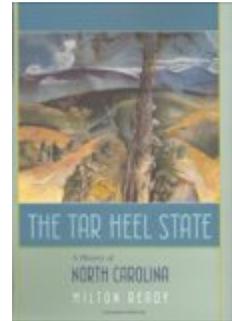


H-Net Reviews

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Milton Ready. *The Tar Heel State: A History of North Carolina*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2005. xi + 404 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57003-591-3.

Reviewed by Erik Mathisen (Department of History, University of Pennsylvania)
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Building a New South State

State histories can sometimes read like biographies: many of the literary conventions draw on a long tradition, the arc of the story and many of the characters are familiar, and the turning points comport with larger regional or national narratives. Decades ago, state studies were important interpretive tools: they gave substance and focus to a larger set of events or socio-economic processes, their value stemming from their ability to complicate the nation's history. More recently, however, state studies have fallen out of vogue in American historiography. Many question the viability of studying regions according to often artificial political borders, when more recent work on the borders between states and regions show a much more permeable process of negotiation and movement. Just as many scholars rightfully question the overweening role that regionalism has played in southern history as a whole. Set against these debates, Milton Ready's effort to build some consensus around a history of North Carolina offers something of a fresh start for state studies. And while the result is sometimes idiosyncratic, Ready paints many colorful pictures that give shape to the history of the Tar Heel State.

Ready's survey of North Carolina history draws together an unwieldy set of events and voices, successfully situates the state in larger regional, national and international contexts, and crafts a narrative of the state's development that shows just how a colony and state, which was something of a southern outsider, became the quintessentially New South state in the twentieth century. The arc of the book stretches from pre-contact through to the present, with twenty-two chapters offer-

ing concise interpretations of everything from Roanoke to the Regulators, Reconstruction to the Research Triangle. The nineteenth century receives the most attention by far: the lengthiest chapter in the book deals with the antebellum period; there are two separate chapters on the Civil War, and three on New South industrialization, Populism and Progressivism respectively. The narrative moves at a brisk pace, and both author and editor are to be commended for including almost two hundred illustrations, scattered throughout the book.

A few key themes dominate. For one, Ready returns on several occasions to the peculiar nature of North Carolina politics. Historians of the colonial South have often remarked that the inter-necine factionalism which developed early in the colony, set the state apart from the arguably more hierarchical South Carolina or Virginia. Ready sees this factionalism as a durable and lasting characteristic. For the author, the absence of a clearly identifiable elite, and the relative lack of a solidified colonial economy, meant that a state of small freeholders fought amongst themselves and exhibited the kind of egalitarian politics (often veering towards outright revolution) that made North Carolina the most democratic of American states. The state was one of the last to ratify the Constitution and remained staunchly opposed to state improvements which could sap North Carolinians of their freedom: in short, a "yeoman's paradise without the progress" (p. 160).

But if the yeoman's paradise bucked the progress of industrialization and infrastructure that was the hall-

mark of American economic success, between 1835 and the early twentieth century, North Carolina turned a corner. Ready is clear that antebellum reformers, New South boosters, and Progressive leaders were hardly radicals. If anything, the author returns again and again to a spirit of progressive conservatism that marked North Carolina's rise from backwater to prominence, which Ready argues was a holdover from its earlier, politically contrarian past. But between the road constructions and school foundations, the industries encouraged, and the marriage between government and moneyed interests, North Carolina became the model of the progressive New South state. "Perhaps the enduring legacy of the New Southerners," writes Ready, "lay not in the textiles, trains, and towns they founded but more properly in the renewed spirit of optimism and progress that they engendered" (p. 282).

North Carolina's development into the paragon of New South optimism in the late nineteenth century represents but one part of another recurring theme in Ready's interpretation. And that is the relationship between North Carolina and the rest of the South. From its colonial beginnings, the author argues that the relative lack of elite domination, coupled with the development of a plantation complex that never really took root in the region, meant that in both its perpetual in-fighting and its racial components, North Carolina was clearly a place apart. Central to his argument is Ready's contention that slaveholding was not as widespread as in other areas of the South, and this factor played the determining role in making the state "less southern" than its neighbors. By 1835, however, North Carolinians ratified an uncommonly durable state constitution, and with it the state sought to bring a burgeoning free black population in line behind the rest of the South. But the project was ephemeral at best, with the Civil War (which Ready argues was equally unique from the rest of the South) and Reconstruction actually bringing the former Confederacy in line behind North Carolina, as the outlying slave state became a center of New South boosterism.

