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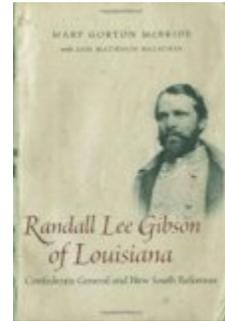
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Mary Gorton McBride, with assistance from Ann Mathison McLaurin. *Randall Lee Gibson of Louisiana: Confederate General and New South Reformer*. Southern Biography Series. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007. xiii + 320 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-3234-0.

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A Louisiana Redeemer and a New Perspective

Mary Gorton McBride, with the research assistance of her colleague Ann Mathison McLaurin, has produced a well-researched, thoughtful study of Randall Lee Gibson, a key figure in Louisiana's Reconstruction and Redeemer periods. Despite Gibson's influential role in postwar politics and New South reform, historians have largely overlooked him. This first full biography of Gibson is, fortunately, a balanced and sensitive one. As McBride explains, Gibson's family origins, charisma, and brave Confederate service make him susceptible to both traditional and modern stereotypes of southern Redeemers—either the “romantic symbolism of the Old South Cavalier or the rigid imagery of the Victorian white male who ruled females and minorities alike with the heavy hand of oppression” (p. 2). McBride ably avoids both nineteenth-century sentimentality and twenty-first century cynicism, providing a compelling reminder of the complexity of the Redeemers' motivations “in the face of defeat, humiliation, and social reconstitution” (p. 2).

Gibson was born in 1832 to Tobias and Louisiana Breckenridge Hart Gibson. Tobias Gibson made his home in Kentucky but his fortune in Louisiana as a sugar planter, thanks to his own hard work and the institution of slavery. Tobias later often confided to others that he was “in conscience opposed” to the institution (p. 25). Besides Tobias's discomfort with slavery, McBride shows that the Gibson family defied several other modern assumptions about the southern planter class. For exam-

ple, while thoroughly grounding her study in scholarship on antebellum Victorian culture and the southern “honor” ethic, she illustrates that Tobias “appealed to the inner-directed concept of character” as well as the “outer-directed ethic of honor” in raising his son (p. 42). The Gibsons valued economy, thrift, and self-discipline rather than ostentatious displays of authority and aggressive assertion. Later in life, in two cases in which a southern gentleman might be expected to demand a duel with a personal enemy (General Braxton Bragg's slanderous charges of cowardice both during and after the Civil War, and an unscrupulous political rival's claim that the Gibsons had a mixed racial heritage), Randall Gibson apparently never even considered that course of action.

Randall Gibson matriculated at Yale in 1848 just as the sectional crisis was about to enter its most acute phase. McBride treats Gibson's Yale years as crucial to the formation of his sectional outlook for the rest of his life. He was universally popular and admired among his northern classmates, who seemingly accepted the southern Cavalier myth and saw Gibson as a fine example of the best of the southern aristocracy. Even after his death, Gibson's fellow alumni from the North honored his memory as a “superior type of gentleman,” admiring his simple manners, lack of pretense, and intelligence (p. 28). While at Yale, though, Gibson found his native section increasingly on the defensive, and became more self-consciously southern in his political outlook and social views. At the

same time, he managed to nurture affectionate ties with his northern friends, beginning a “lifelong quest for common ground” on which he could help northerners and southerners reconcile contradictory interests and values (p. 26).

After graduation, Gibson traveled and studied in Europe, opened a law practice in Louisiana, and acquired a sugar plantation. When the Civil War began, he enlisted and later took command of the 13th Louisiana Volunteer Infantry Regiment. In covering Gibson’s Civil War career, McBride ably grounds her narrative in literature on traditional military history, personalities of key Confederate leaders, and the organization and training of Civil War armies. She perceptively covers issues of unit morale in the early days of the war, as well as the inexperience of many amateur officers like Gibson. Though Gibson soon proved to be a popular and effective officer, his advancement was stymied by the personal hostility and unfair treatment of his commanding general, Bragg. Fully enjoying his men’s confidence and the respect of other officers throughout the war, Gibson became an excellent brigade commander who probably could have performed well at the next higher level of command.

After the war, Gibson avoided the worst symptoms of posttraumatic stress that many others of his generation experienced. He established a busy law practice in New Orleans; became a charter member of the Southern Historical Society dedicated to telling his, and the South’s, version of the war; and participated in various veterans’ benevolent societies. He married Mary Montgomery, a woman who brought “southern roots and a northern fortune” to their union (p. 129). Mary’s father was a northern-born merchant who had made his fortune in New Orleans and New York, then abandoned New Orleans during the war due to his pro-Union sympathies.

