.

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