H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

LeeAnna Keith. *The Colfax Massacre: The Untold Story of Black Power, White Terror and the Death of Reconstruction.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2008. xv + 219 pp. $24.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-531026-9.

Charles Lane. *The Day Freedom Died: The Colfax Massacre, The Supreme Court and the Betrayal of Reconstruction.* New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2008. 326 pp. $27.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8050-8342-2.

Reviewed by W. Scott Poole (Department of History, College of Charleston)
Published on H-CivWar (August, 2008)

A Doorway to Hell: Southern Violence, the High Court and the End of

The Colfax Massacre is one of the most catastrophic examples of racial violence in the United States, ending in the deaths of at least one hundred and five African American men (perhaps as many as twenty more could not be identified). It is also among the major acts of violence passed over in the larger American historical narrative. In 1873, a contested Louisiana gubernatorial election led to a stand-off between the African American militia of Colfax, Louisiana and local whites seeking to secure the symbolically significant courthouse for the white supremacist regime. The massacre, a horror by itself, became a kind of double tragedy. The death of the community led to a legal battle that proved portentous for the fate of Reconstruction itself. *U.S. v. Cruikshank* redefined the Fourteenth Amendment out of existence. The high court's ruling limited federal protective power so that only acts of an individual state, rather than acts of mob violence, warranted governmental action. White violence, in collusion with a conservative American judiciary, nullified constitutional protections and opened a doorway to hell to generations of African Americans.

Two recent books explore this story. LeeAnna Keith's *The Colfax Massacre* and Charles Lane's *The Day Freedom Died* are both written with an eye toward resurrecting a story that has played much too small of a role in the analysis and understanding of Reconstruction. Although many standard college texts in U.S. history briefly note the *Cruikshank* decision as a turning point, most pass over it briefly and almost all fail to tell the story of the bloody Colfax Massacre that forms its background.

Both these works also examine the role played by the massacre in American memory (or, really, amnesia). The Colfax Massacre, like many such acts of violence throughout the Reconstruction South, became part of the Lost Cause legend of heroic whites "redeeming" their states from African American power. Although similar acts of violence are often erased in local memory, both Lane and Keith show how central Louisiana whites actually celebrated the significance of the event, insisting that it played an important role in the white southern victory over Reconstruction. In 1921, white residents of Grant Parish unveiled a monument to the three whites who died at Colfax with much Lost Cause fanfare. As late as 1951, the white leadership of Grant Parish raised a historical monument in the midst of the growing Freedom Struggle, a monument that interpreted the incident as a "riot" and its outcome as bringing an end to "carpetbag misrule" in the state.

Although obviously supplementing, and occasionally echoing, one another, these two fine books do take different approaches. Leanna Keith's work provides the reader with both the larger political context and a study of the growth of the Red River communities. The growth of the Red River plantation in the 1830s represented the emergence of sugar and cotton fortune by immigrants from South Carolina. These southern frontier plantations, where Fredrick Law Olmstead wrote a terrifying account of witnessing a violent beating of a female slave, provided the dark inspiration for some of the violence in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). Keith's work places Colfax in the context of the region's nineteenth-century history, examining the mechanisms of white supremacist culture in Louisiana. Keith looks, for example, at the 1873 celebration of Mardi Gras, in which the Comus parade included racist political satire that portrayed black Reconstruction leaders as primates. After a Lenten season of rising political violence, the Colfax Massacre occurred on Easter Sunday night. Keith is able to connect this single event to a larger pattern of both rhetorical and real white supremacist violence.

Charles Lane has written a strong narrative history of Colfax and its effects, providing an almost moment-to-moment account of the massacre and the judicial deliberations that followed. He spends much of the second half of the book on a detailed exploration of the constitutional maneuverings that led to *Cruikshank*. He also does a good job of looking at how *Cruikshank* would affect the entire South, especially Mississippi and South Carolina's Reconstruction experience. In general, he does a better job than Keith of connecting the events in Louisiana to the traditional Reconstruction narrative.

