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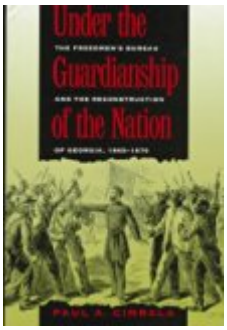

Paul A. Cimbala. *Under the Guardianship of the Nation: The Freedmen's Bureau and the Reconstruction of Georgia, 1865-1870.* Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1997. xx + 395 pp. $50.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8203-1891-2.

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Historians of Reconstruction wrestle with the meanings of the Civil War as imagined and realized from 1865 to 1877. Freedom, power struggles between southern whites, northern dreams for and fantasies about the South, reuniting the nation, and the future of the southern economy vexed Yankees and Rebels, whites and blacks, men and women, in the months and years after Appomattox. The Freedmen^Òs Bureau, a federal agency created to monitor the movement of blacks toward freedom, was an integral part of Reconstruction. Contemporary scholars of the Bureau portray it either as the most important government agency in the nation's history or as the progenitor of a repressive labor system in the post-bellum South. They either succumb to a schoolboy crush on Bureau officials and insist that they did no wrong, or they believe agents were but demonic pawns in the Marxist grist of economic determinism. Thankfully, Paul Cimbala gives us a much more nuanced and accurate view of this important yet flawed Reconstruction institution in his insightful study *Under the Guardianship of the Nation*.

To understand Reconstruction, Cimbala contends, one must start by understanding the Bureau. Problems abounded. In 1865, local agents, state leaders, and Washington politicians were unclear as to the precise scope of the newly established agency. Confusing and contradictory signals emanated from the White House of Andrew Johnson. A shortage of abandoned plantations deterred land redistribution. Agents often demanded implementing free labor ideologies and a work ethic that curtailed black freedom. Many agents, just like the majority of northern whites, embraced racism and its hybrid, paternalism, when they dealt with freedpeople. Local agents often mirrored local class prejudices. At times, personal political ambitions obscured the mission to help freedpeople. Agents toiled in a land that embraced neither them nor their goals. Southern hospitality did not extend to the Bureau. Many agents faced physical intimidation, violence, death, and arson. Over time, economic, political, and judicial problems grew more intractable. Many freedmen became mired in debt peonage. Agents tried to be apolitical and not to sway black men too much in the 1868 presidential election,

but many Georgian whites and blacks found such apolitical posturing absurd. Incredulous whites thwarted equal protection of the laws for freedpeople. As the bureaucratic maze thickened in 1866 and 1867, jurisdictional lines often overlapped or blurred. Vociferous enemies of Bureau agents, both black and white, increased. Bureau officials seemed pulled in various directions by whites and and blacks, southerners and northerners, in the days after the war. Most agents seemed inundated with the workload. On any given day, contracts were checked and signed, families reunited, jobs procured, letters written, reports finished, disputes investigated, and violence quelled.

Four assistant commissioners and over two hundred local agents dealt with these myriad problems. Each entered his office every morning with his own biases, prejudices, and agendas. For example, one assistant commissioner, Brigadier General Rufus Saxton, was ill and on leave from late June until early August, 1865, in the critical first months of the Bureau's operation in Georia. One wonders if his plans for land redistribution would have been realized had he been present. General Davis Tillman, an amputee, used his engineering background and class prejudices, which brooked no hint at social equality for blacks, to create a very paternalistic Bureau. He insisted on garnering agents from local residents, even if they had been slave owners and planters. Colonel Caleb C. Sibley streamlined the Bureau and drastically reduced the number of agents. He recruited retired army officers far more often than local citizens, a change in recruitment practices. John Randolph Lewis led the agency in its waning days, and by January, 1869, he supervised only nine officials.

