

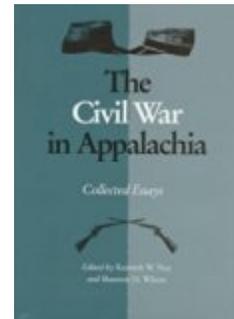
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Kenneth W. Noe, Shannon H. Wilson, eds. *The Civil War in Appalachia: Collected Essays*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997. xl + 264 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87049-971-5.

Reviewed by Thomas L. Powers (University of South Carolina-Sumter)
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Kenneth Noe and Shannon Wilson assert that “modern readers have experienced an intellectual acoustic shadow in regard to the Civil War as it occurred in...the region now called the Southern Highlands, the Southern Mountains, or, most commonly, Appalachia” (p. xi). Their goal is to lift that shadow with this collection of essays, each dealing with a different aspect of the conflict there.

The authors acknowledge that this is not an easy task. Although the region’s major campaigns, such as Antietam and Chattanooga, are well covered, and although occasional incidents make their way into the history books, everything else seems to fade into the shadows, leaving most general readers to conclude that “Appalachia’s Civil War” is practically an oxymoron.

Perhaps worse than the invisibility are the stereotypes that have obscured it. The “Myth of Unionist Appalachia” depicted a region of devoted Unionists who hated slavery and secession and shared the values of the North. The “Myth of Savage Appalachia” emphasized the uncivilized brutality of the region and its inhabitants, exemplified best by its unforgiving environment and the tradition of family feuds. Both myths have provided a “usable” history and have influenced much writing about the region. Mountaineers, like American Indians, “could be depicted as ‘noble’ or ‘savage,’ whenever it fit an author’s purposes” (p. xv).

Scholarly work on Appalachia over the last thirty years has succeeded in destroying many myths and stereotypes, but until fairly recently, has been notably weak on reexamining the Civil War. Now, large numbers of specialized studies finally are filling that gap. More is being done, but a solid synthesis remains to be derived.

This volume attempts to serve as a step in that direction. The editors claim that it “marks the first attempt to bring together in one volume practitioners of the new Appalachian Civil War history,” and that it provides “the closest thing historians have to a comprehensive history of the Southern Mountains at war” (p. xvi). They acknowledge that this is not an adequate substitute for more coherent scholarship, but assert that it does provide at least “an introduction to the social history of Appalachia’s Civil War, illustrating both the strengths and weaknesses of current historiography” (p. xvi) and a survey of the field’s present position and future prospects.

The essays live up to that claim in two senses. They do offer effective challenges to any lingering stereotypes. They do shed light on several different areas, geographical and topical, of Appalachia during the war, driving away at least some of the shadows. But these very successes turn out to work against the goal of providing a comprehensive history and building toward a synthesis of regional history.

Almost immediately, the difficulty of bringing a measure of unity to this project appears, for the society being depicted is a very diverse one. It is difficult to see how North Georgia, East Tennessee, western North Carolina, and so on, necessarily have much to do with one another, or how they differ in consistent detail and degree from the rest of the South. The editors acknowledge this, noting that “Appalachia” is itself a postwar concept. Their acknowledgement, however, does not resolve the difficulty inherent in applying their purposes to this patchwork. This may indeed be the closest thing yet to a comprehensive history of the region in wartime, but “closest yet” is still too far away to be comprehensive and coherent.

ent.

The problem begins with the most basic question of generalization: Just what is “Appalachia” anyway? Geographically, the editors define it in terms of specific counties in specific states. Although necessarily somewhat arbitrary, that is not difficult to do. But trying to define “Appalachian society” and “the Appalachian experience” turns out to be another thing entirely. Within the geographical region defining the subject, there were many societies, many social histories, and many different wartime experiences. Some areas were relatively unionist, some secessionist. Some resembled stereotypical isolated mountain communities, some were characterized by regular contact with the world beyond. Some were heavily rural, others were characterized by towns and even a few relatively substantial cities such as Asheville, Chattanooga, and Winchester. The individual essays in the book do a wonderful job of examining specific situations and circumstances in specific locations, but both the nature of the subject and the nature of the book make it impossible to offer effective generalizations about “The Civil War in Appalachia.” That longed-for synthesis remains to be written, perhaps even to be conceived. While this book adds considerably to the store of understanding which must precede such a synthesis, the unique character of so many of its separate stories may paradoxically lead away from one.

