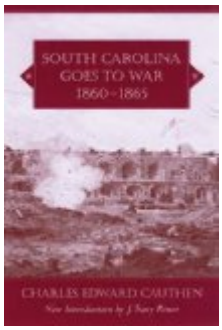
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Charles Edward Cauthen. *South Carolina Goes to War, 1860-1865.* Tracy Power. Southern Classics Series. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2005. xxiv + 260 pp. $15.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-57003-560-9.

Reviewed by R. Boyd Murphree

Published on H-CivWar (November, 2007)

The echo of the first shot of the Confederate bombardment of Fort Sumter still lingers in South Carolina, where the impact of the Civil War remains embedded in the present-day politics and culture of the Palmetto State. Whether it is the controversy over the flying of the Confederate battle flag on the grounds of the State House, the state's recent legal dispute over a trove of Civil War-era documents, or the current debate on the restoration of the Confederate submarine *H. L. Hunley*, South Carolina's experience during the years 1860-65 continues to have relevance for the ongoing debate over the role of the Confederate States in United States history and the meaning of the Civil War in American memory.[1]

South Carolina's prominence in Civil War related controversies makes the republication in 2005 of Charles Edward Cauthen's *South Carolina Goes to War 1860-1865* especially timely. Originally published in 1950 as part of the James Sprunt Studies in History and Political Science, it was the only general history of South Carolina in the Civil War for fifty-five years until the publication of W. Scott Poole's *South Carolina's Civil War: A Narrative History* (2005). The absence of a new history of South Carolina's role in the Civil War for over half a century is both a tribute to the reputation of Cauthen's study and a reflection of the small number of works on wartime Southern state and local politics compared to the superabundance of literature devoted to battles, campaigns, and military biography. A welcome feature of the new edition is J. Tracy Power's introduction. The author of *Lee's Miserables: Life in the Army of Northern Virginia from the Wilderness to Appomattox* (1998), Power is a historian at the South Carolina Department of History. His introduction provides a brief overview of South Carolina in the Civil War, a review of *South Carolina Goes to War*, extensive source notes, and a biographical sketch of Cauthen, who died in 1964. The re-issuing of *South Carolina Goes to War* will allow a new audience of readers to enjoy a judicious and meticulously researched classic of Civil War political history.

Politics is the primary focus of *South Carolina Goes to War*. As the title suggests, it is the road to secession and war that Cauthen is most intent on

guiding us down--eight and a half of the book's sixteen chapters deal with pre-war politics. The history of the secession movement in South Carolina before 1861 is the subject of the first five chapters. Chapters 6 and 7 cover the period between South Carolina's declaration of secession on December 20, 1860, and the transfer of command from state to Confederate forces on March 4, 1861. The state's preparations for war are the subject of chapter 8. Cauthen does not arrive at the outbreak of the war until midway through chapter 9. The second half of ***South Carolina Goes to War*** presents all of the principal issues the wartime government of South Carolina confronted. Chapters 10 and 11 cover the life of the executive council, which existed to fully mobilize the state's military resources in the wake of the Federal capture of Port Royal on November 7, 1861. Chapters 12 and 13 address Confederate conscription and impressment policies in South Carolina. Chapter 14 examines how the state financed the war, chapter 15 discusses South Carolina's relations with the Confederate government, and chapter 16 covers the state's final defeat.

Cauthen's decision to concentrate more than half of his history on antebellum politics is justified. South Carolina's antebellum political history, according to Manisha Sinha, "can perhaps tell us more about the creation of the Confederacy than the history of any other southern state."[2] Politically, South Carolina had been at "war" with the United States for over thirty years before the Civil War. The state's anger over the protective tariffs of 1827 and 1828 and the ensuing Nullification Crisis in 1832-33 placed South Carolina in opposition to the federal government and ignited support for secession among the most radical nullifiers. While acknowledging the importance of the protective tariff in engendering separatist sympathies in South Carolina during the 1830s, Cauthen points consistently to the defense of slavery as the principal motivation or the "naked and true point," as one member of the South Carolina secession convention put it, behind the growth of the secessionist movement in South Carolina (p. 72). South Carolina's political elite, including radicals (those in favor of separate secession) and cooperationists (those who favored secession only in alliance with other Southern states), believed the continuation of slavery in the South and its potential spread to the territories must be defended.