Both books focus on some of the more interesting characters that played a role in the dark events of 1873. Both give attention to the part played by the fascinating figure of William Smith Calhoun. Heir to a plantation fortune in central Louisiana, Calhoun had despised talk of secession and rebellion in the 1850s. Following the war, he became a Republican and proponent of African American voting rights. Here, the more popularly written approach hurts Lane's analysis. Lane writes that when Calhoun chose to support black rights "the trouble started" (p. 64). Lane's emphasis on Smith's decision is largely for narrative effect though it might leave some reader's with the impression that Calhoun was driving the African American struggle in Grant Parish. Keith provides a needed corrective to this by describing the long-term work of the African American leadership of Grant Parish and the efforts of "Grant Clubs" and "Colfax Clubs" (p. 59) that energized the electorate and terrified native whites. Her work gives some sense of the strength of the black community in central Louisiana. This community created leaders like former Union soldier William Ward, who commanded the Grant Parish militia and pursued white night riders with audacity and panache. Ward would run for a seat in the state legislature in the fateful election year of 1872 when some white Republicans sided with conservative Democrats against radical gubernatorial candidate William Pitt Kellog and set the stage for the Colfax Massacre.

Both works note the obvious implications of the *Cruikshank* decision and the celebration with which what Lane calls "the white supremacist press" (p. 212) greeted the decision. Both also show that the immediate effect was a wave of violence in Louisiana in 1874 as whites realized that the federal government had no intention of enforcing the Fourteenth Amendment. The White League succeeded earlier paramilitary organization and unleashed a reign of terror. Again, Lane does a better job of showing the effects of the decision throughout the entire South (though Keith does not ignore this important point).

While both works deal with the constitutional ramifications of the Colfax, this is certainly Lane's strong suit. Lane's meticulous unpacking of the Supreme Court's decision is certainly the most valuable contribution of his work. His narrative style is especially useful in illuminating the close legal maneuvering for those of us unfamiliar with legal history. He does an excellent job of moving back and forth between the court's deliberation and the growing optimism of southern whites that the court would give them a free hand to use violence and intimidation against African American voters and office holders.

Keith attempts, somewhat unsuccessfully, to pack her analysis into a single chapter. Nevertheless, she does give a clear, detailed description that will prove helpful to most readers. She especially emphasizes the political dimensions of the decision, noting that "the court's instructions spelled the end of federal intervention in southern civil rights and voting rights abuses" (p. 157). While the court's decisions had not, theoretically, limited the voting rights of black men secured by the Fifteenth Amendment, they ensured that there would be no federal effort to enforce these legal rights. By the 1890s, as in most southern states, a new state constitution effectively ended black political participation and included "the first grandfather clause in the United States" (p. 165).

Both of these books are excellent and complement one another perfectly. Given their different approaches, both can be read profitably. There is a small issue with *The Day Freedom Died* worth discussion. Charles Lane made the strange decision to use the terms "colored" and "negro" throughout his work. The author, to his credit, warned the reader that he would do so in a brief author's note. Lane writes that to use more modern terms would simply be anachronistic. There is no question that the author should, of course, have employed these older terms when quoting from his sources. But what seems anachronistic is the use of these terms in his own voice. I am in no way suggesting that Lane seeks to revive the old racist rhetoric. This is clearly not his intent in a book that does valuable service in the shaking us out of our historical amnesia about the role of racist violence in the postbellum period. I still found his choice an unfortunate one. Readers will disagree about this point and I do not think it in any way devalues Lane's overall achievement.

Keith's work will appeal both to the general reader and would make an excellent addition to an undergraduate or graduate syllabus. Indeed, she has written a work that will prove useful in explaining more fully how *Cruikshank* allowed the resurgence of white paramilitary orga-

nization in places like Mississippi and South Carolina (a point I missed in my earlier research and writing on the end of Reconstruction in South Carolina). Charles Lane has succeeded in writing a strong narrative history of Reconstruction politics in Louisiana and how the bloodshed in Grant parish affected the politics of the nation. A large audience will learn much from Lane's highly readable account. The ongoing discussion of the public meaning of Reconstruction will benefit from the dark story these works have to tell.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: W. Scott Poole. Review of Keith, LeeAnna, *The Colfax Massacre: The Untold Story of Black Power, White Terror and the Death of Reconstruction* and Lane, Charles, *The Day Freedom Died: The Colfax Massacre, The Supreme Court and the Betrayal of Reconstruction.* H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. August, 2008.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14803

Copyright © 2008 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.