A few themes, however, do emerge from the book, running through several different times, places, and circumstances. While there are exceptions to all of them, sometimes notable exceptions, they may shed at least a little light on this foggy subject.

First, it appears that those parts of the region most in touch with the rest of their respective states were also the most pro-Confederate, while those most isolated were the most unionist. Where roads, railroads, and regular trade routes ran, people appear to have perceived a profitable relationship they were loath to lose. Similarly, and probably for related reasons, loyalty to the Confederacy seems to have been correlated with the percentage of population living in cities and towns. Likewise, within specific areas, loyalty seems more common among the educated classes and those connected to broader markets: lawyers, merchants, farmers engaged in commercial agriculture, and so on. Unionism seems to have been stronger among subsistence farmers or those dependent on a local market. Loyalty also seems to have been associated with families, social classes, and areas which, for whatever reason, felt tied to the state government; while

unionism flourished more among those who felt isolated or alienated from it. Connections or perceived connections to the social, cultural, economic, or political mainstream of the South seem to have worked toward affiliation with the Confederacy; alienation from the mainstream appears to have produced alienation from the cause of secession and independence.

Another major theme emphasizes pre-war social cleavages, and finds that wartime allegiances often followed antebellum fault lines. The secession crisis did not cause quarrelling parties to close ranks in the interests of national or local unity, but, rather, exacerbated existing differences. If a prominent family or faction declared for the Confederacy, its major rivals were likely to go in the other direction. These rivalries may have been rooted in a variety of causes (economics, social status, partisan politics), but the fact of the rivalry seems to have been at least as important as its roots. Wartime rivalries did not spring instantly out of the need to take sides in the war; the choice of sides in the war often simply made existing rivalries more volatile.

Yet another theme, and a more tentative one, strikes a familiar note: support for secession and the Confederacy was proportionate to the number of and degree of reliance upon slaves. This obvious point is sometimes overlooked when Appalachia is defined in stereotypical white terms, but parts of the region, particularly the large valleys, did utilize slavery. Some families, especially those connected to the mainstream of their respective states, had substantial investments both in the institution generally and in slave labor. Too much should not be made of this point, however, for the region did not support a true plantation society, and slavery there seems not to have had quite the same social meaning as slavery elsewhere. Further, it should be noted that in some parts of Appalachia, many unionists, and many unionist leaders, were slaveholders. Still, those for whom the loss of slaves seemed to mean the loss of nearly everything appear to have perceived that their best interests lay in support for the Confederacy and in opposition to the Republican Union.

It should not be forgotten that for all the emphasis on unionist Appalachia, unionism was almost everywhere a minority sentiment. Even in East Tennessee, usually considered the most unionist area of all, the majority seems to have been loyal, and the area furnished more troops to the Confederate army than to the Union. This is a useful reminder that unionist activity or the expression of unionist sentiment, even in “unionist” Appalachia, was a

dangerous thing, and one not undertaken lightly or easily.

Finally, in almost every example shown here, it appears that people's loyalty to "the Union" or "the Confederacy" was defined strongly in local terms. To a Confederate, for example, "the Confederacy" meant HIS Confederacy: his family, his land, his business. Things of immediate importance to those values mattered. Affairs in Richmond or at Gettysburg were of less significance. By the same token, the threat to those valued things was seen to come less from faraway Yankee power than from nearby dangers in the form of local unionists, deserters from both armies, disloyal neighbors, refugees who had fled to the sheltering mountains, and those disorderly elements still familiar to a region not far removed in time or place from a frontier. Something analogous could be said of a stereotypical unionist. To Appalachian residents, the real war was not on some distant battlefield, but at home. Although this is hardly unique to Appalachia (Vernon Burton, for example, has shown the power of the same sort of attitude in piedmont South Carolina), these essays suggest that it was a more powerful force here than in the more cosmopolitan areas of the lowlands.

