

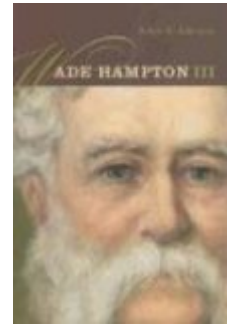
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Robert K. Ackerman. *Wade Hampton III*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2007. 341 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57003-667-5.

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Third Time's a Charm

Wade Hampton III finally has a worthy biography. After three lackluster attempts over more than a half-century to bring the man to life in print, Robert K. Ackerman delivers the best and most realistic portrait yet of the former planter, Confederate general, and South Carolina statesman. Moreover, lately Hampton has been a popular portrait to paint. After a long silence following Manly Wade Wellman's *Giant in Grey* (1949), three biographies of Hampton III have appeared in the last four years. But why is there this sudden attention to Hampton now?

First, a serious academic study of Hampton is long overdue. There exist troubling biases and limitations, and a general lack of quality analysis in the earlier biographies. Wellman's account is dated. And, though it has strengths, Walter Brian Cisco's *Wade Hampton: Confederate Warrior, Conservative Statesman* (2004) is so saintly that it is difficult to accept in its entirety (as this reviewer wrote in a review of the book for H-Net last year). Edward Longacre's book *Gentleman and Soldier: A Biography of Wade Hampton III* (2003) focuses mainly on Hampton's military career and offers little knowledge of the man after 1865. Ackerman's study, in contrast, is more erudite, balanced, comprehensive, scholarly, and generally better written.

Second comes technology. It has been a difficult task to study Wade Hampton because his papers were lost to fire in 1899. Thus, earlier scholars opted out of a Hampton study when other subjects and their source materials were more readily available. Today, however, it is

easier to access and process information across multiple databases, archives, and sources. That is not to say that technology can replace good old-fashioned historical legwork—a great deal of which Ackerman has ably done. He incorporates a large body of secondary source material and skillfully handles the problems created by a lack of documents by relying heavily on newspapers, extant letters, and first-hand accounts of “what he said and did” (p. xiii). Ackerman admits that he was forced into making “speculative conclusions, fraught with possible errors,” but, then, what historian is not (p. xii)? Despite these problems, he succeeds in using those sources available to him to give the reader a balanced, multi-dimensional representation of this important personality.

Third, Hampton's relative independence to race and party can perhaps be analyzed more objectively now that the United States has come to terms with its contentious civil rights legacy. For Americans living forty years after Jim Crow was struck down by the federal Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, Hampton's role as a moderate at a time of hardening racial legislation is important to our collective understanding of Jim Crow's development. Though Hampton's paternalism and white supremacist views are noted here (he advocated black colonization to Africa and believed “better blacks” would thrive under white direction), Hampton was, nevertheless, an advocate for black rights (albeit qualified). He believed African Americans should be given the franchise and equal protection under the

law. This was a man, it was rumored, who had “dined with blacks” and “consorted with [Republican] President Hayes” resulting in the 1876 election defeat of the national Democratic Party (pp. 237, 247). These “liberal” beliefs ran counter to national trends of his day and to the prevailing racial attitudes of his electorate, and Ackerman ably describes Hampton’s views and actions here.

Finally, Hampton is receiving more attention today because his relatively progressive views on race during his time make him an intriguing figure. Neo-Confederates use Hampton’s civil rights legacy to promote a kinder, gentler Confederacy. Academics find interest in Hampton’s contradictions on slavery, secession, and civil rights.

Though the field is crowded, Ackerman’s book has several notable strengths that make it stand out from the pack. The first is Ackerman’s extended analysis of Hampton’s postwar years. The author deftly places Hampton in the political and social context of Reconstruction, redemption, and reconciliation. These were difficult years of adjustment for the South and for the General—time for him to reflect bitterly on the loss of his estates, cause, once great wealth and financial uncertainty, as well as the most of difficult of all, the death of his wife and sons. But Hampton stoically accepted his fate and worked for sectional and racial harmony. Ackerman successfully charts Hampton’s evolving racial position from owning large numbers of slaves, to reluctantly accepting their freedom, and, finally, to believing that the freedmen deserved basic civil rights.

Ackerman also effectively charts Hampton evolving views of the late war. Though he advocated sectional harmony, Hampton defended the South and was a prominent figure in the “Lost Cause” revisionist history movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Although this is not new or confined to Ackerman’s analysis, the author convincingly shows Hampton as an active participant in “redefining” the causes of the sectional conflict. The author notes that these men believed in 1861 that “the only hope of republican institutions on this continent is to be found in the perpetuation of that institution, slavery, which has been made the occasion of this war” (p. 59). But by the later years of the nineteenth century, these men, seeking sectional reconciliation and support for their racial agendas, “set about redefining the causes to emphasize such factors as states’ rights, a conservative interpretation of the Constitution, and the Jeffersonian ideal of rural life” (p. 251).

One of the most effective aspects of Ackerman’s

study is his portrayal of Hampton as an old Whig in Conservative’s clothing. Hampton never had much interest in politics before the war, devoting himself rather to his extensive plantations (and hunting its lands). Ackerman shows that, after the war, Hampton’s Confederate legacy and his sense of duty drew him into the political arena. As it did, his old Whig leanings resurfaced to guide him through those post-Civil War political battles. Martin Gary and Ben Tillman attacked the governor for his racial views; but, what also hurt him in his later years were his Whig leanings and conservative hard-money approach, which contributed to the Conservatives failure to stem the agrarian populist movement in his state.

Ackerman is impressed by Hampton and his character. Southern elites, like Hampton, spoke frequently of “devotion to duty” and their “reluctance” or “inability” to do things which they usually ended up doing anyway. Indeed, Hampton grew up among a privileged generation that required men to display mastery over themselves, their relations, and their slaves. While such mastery, modesty and self deprecation—not to mention “duty”—seem insincere and out-dated concepts, Ackerman stresses correctly that these feeling were very real to men like Hampton, giving us insight into Hampton’s inner self.

The book has some shortcomings, however. Ackerman’s prose, while functional, tends toward textbook-like dryness. There is also his habit of repeating facts that make passages wordy. In addition, a more extended analysis of Hampton’s planter years, as Ackerman did with the postwar years, would be helpful (though this, the author admits, is probably the most difficult part of Hampton’s life to document). These factors, however, are not a serious impediment to the overall quality of the text which brings Hampton into tighter focus.

The Hampton who emerges from these pages is a tragic figure. He was a man who had sacrificed everything for a terrible lost cause and witnessed his world turn upside down. The old régime of the planters and Conservatives had been consumed by the rising tide of “white trash supremacy” (p. 265). Hampton became irrelevant in his old age. Though an honored two-term U.S. Senator, “he did not prove to be the distinguished senator for South Carolina his supporters had predicted” (p. 240). Rather, he had become a figure relegated to old soldiers’ reunions, dependent on his friends and colleagues for financial support, while his moderate policies were rejected by those hard-line racists who came to dominate South Carolina (and southern) politics for the next half-

century.

There is a tinge of nostalgia in this biography, not for the Confederate or segregationist past, but for what could have been. We are left with a series of “what ifs” at the conclusion of this study, which asks whether the “paternal moderation” of Hampton’s policies were the best

route to repair the damages done to slaves and the South alike after the war. Or, would the South and the nation have been better served had the federal government confiscated Confederate lands, or, at least, done more to ease the freedmen’s transition from slavery to freedom? Ackerman’s account asks the right questions, while answering many.

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