The local agent was the Freedmen's Bureau for most Georgia blacks. They were the eyes and ears of Reconstruction. They could be as radical as General Edward A. Wild, who confiscated the county courthouse for use as a school by blacks, and who tried to excise the word *colored* from all Bureau reports; or they could be as lethargic and apathetic as Taylor County agent James T. Harmon, who could barely move around, let alone demand anything from anyone. In this study, many of the agents' physical infirmities and illnesses emerge as more important factors than in previous examinations of the Bureau. In 1867, for example, one subassistant commissioner began using as local agents twelve officers of the Invalid Corps, an organization of disabled but still capable soldiers. Many agents, such as Alvin Clark of southwest Georgia, applied for and received a position in the Bureau when his disability prevented him from doing anything else. Major G. A. Hastings, a war veteran plagued by debilitating chills and chronic diarrhea, opined to superiors that he wondered if he could perform his job while so sick. One wonders what white southerners and Georgian freedpeople thought of the many maimed and disabled Freedmen's Bureau agents who tried to reconstruct them and Georgia. Undoubtedly, if it were possible, psychological and medical profiles of local agents would offer a fascinating glimpse into the kinds of people manning Bureau posts.

Although the crippled, chronically ill, and alcoholic comprised but a small percentage of the Bureau, most agents tried to follow orders, however hazy and ambiguous those orders were. They were good soldiers, and they improvised and obeyed as best they could. Local Bureau agents fashioned many lasting contributions for freedpeople. Although fearful of creating a dependency on the Bureau that would deter the work ethic, agents dispensed food, clothing, and medicine to black and white Georgians in 1865. Throughout its tenure, local agents worked to ensure that blacks would have jobs and would receive fair wages. Agents arbitrated contracts, helped freedpeople find jobs, and regulated the apprenticeships of freedpeople's children. They constantly protected blacks' rights to move about freely, to own firearms, and to assemble peacefully. They tried to make sure that recalcitrant

whites obeyed the 14th Amendment and the 1866 Civil Rights Act. They emphasized schools and helped to fund over fifty new schools for blacks in Georgia. When elections approached, they encouraged black political participation and protected their newly gained right to vote by calling out troops for protection when necessary. But in the end, Cimbala rightly concludes, as black and white Georgians continued to work out their long-term relationships, they were influenced more by old prejudices, individual expectations, and the requirements of agriculture than by the Bureau's short stay in the state. The Bureau exited Georgia in 1870 with most of the dreams of blacks for freedom yet unfulfilled.

This is an excellent institutional history, indeed, it is the most detailed state study of the Freedmen's Bureau to date. Anyone who has sifted through the Bureau's papers will appreciate the material mastered by the author. There is also an excellent and creative use of soldier^Òs and civilian^Òs private papers and of daily newspapers. The writing style is excellent, both clear and concise. No other state study delineates the actual mechanics of how agents went about their daily tasks. Yet, as an institutional history, this work never captures the dynamics of black freedom in 1865-1870. What is lacking is the passion many blacks felt as they worked out their freedom. What is missing is what blacks felt as they heard their own church bells toll, as their children recited from spellers, or as they waited in line to cast their ballots. How strange a book about a Civil War regiment would be if it only looked at the unit from the viewpoint of the commanders and their orders. Such is the institutional approach Cimbala takes. He fears romanticized history and eschews William McFeely's ***Sapelo's People: A Long Walk into Freedom*** (1994), his work about Georgia coastal blacks during Reconstruction. Yet McFeely's freedpeople seem far more lively than anyone here.

Just what is romanticized history? Is it a term for anything with which the author disagrees? If blacks are depicted as activist and empowered, as they appear in McFeely's work, why must this be deemed romantic? Such assumptions could have ominous implications. A better way, perhaps, to analyze the Freedmen^Òs Bureau would be to combine the agents' view (which this book accomplishes brilliantly), along with the views of Georgian whites (depicted here much too homogeneously), and the views and actions of Georgia freedpeople. Some historians may wonder why the postmodern triptych of class, race, and gender play such a minimal role in this account of the Bureau. Too often white Georgians are lumped together as if no distinctions or conflict existed. The ideological constructs about race and gender, critically contested areas in Reconstruction, go virtually unnoticed. However, as an institutional history of the Freedmen's Bureau, ***Under the Guardianship of the Nation*** has few if any peers. Perhaps a Faulkner or Dostoevski could provide a work that would encompass all the players and all of the complexities of Reconstruction, but until that highly implausible day, this is a splendid book wil suffice.

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