In her coverage of the postwar period, McBride emphasizes the variety and complexity of Gibson’s goals and concerns, in contrast to the current consensus that reestablishing white supremacy was the central, overriding project of the Redeemer generation. McBride argues that rebuilding “community” or “common ground” with his former enemies became “the defining challenge of Gibson’s political career” (p. 136). She depicts Gibson as racially moderate, appealing to certain segments of the African American electorate in New Orleans, and running unsuccessfully for Congress on the “fusion” ticket of moderate Democrats and Liberal Republicans in 1872. Using similar tactics in 1874 in a race against a Union

veteran and northern “immigrant” to Louisiana, he was successful, aided by the violence of white supremacist groups whose membership he explicitly disavowed. During this period, Gibson became deeply disgusted by the corruption infesting the state’s politics, the arrival of which he blamed primarily on Republicans while conceding that it had debauched the Democratic Party as well. As a Louisiana congressman, he played a key role in cobbling together the Compromise of 1877.

McBride navigates the story of Gibson’s career through Louisiana’s byzantine politics in the postwar period and reminds readers of the factionalism and philosophical disagreements that divided southern Democrats, particularly after Reconstruction. She explains that Louisiana Democrats were divided among three factions—“Ring” politicians centered in New Orleans; “Bourbons” who were reactionary in their devotion to the Lost Cause and Old South values, yet rejected noblesse oblige; and “Conservative Democrats” or “Redeemers” who were political and fiscally conservative, but moderate in their social views, embracing noblesse oblige policies toward blacks. McBride places Gibson in the last category. Her descriptions of each faction seem weighted toward facilitating a positive portrayal of Gibson, though she is able to make the factional struggles comprehensible to readers; and it does seem clear that contemporaries generally admired Gibson’s character and integrity.

McBride implicitly rejects the dichotomous “left fork” vs. “right fork” characterization of Redeemer politicians in Washington. As a congressman and U.S. senator in the years 1874-92, Gibson voted with fellow southerners on reduction of taxes on whiskey and tobacco, and with the West in favor of internal improvements, such as railroads (one of his important contributions as a statesman was the establishment of the Mississippi River Commission). Yet he generally voted with the Northeast in favor of hard money policy and protective tariffs (especially for Louisiana sugar). He advocated the New South agenda of progress, social harmony, sectional reconciliation, and support for education while still encouraging Louisiana’s continued reliance on sugar, rice, and other crops.

Gibson’s most important legacy, McBride believes, was his role in the establishment and nurture of Tulane University through its first decade of existence. Hand-picked by the kindly but eccentric benefactor Paul Tulane to lead the board of trustees, Gibson skillfully guided the university through its first decade of existence and embraced innovations in curricular reform and coeducation,

though there was never any thought of admitting black students. McBride helpfully observes that Gibson's faith in education as a means to improve the lives of all people contradicted his acceptance of "a white supremacy that would deny full participation in society ... to those of other races.... The conflict between the assimilation and rejection of others, between the inclusive goal of education and the exclusionary intent of racism, was one of the most tragic contradictions in 19th century American life ... [and] the great contradiction of Gibson's career" (p. 6).

McBride's biography is thoroughly researched, informative, and readable, yet it does have weaknesses. The text occasionally bogs down in overly extensive discussions of patronage and spoils system politics without pausing to provide larger context or broader explanations. The latter chapters cover, in serial fashion, factional politics in Louisiana, patronage, protective tariffs, national party politics, the "Force Bill," suffrage reform, the Louisiana lottery, and the Farmers' Alliance, while scarcely pausing to reflect or summarize how the pieces fit together as part of a larger pattern in Gibson's career, and even less how that career was affected by personal events and crises in his personal life. Only in the epilogue, for example, do we learn that during the period he was wrestling with these issues, he was a "loving but far too indulgent parent," and of the self-destructive behavior of his oldest son, and that he transferred forty acres of property to one of his family's black servants "in consideration of his long & faithful service" (pp. 257, 253).

One wonders, for example, what this gift (not to mention his apparently close relationship as a boy with Nathan, a trusted slave who was an overseer on the Gibson plantation) revealed about his noblesse oblige assumptions. Did his family's opinion of Nathan temper Gibson's reaction to African American demands during Reconstruction and help explain his reaching out to New Orleans's former free black community during Reconstruction? Likewise, the reader learns that the death of his beloved wife Mary was emotionally devastating to Gibson, but that is as far as it goes. In short, readers might be left pondering the extent to which the personal affected the political, and the larger worldview of Gibson.

Despite these criticisms, McBride has produced an impressive piece of work that makes several contributions. It rescues an important figure from oblivion and provides a great deal of insight into the complexity of southern politics in the post-Civil War period, as well as a helpful discussion on the early development of Tulane University. Even more important, it enriches our understanding of the Redeemer generation of southern leaders. McBride conclusively demonstrates the complexity of motives that drove white Democratic leaders, who appear too often in today's scholarship as one-dimensional, single-minded symbols for the restoration of white supremacy; and provides one compelling example of their occasional creativity, frequent good intentions, and failure to meet adequately all the challenges of their generation.

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