Perhaps there is enough substance in themes such as these to define Appalachia, other than on geographical grounds, as something internally coherent and externally distinctive enough to have a meaningful identity. It remains to be shown, however, that this is enough to justify speaking of "The Civil War in Appalachia" in any but the most nominalist terms.

For all these reservations, or perhaps because of them, this really is an excellent book with some potentially valuable applications. It succeeds well in showing the complexity of Appalachian societies at war. It is also a good demonstration of diverse historical methodologies at work. It would be a marvelous tool for a graduate seminar, not only in introducing students to the complexities of Civil War Appalachia, but in showing how historians address those complexities with varied tools and perspectives. Scholars who are relatively unfamiliar with the area will also find it rewarding to read. I suspect it would leave most undergraduates and general readers more confused than enlightened. That, however, is the nature of this Appalachian beast.

The editors are to be commended for putting this volume together. It does effectively lift some of the shadow which has shrouded the Appalachians in the Civil War. It does offer a useful tool to anyone who needs a good introduction to the subject. It remains to be seen if it will

serve as the bridge to a much-needed synthesis. For those interested in knowing just what is in the book, descriptions of each essay follow.

Peter Wallenstein, " 'Helping to Save the Union': The Social Origins, Wartime Experiences, and Military Impact of White Union Troops from East Tennessee": Using primarily *Tennesseans in the Civil War*, 2 vols. (1964) and the Tennessee Civil War Veterans Questionnaires, Wallenstein concludes that East Tennessee white society was divided before the war, with the primary social divisions reflecting a gap between slaveholding and non-slaveholding families. The same gap influenced loyalty during the war. Slaveholding families overwhelmingly furnished troops to the Confederacy and non-slaveholding families to the Union. Economic differences, never wholly separable from slaveholding differences, also reflect a clear pattern: "The lower their socioeconomic standing, the more likely men were to fight for the Union" (p. 18).

W. Todd Groce, "The Social Origins of East Tennessee's Confederate Leadership": Recognizing the lack of an obvious means of defining "Confederate leadership" in East Tennessee, Groce identifies it with the holding of officer positions in Confederate units raised in the region. He then tests the traditional hypothesis that Confederate loyalty was rooted in the cities and towns of the valleys and along the main transportation routes, especially the railroads; and among the slaveholding class. His research confirms the first hypothesis, adding some depth to it, but does not confirm the second. Confederate loyalty is also associated with pre-war affiliation with the Democratic party and with membership in a younger, rising generation.

Martin Crawford, "The Dynamics of Mountain Unionism: Federal Volunteers of Ashe County, North Carolina": Located at the junction of the state lines of North Carolina, Virginia, and Tennessee, Ashe County was about as "Appalachian" as a North Carolina county could be. Yet, a majority of its people supported the Confederacy. A substantial minority—and one which grew as the war went on—was unionist. Crawford concludes: "No simple formula adequately can embrace the innumerable factors that produced Ashe County Unionism, or indeed its pro-Confederate counterpart" (p. 66); but, he continues, but "Ashe County Unionism, like its pro-Confederate counterpart, derived much of its motivating energy from the neighborhood and kinship dynamics of mountain community life," dynamics that historians are "only now beginning to explore" (p. 70).

Ralph Mann, "Ezekial Count's Sand Lick Company: Civil War and Localism in the Mountain South." Ezekial Counts led a sometime Confederate company in and around Buchanan County, Virginia. Confederate authorities considered the company utterly unreliable, for its members came and went at pleasure, took "furloughs" at will, often refused to operate outside their own locality, and took orders from none but their local officers. The men of Count's company considered themselves good Confederates and their organization a properly regulated one, but their definitions of these terms were their own. Their Confederacy was their home region. Defense of that domain sometimes necessitated ignoring larger Confederate concerns.