Covering as much ground as it does, Ready's book offers some noteworthy insights. Perhaps his most interesting intervention comes in the first third of the book, where he situates North Carolina's colonial past in the context of a wider Atlantic World. While studies of the period often treat the colony as a poor country cousin to the Carolina Lowcountry or the Chesapeake Bay, Ready argues that the ill-fated Roanoke settlement had a profound impact on both the shape and direction of English colonization efforts for much of the seventeenth century.

Far from a back-water, Ready argues that North Carolina was a pivotal testing ground, and the failure of Roanoke girded later colonial experiments on the North American continent for some time thereafter.

But while the author goes a long way towards integrating a multitude of stories and perspectives into the durable framework of the state history, the book is not without some shortcomings. For one, the structure of the book isolates many peoples and voices from a dominantly political narrative. An odd chapter on the Cherokees, sits uncomfortably between chapters on the antebellum period and the Civil War; African Americans materialize at moments when slavery or the fight for civil rights overwhelms the state's political landscape. In many ways, this issue is but one example of a larger problem: how can you pay due attention to an expanse of historical experience, within the confines of state studies that invariably pay closest attention to political developments? How can historians deal with a diversity of experience that does not easily fit between political turning points? In this case, I think this has less to do with the author's choices than it does the actual structure of the state narrative itself, which we so closely associate with politics and politically active men.

Secondly, Ready's focus on the egalitarian nature of North Carolina politics—as both the most democratic and the most indifferent, the most violent and the most egalitarian of political cultures—is a bit difficult to follow. The reader is left to wonder, for instance, whether North Carolina's political elite were as ineffectual compared to Virginia or South Carolina elites as Ready suggests, or whether it was not contrarianism but regionalism that created a state without a political center. Ready chalks up all of the blood-letting to a factionalism that lacked the presence of an elite to mete the endemic nature of the fighting, but perhaps the political violence had a more focused aim. The author emphasizes, for instance, that democratic practices sunk deep roots in the North Carolina's political culture, and that a dominant slaveholding elite never developed. But as Marvin Kay and Lorin Cary note in their study of slavery in the region during the colonial period, the relative lack of large slaveholders in the landscape did not preclude smaller slaveholders from a particularly violent brand of mastery.[1] And as the history of the Regulators makes clear, there is equal evidence to suggest a class, as well as a geographical, divide in the state that could be interpreted as something other than democratic individualism run amok.[2]

Finally, Ready's focus on the Progressive era in North

Carolina is understandable, but worth a closer examination. While the author judiciously points to both the successes and the shortcomings of the period and the people who oversaw it (particularly in an elegant close to the book that emphasizes the cost inflicted by progress on the region's environment), the Progressives are the real protagonists of Ready's work. In a chapter titled "Trains, Towns, Textiles and Tobacco," the author points to the many developments in the state's economy that remade North Carolina. But the author's take on Populism casts agrarian protests as more of a parochial tilting at windmills than a clear-eyed effort to see the value in the Progressive program, and by the twentieth century, quick chapters on the New Deal, civil rights and the development of the state's technological sector read as something rather teleological. The effort to brand the state's political mantra pops up again, with reference to North Carolina's "hesitant radicalism" during the Great Depression. This characterization left this reviewer wondering, once again, about the connections between the art of the state study and the art of biography. Any state that spurred the creation of civil rights sit-ins and

Robert Williams seems something more than hesitantly radical, and perhaps the effort to imbue a state (with all of its complexities) with a larger ethos does more harm than good. That said, the author builds to a strong finish, pointing the reader towards the work yet to be done in the New South Tar Heel State, but also the costs the state incurred along the way. In a clearly written and engagingly argued textbook, North Carolina has a new biography.

Notes

[1]. Marvin L. Michael Kay and Lorin Lee Cary, *Slavery in North Carolina, 1748-1775* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

[2]. A point made by A. Roger Ekirch in "Whig Authority and Public Order in Backcountry North Carolina, 1776-1783," in *An Uncivil War: The Southern Backcountry during the American Revolution*, ed. Paul E. Hoffman, Thad W. Tate, and Peter J. Albert (Charlottesville: Published for the United States Capitol Historical Society by the University Press of Virginia, 1985): pp. 99-124.

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