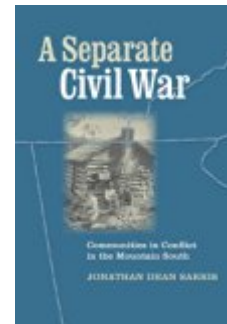


Jonathan Dean Sarris. *A Separate Civil War: Communities in Conflict in the Mountain South*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2006. x + 238 pp. \$22.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8139-2555-4; \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8139-2549-3.

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## Georgia's Forgotten Civil War

There has been a recent surge of interest in the Civil War among scholars and the public. This renewed interest has been matched with a host of new histories illuminating the conflict's great leaders and epic battles. Occasionally, a novel work appears which explores little-known and neglected areas in Civil War history. Jonathan Dean Sarris, assistant professor of history at North Carolina Wesleyan, has compiled such a work. Although the title, *A Separate Civil War: Communities in Conflict in the Mountain South*, suggests a study focusing on Appalachia, the book's central thrust is on the Civil War experience in North Georgia, particularly in Fannin and Lumpkin Counties. Although Tennessee's mountain regions are drawn into the narrative occasionally, the book remains primarily a history of northeast Georgia during the Civil War.

Sarris has skillfully managed to piece together, from manuscripts, newspapers, written accounts, and an impressive array of government sources, a scholarly account of unionism during the Civil War in the North Georgian mountains. While the story is not an unknown one, it is fraught with myths, misconceptions, and misinterpretations, at least until the publication of this work. What emerges from these pages is a savage and ruthless civil war within the Civil War. The struggle for control in North Georgia's mountain towns and communities between rebels and unionists (identified as Tories in the book) was a microcosm of the larger conflict between Confederate and Union soldiers on the war's battlefields. In essence, Sarris suggests, North Georgia's Civil War

was one that concerned local power and influence in the mountain communities. The concepts of localism and community represent a common theme throughout the work. Decisions to support the Union or Confederacy, for example, were often linked to specific issues that touched the community and not, according to one myth, a predisposition for Unionism in the region. Appalachia's "shadow war" between secessionists and Tories was intricately connected to perceived loyalties and threats to home, family, community, law, and order. Beneath an individual's support for the Confederacy or Union, contends the author, "the local always lurked, strong and unavoidable" (p. 102).

One of the myths that Sarris shatters is the notion that the mountain communities were illiterate, uncivilized, and uncultured, and, by default, were therefore barbaric. These conclusions colored earlier analyses of the region and were used to explain the unusual level of brutality experienced in the section during the conflict. However, according to Sarris, this was simply not the case. "War crimes" and even "terrorism," which characterized the war in Appalachia, wrote Sarris, "sprang from identifiable, specific social crises, not some natural cultural predisposition toward violence as earlier analysis of the region often claimed" (p. 5). Having laid the foundations for this particular argument, the author, like a practiced lawyer, meticulously makes his case. As the narrative unfolds, Sarris cites numerous instances which connect elevated levels of violence to transpiring events. The passage of the Confederate Conscription Act in 1862,

for example, “provoked widespread dissension in North Georgia” (p. 68). The Confederacy’s efforts to enforce the draft in mountain communities were seen by many as an infringement on “community, family, and local justice” (p. 73). Since conscription was viewed by some as a “direct assault upon the community,” many defected from the Southern cause and became anti-rebels. To these “Tories,” the Confederacy’s policies were illegal because they violated the “sanctity of property and family” (p. 75). Thus, according to the author, it was “clear that North Georgia’s Tories were driven to resist in reaction to the policies of the Confederate government” (p. 76). Their dissension, and the rebel’s attempts to prevent it, became an important component in North Georgia’s “mini” civil war.

Violence in the mountain counties only intensified in 1863 as the valleys and forests swelled with secessionists on witch-hunts for hiding dissenters. “In Fannin and Lumpkin counties,” remarked the author, “anti-Confederate bands roamed the hills, stealing weapons, food, and livestock and occasionally ambushing conscription and impressments agents” (p. 89). The situation deteriorated steadily throughout the year and by 1864, had degenerated into chaos.