After Abraham Lincoln's election to the presidency in November 1860, popular support for secession was overwhelming. Cauthen argues that secession in South Carolina was not the work of a "dark lantern conspiracy" by a radical elite, but a movement that succeeded in South Carolina due to "a great wave of popular enthusiasm" (pp. 31-32). He tempers his populist argument, however, by recognizing the important role three decades of anti-federal leadership in South Carolina played in the "education of the masses" in the ideology of state rights, which emphasized the defense of Southern institutions, especially slavery (p. 32). White Carolinians embraced the secessionist press and pamphleteers' call for disunion. The "1860 Association" sponsored the most popular secessionist pamphlets in South Carolina. Titles such as John Townsend's ***The South Alone Should Govern the South*** (1860) and ***The Doom of Slavery in the Union: Its Safety Out Of It*** (1860) submitted that Republican victory meant the triumph of abolition and the demise of the South (pp. 35, 37). Radical propaganda overwhelmed opposition to separate state secession from cooperationists and unionists. The secession convention convened in Columbia on December 17, 1860, but only met for one day before deciding to remove the proceedings to Charleston after receiving news of an outbreak of smallpox in the capital. When the convention reconvened in Charleston on December 20 it passed an ordinance of secession the same day: all of the convention's 169 delegates voted for secession.

South Carolina's secession initiated the flight of the rest of the Lower South from the Union and led to the creation of the Confederacy in February

1861. Two months later, it was also the state's fate to be the scene of the outbreak of war. Cauthen endorses the view that Lincoln maneuvered the Confederacy into attacking Fort Sumter; however, he concedes that the conflicting and incomplete documentary evidence leaves plenty of room for "honest difference of conclusion" (p. 119). Caught between radicals who wanted him to seize Sumter unilaterally and his fear that he would suffer politically if he did not seem willing to attack the fort, Governor Francis W. Pickens "no doubt breathed a sigh of relief" when the Confederate government assumed responsibility for the fate of the fort and war with the North (p. 109). Cauthen remains sympathetic to Pickens and South Carolina's other Civil War governors (Milledge L. Bonham and Andrew G. Magrath) as men who did their best to lead their state during the most difficult years of its history. He portrays Pickens and Bonham as cooperative with Confederate conscription and impressment policies despite their constitutional concerns and the need to retain men in South Carolina to meet the Federal threat. During Bonham's tenure, South Carolina managed to retain control of Charleston in the face of ongoing Federal naval and amphibious operations against the port. The war was almost over by the time Governor Magrath began his term in December 1864. Magrath argued that the centralizing policies of the Davis administration had sapped the states' enthusiasm for the war, which no longer reflected secession's original goal of protecting state rights. He called on other Southern governors to allow their militias to serve outside of their respective states to help defend fellow states undergoing invasion. Magrath believed "the states must save themselves and thus save the Confederacy" (p. 227). Despite Magrath's resolve, Gen. William T. Sherman's army met little resistance as it pushed through South Carolina in February 1865. Columbia fell on February 17 and Charleston surrendered the next day. Cauthen ends his account of the war with Federal troops arresting Governor Magrath on May 25, 1865.[3]

Cauthen's book remains the standard history of South Carolina in the Civil War, but it is not comprehensive. While he touches on the economic, social, and military aspects of the war, Cauthen's emphasis remains politics, not the experiences of the common soldier, civilian, or slave. Besides emphasizing the crucial importance of slavery as a cause of secession and the importance of slave labor in the Confederate impressment effort, Cauthen has little to say on the subject of slavery during the war. He mentions Port Royal only in reference to the Federal naval campaign of November 1861; there is no discussion of the Port Royal Experiment or emancipation in general. Military enthusiasts will also be disappointed. Cauthen presents no details of military operations in South Carolina--he covers the Federal occupation of Morris Island, the fight for Battery Wagner, and the siege of Charleston in one sentence. The lack of social and military history should not detract, however, from the contribution of ***South Carolina Goes to War***, which retains its worth as a straightforward and thorough political history of South Carolina from 1860 to 1865.

Notes

[1]. For the Confederate flag controversy see K. Michael Prince, ***Rally 'Round the Flag Boys: South Carolina and the Confederate Flag*** (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2004); and John M. Coski, ***The Confederate Battle Flag: America's Most Embattled Emblem*** (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2005). The South Carolina Department of Archives and History website provides a link to the court rulings in the state's losing battle to obtain control of the documents: http://www.state.sc.us/scdah/court.htm. On the ***Hunley*** restoration see John Monk, ***How Senator Steers Sub Under Radar***, ***The State***, May 14, 2006, A1; ***Sub-Standard: Should Tax Money Go to Deprived Children, or to a Museum Piece***, ***The Economist***, June 10, 2006, 28-30; and Glen McConnell, ***Setting the Hunley Record Straight***, ***The State***, July 2, 2006, A23. The significance of the Lost Cause and

American memory are covered in David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2001); Gary W. Gallagher and Alan T. Nolan, eds., *The Myth of the Lost Cause and Civil War History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000); and W. Scott Poole, *Never Surrender: Confederate Memory and Conservatism in the South Carolina Upcountry* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004).

[2]. Manisha Sinha, *The Counterrevolution of Slavery: Politics and Ideology in Antebellum South Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 1.

[3]. See John B. Edmunds, *Francis W. Pickens and the Politics of Destruction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986) for a biography of Pickens. Bonham and Magrath are included along with Pickens in W. Buck Yearns, ed., *The Confederate Governors* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985).