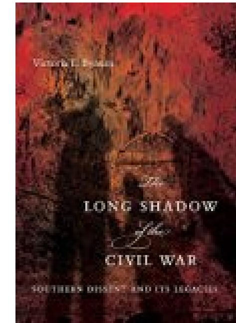
H-Net Reviews in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Victoria E. Bynum. *The Long Shadow of the Civil War: Southern Dissent and Its Legacies.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010. 272 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3381-0.



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Published on H-CivWar (May, 2010)
Commissioned by Matthew E. Mason

Escott on Bynum

"Few histories," writes Victoria Bynum, "are buried faster or deeper than those of political and social dissenters" (p. 148). *The Long Shadow of the Civil War* disinters a number of remarkable dissenters in North Carolina, Mississippi, and Texas. It introduces the reader to stubbornly independent and courageous Southerners in the North Carolina Piedmont, the Mississippi Piney Woods, and the Big Thicket region around Hardin County, Texas. These individuals and family groups were willing to challenge their society's coercive social conventions on race, class, and gender. They resisted the established powers when dissent was not only unpopular but dangerous–during the Civil War and the following decades of white supremacy and repressive dominance by the Democratic Party. Their histories remind us of two important truths: that the South was never as monolithic as its rulers and many followers tried to make it; and that human beings, though generally dependent on social approval and acceptance by their peers, are capable of courageous, independent, dissenting lives.

Bynum begins by focusing on the fierce, armed resistance to Confederate authority that developed in the North Carolina Piedmont, in Mississippi's "Free State of Jones," and in Texas' Big Thicket counties. All three areas "had solid nonslaveholding majorities with slaves making up only 10 to 14 percent of their populations" (p. 16). Guerrilla leaders in all three supported the Union over the Confederacy, sheltered and encouraged deserters, and fought the soldiers and authorities of the new Southern nation. They often gained considerable power locally and forced Confederate leaders to dispatch troops in vain internal efforts to eradicate them.

Bynum gives detailed attention in this part of the book to the North Carolina Piedmont. Religious conviction was an important part of resistance in North Carolina's "Quaker Belt," where particularly strong resistance developed in Randolph County, an area that had also been influenced by the antislavery beliefs of Wesleyan Methodists. Women played an especially prominent role in dissent in the Piedmont. They aided their husbands, stole to feed their families, helped other deserters, and both protested to and threatened Confederate officials. "Deeply felt class, cultural, and religious values animated" these women's actions (p. 51).

In nearby Orange County, North Carolina, there was "a lively interracial subculture" whose members "exchanged goods and engaged in gambling, drinking, and sexual and social intercourse" (p. 9). During the war these poor folks, who had come together despite "societal taboos and economic barriers," supported themselves and aided resistance to the Confederacy by stealing goods and trading with deserters. During Reconstruction elite white men, who felt that their political and economic dominance was threatened along with their power over their wives and households, turned to violence to reestablish control. Yet interracial family groups among the poor challenged their mistreatment and con-

tributed to "a fragile biracial political coalition" (pp. 55-56) that made the Republican Party dominant before relentless attacks from the Ku Klux Klan nullified the people's will.

Bynum next focuses on Newt Knight's military company that fought the Confederacy in Jones County, Mississippi. These armed resisters were so powerful that by late 1863 the Confederate government had to send troops to the area in order to carry out two major (and largely unsuccessful) raids against them. Knight also defied racial taboos by choosing to live with and father children by a black woman named Rachel, who was a slave of Newt's grandfather. Together they started "a multiracial community that endures to this day" (p. 8). Bynum's careful research adds to our understanding of the nature and roots of resistance in the "Free State of Jones." Through three decades following the Civil War, Knight petitioned for financial compensation from the United States for the pro-Union efforts of himself and his military company. The documents of his long and ultimately unsuccessful quest reveal details about Jones County Unionism and his own determination. Pro-Union ideals played a far larger role than religion among Knight's company. Newt's obstinate resistance to the South's ruling class led him to embrace and work for Populism in the later years of his life.

Family and community ties were at least as important among dissenting Southerners as among the slaveholding elite. Close relatives of Newt Knight and of his two key lieutenants in the "Free State of Jones" had moved to east Texas in the 1850s. There several brothers–Warren, Newton, and Stacy Collins–became principal figures in the anti-Confederate resistance that flourished in the Big Thicket region. Only one of eight Collins brothers chose to be loyal to the Confederate government. After fighting Confederate authorities during the Civil War, the Collinses and their relations later became active in the Populist Party and then in the Socialist Party. They stood up against the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of greedy or corrupt capitalists just as they had rejected the dominance of slaveholders. Back in Mississippi, members of the Collins clan chose to resist not only the power of the Democratic Party but the religious and cultural dominance of the Baptist Church, which had become part of the "white southern orthodoxy" (p. 108). Jasper Collins and other members of his family began a Universalist church; Newt Knight's brother Frank "converted to Mormonism and moved to Colorado." Such "dissident religious groups" faced "fierce and frequently violent" reactions, for they "threatened the reconstituted order over which the Democratic Party reigned supreme" (p. 105).

Professor Bynum closes her book with a chapter on the interracial offspring of Newt and Rachel Knight. Called "white Negroes" or "Knight's Negroes" by their neighbors, these individuals continued to exhibit an independent spirit as they dealt with their society and with each other. They chose to identify themselves in a variety of ways; different members of the family adopted different approaches to life. Some passed as white, others affirmed their African American identity, and still others saw themselves as people of color but kept a distance from those whom society defined as Negroes. Within the family group there were many independent spirits. One woman, the ascetic Anna Knight, forged a long and energetic career as an educator and Seventh-Day Adventist missionary.

Victoria Bynum has plunged deeply into the primary sources on these interesting individuals, family groups, and local communities. Her footnotes will be very useful to future scholars. Yet, micro-history of this type often proves to be more tangled, complex, and difficult to comprehend than study of a large region, because the connections are both more abundant and, inevitably, less fully documented. It also is difficult to tell a multiplicity of short but complicated stories clearly. Professor Bynum's history of these dissenters lifts the veil on a complicated web of friends, enemies, allies, and family relations who interacted over time. To describe the variety and extent of local conflicts, she must characterize the local community and introduce a host of minor characters. The multiplication of names, places, and details can be as confusing as it is illustrative of the depth of her research. Unfortunately, the welter of briefly mentioned details makes the reader's experience choppy and sometimes confusing. Had the sources been rich enough, three separate books might have been easier to read than one peopled by so many characters whose personalities remain dim.

The Long Shadow of the Civil War is valuable, however, because it proves that dissent was not rare and insignificant. It modifies the image created by those in power of a solid, unchanging South united behind class dominance, white supremacy, and subordination of women. As writers like Eudora Welty have shown us, the Southern man or woman can be an independent, stubborn, dissenting, even eccentric individual. The fact that we tend to remember so few of these Southerners testifies to the coercive power that repressive elites have exercised through most of the region's history.

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Citation: Paul Escott. Review of Bynum, Victoria E., *The Long Shadow of the Civil War: Southern Dissent and Its Legacies.* H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. May, 2010.

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