Tensions reached a breaking point in 1864 when a series of “hellish deeds” were committed throughout the region. By that time, with the crumbling of the Confederacy and the invasion of William T. Sherman’s forces, warfare in the mountains had evolved into one of extermination between Tories and secessionists. Even then, many of those engaged in acts of barbarism fought not for Unionism or secession, but for more personal reasons, namely, family, community, law, and order. For this reason, contends Sarris, the “local always lurked, strong and unavoidable” during the Civil War in Appalachia (p. 102). As the violence intensified, North Georgia became the scene of vigilantism, guerrilla warfare, witch-hunts, murders, and summary executions. The chaos was such that one Confederate officer compared Fannin County to the “bowels of hell” (p. 124). Perceived enemies of the Confederacy were rounded up, denied due process of law, and quickly executed. Indeed, in the absence of law and order, many people “killed because they could, and because no one could stop them” (p. 138). These actions were often justified, not due to loyalty to the Confederate or Union causes, but to one’s own perception of threats to their community. Importantly, these acts of brutality did not stem from an environment of savagery or “cultural retardation” in isolated mountain and valley communities. Instead, they were reactions to events which

threatened, in some way, the stability of local communities. The brutal civil war in the mountains, writes Sarris, “resulted from a dramatic social disruption” (p. 184).

One of the important contributions of this work is that it follows the themes of some recent Civil War histories in delving into the motives that made soldiers choose sides and fight. Here, Sarris is at his best as he attempts to unravel the complexities of motivation. Again, though, Sarris finds community and family as important contributing factors at the heart of individual motivation. Most interesting is Sarris’s attempt to explain the high incidence of Unionism in the mountain counties. It is well known that the peculiar institution of slavery was not as entrenched in the mountainous regions as it was in the rest of the cotton South and some historians in the past have been tempted to use this as primary explanation for Appalachian Unionism. The truth, however, is much more complicated. Sarris shows that slavery was actually an intricate component of North Georgia’s mountains. In Lumpkin County, for example, about 10 percent of the population were slaves throughout the antebellum period. The low numbers of slaves cannot be taken to mean that abolitionist sentiment prevailed in Appalachia. When Frederick Law Olmstead traversed the region in the 1850s, he noted that true abolitionist sentiment was rare, and perhaps even nonexistent (p. 29). Although for some, slavery’s lesser role certainly weighed in favor of Unionism, there were other equally important factors that fed Unionism. Many cast their lot with the North because they felt that it was best for their families and communities. Others did so in order to survive. Surprisingly, Confederate policies and activities in the mountains (namely conscription, impressments, state-sponsored violence, and tracking down deserters) caused many residents to view their Rebel neighbors as brutes. These “Confederate intrusions,” points out Sarris, drove many into Union arms (p. 107). Economic factors also played a role in fostering Unionism in the mountains. Whatever their motives, these dissenters were treated as a “separate class of untouchables, whose property, family, and very existence was unworthy of civilized treatment” (p. 118).

Atrocities committed by both sides were remembered long after the war’s end. Thus, as the rest of the nation embraced peace after 1865, a civil war of words and deeds continued in North Georgia’s mountain counties as ex-Tories and ex-Confederates continued to defend their communities, families, past actions, and reputations. The divide which characterized the region during the Civil War continued through the Reconstruction period and

the New South era as both sides tried to define the meaning of the conflict. Those who embraced the Lost Cause attempted to write Tories and dissenters out of history. Tories, too, recast the past into versions which favored their cause, especially as they sought compensation for their services from the federal government.

*A Separate Civil War* is a first-rate history that is well written, well organized, thoroughly researched, and meticulously documented. It is something new and fresh

for Civil War scholars and the general public to consume. If Sarris's book, and North Georgia's Civil War history, tells us anything about humanity, it is this—during periods of extreme tension, confusion, and chaos, loyalty to family and community can often trump loyalty to cause and country. Civil War historians have only begun to focus on Appalachia. Even so, North Georgia persists as a neglected region. If it was Sarris's intention to fill that void, he has done an admirable job.

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