Kenneth W. Noe, "Exterminating Savages: The Union Army and Mountain Guerrillas in Southern West Virginia, 1861-1862": Union generals George McClellan and William Rosecrans, operating in northwest Virginia early in the war, attempted to keep the war on a "civilized" plane, but they soon found it slipping into a "hard war" in which the lines between soldiers and civilians quickly faded and in which brutality and savagery became the norm.

Jonathan D. Sarris, "An Execution in Lumkin County: Localized Loyalties in North Georgia's Civil War": In the mountain regions of North Georgia, the term "Civil War" referred more accurately to a local than a national or regional phenomenon, for that region was as badly and as violently divided as the nation. Priority to protecting local interests led many soldiers from the area to resign or desert their army positions and return home to carry on the war against local enemies. It was in this atmosphere that a rebel militia commander seized and then summarily executed three unionists, who appeared to be symbols of everything which was destroying the community.

John C. Inscoc, "'Moving Through Deserter Country': Fugitive Accounts of the Inner Civil War in Southern Appalachia": A notable and overlooked source for information on the southern Appalachians during the Civil War is in the accounts of union fugitives from southern prisons. Fleeing through Appalachia on their way to safety, fugitives encountered the region from a different perspective from those of natives, casual travellers, and invading armies. Analysis of their accounts reveals that unionists were a minority in most of the southern Appalachians, that there were many more blacks living in the southern Appalachians than other accounts suggest, and that Appalachian women seemed to carry anti-Confederate sentiment more broadly and more deeply

than men. The essay includes a bibliography of fugitive accounts.

Jan Furman, "A Former Slave in Federal Service: John McCline's Experience in Appalachia": One day in late December of 1862, a ten-year-old slave named John McCline saw a column of Federal soldiers marching past his master's middle Tennessee plantation. At the invitation of one of the soldiers, young McCline simply walked into their midst and walked away from his home and from slavery. For the remainder of the war, he served as a teamster with the 13th Michigan Infantry, most of that time in Appalachia.

Robert Tracy McKenzie, "'Oh! Ours is a Deplorable Condition': The Economic Impact of the Civil War in Upper East Tennessee": Like the rest of the South, East Tennessee suffered severe economic decline after the war. This cannot be explained by the usual reasons, especially those involving the destruction of capital and loss of labor involved in the emancipation of slaves or in the collapse of the cotton market. Most seems to have been the consequence of the region's role as a theater of military operations and host for armies that consumed its substance. Post-war emigration of wealthier residents, and their replacement by poorer immigrants, along with a rise in tenancy, also contributed to the decline.

Gordon B. McKinney, "Premature Industrialization in Appalachia: The Asheville Armory, 1862-1863": During the war, the Confederate government operated an arms manufacturing plant in Asheville, North Carolina, but the plant proved to be a complete failure. Local workers lacked the necessary skills, attitudes, and work habits to make a large manufacturing operation successful, and early managers lacked the skills to run one. There was no adequate transportation system to bring raw materials to the site or to take away the finished products. Military operations in the region rendered the plant vulnerable to attack and seizure. The Confederate government finally closed the armory. Industrialization of the Appalachians would have to wait for railroads and new attitudes.

Shannon H. Wilson, "Lincoln's Sons and Daughters: Berea College, Lincoln Memorial University, and the Myth of Unionist Appalachia, 1866-1910": The meaning of the Civil War, like the meaning of all history, rests in memory, and memory involves what is forgotten as well as what is remembered. In their publicity and fundraising activities, Berea College and Lincoln Memorial University contributed to the construction of the memory and meaning of the Civil War by the way they defined "Lincoln's Sons and Daughters," the citizens of Ap-

palachia whom they served. In the process, both also contributed to the construction of popular stereotypes about the region and its people.

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