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Brian Dallas McKnight. *Confederate Outlaw: Champ Ferguson and the Civil War in Appalachia.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2011. 288 pp. $34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-3769-7.

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Champ Ferguson

For three decades historians have contributed significantly to our understanding of the Civil War by assessing the multiple roles of unconventional warfare. Scholars–such as Michael Fellman, Clay Montcastle, and Daniel Sutherland–not only revealed the pervasiveness of irregular warfare on the Confederate home front, but also examined the ways in which guerrilla activities shaped official war policies and the course of the broader conventional conflict.[1] Augmenting this burgeoning scholarship on Civil War irregulars, Brian McKnight's biography explores the life of one of the most notorious pro-Confederate guerrillas, Champ Ferguson, and sheds light on the chaotic irregular war that wracked many mountain South communities.

McKnight's work comes on the heels of Thomas D. Mays's 2008 study on Ferguson. He places Ferguson within the broader regional and national conflict and challenges Mays's assertion that the contest along the Kentucky-Tennessee border degenerated into a vicious guerrilla war because a "frontier culture remained strong in the isolated children and grandchildren of the original settlers."[2] Employing an array of archival sources–including newspaper editorials, manuscript collections, and postwar trial testimony–McKnight maintains that Cumberland highlanders' war-induced paranoia and pragmatic survivor mentality inflamed the merciless guerrilla warfare. He also argues that Ferguson's Manichean outlook, in which he viewed the conflict in stark terms of good versus evil with no middle ground, was founded upon a rudimentary understanding of Old Testament scripture.

Organized chronologically, McKnight's study initially provides insight into Ferguson's prewar background and demonstrates that often-ambiguous loyalties divided many Appalachian families and communities during the secession crisis. On the eve of war, Ferguson was a middling Democrat who owned three slaves and more land than the average resident of Clinton County, Kentucky. Whereas political, economic, and legal issues induced Ferguson to join the Rebel cause, his brother and mother became outspoken Unionists. McKnight asserts that "throughout the deeply divided Appalachian region, a pragmatic approach to Union or Confederacy was often employed, with the focus solely on self-preservation," and as war ensued "secession and union fevers quickly became epidemic .. [and] turned friends against friends and separated normally close families" (pp. 26, 31). Ferguson eventually embraced the black flag and carried out a personal campaign against many longtime comrades and rivals who were Unionists.

The author goes on to trace the bloody contest between local Unionists and Confederates and details how Ferguson gained notoriety as a ruthless guerrilla whose motley unit terrorized, pillaged, and killed Union sympathizers. In particular, McKnight asserts, "Ferguson's attack on William Frogg epitomizes the nature of warfare as understood by Cumberland region guerrillas" (p. 44). On November 1, 1861, Ferguson arrived at the home of William Frogg, a prewar friend who was sick and bedridden. Ferguson alleged that Frogg had enlisted in the Union Army and promptly killed him. Exemplifying the ruthless mentality prevalent among many Cumberland irregulars, the guerrilla later claimed, " 'Every man was in danger of his life: if I hadn't kill[ed] my neighbor, he would have killed me … it was regarded as legitimate to

kill them at any time, at any place, under any circumstances' " (p. 45).

Besides detailing how the course of the broader war shaped the conflict in the Cumberland region, McKnight illustrates that like many Civil War irregulars, Ferguson operated along the ambiguous line separating irregular and conventional warfare. Ferguson acted outside the formal Confederate Army throughout most of the war; however, in the spring of 1862 Rebel cavalry raider John Hunt Morgan tapped Ferguson as a guide for his foray into western Kentucky. Complicating historian Robert Mackey's strict categorization of irregulars, McKnight asserts that Ferguson's exploits under Morgan redefined "the nature of his service: regular soldier when convenient, Confederate partisan when otherwise" (p. 90). Ferguson opportunistically served under various Confederate officers, including Colonel George Dibrell and General Joseph Wheeler, for brief periods throughout the rest of the war. His relationship with conventional Confederate officers brought him under General Felix Robertson's command at the Battle of Saltville in 1864. In the wake of the mêlée, he massacred wounded black Union troops as they lay on the battlefield and later killed the injured Elza Smith, a relative of Ferguson's late first wife, at a hospital set up on the campus of Emory and Henry College.

Although Confederate authorities had briefly detained Ferguson after the Saltville Massacre, Union officials arrested and indicted him for murdering fifty-three men more than a month after Confederate surrenders at Appomattox and Bennett Place. McKnight chronicles the guerrilla's much-publicized trial in Nashville, Tennessee, and details how Ferguson's lack of a formal Confederate commission and mercurial relationships with conventional Rebel leaders formed the foundation of the legal arguments. After he was found guilty and hanged in October 1865, Ferguson joined Henry Wirz as the only Confederates executed for war crimes.

McKnight concludes his work by examining the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century cultural development of legends surrounding Ferguson. He explains that Lost Cause proponents broadcast two primary myths, which couched Ferguson as a tragic hero and justified his wartime brutality. Whereas one legend alleged that Ferguson undertook his bloody campaign after Federal soldiers sexually assaulted his wife and daughter, the other story supposed that Union troops murdered Ferguson's son. McKnight disproves both myths and concludes that Confederate apologists created "a twisted form of moral justification for a troublesome Confederate hero" by claiming "the defense of family as a primary motive for Ferguson's bloody career" (pp. 180,182). He also claims that elements of the Ferguson legend pervaded various late nineteenth-century Appalachian local-color publications, and even formed the foundation of Asa Carter's ideal guerrilla character–Josey Wales.

Whereas many Civil War historians have focused solely upon the brutal guerrilla warfare in Kansas and Missouri, McKnight brings the complex partisan war along the Kentucky-Tennessee border to the forefront. In particular, he provides a more nuanced examination of Ferguson's vicious wartime career in the Cumberland highlands and postwar legacy in the popular imagination. Some readers may find McKnight's assessment of Ferguson's Old Testament mentality rather tenuous; however, most students of southern Appalachia and the Civil War era will certainly find this well-researched biography valuable.

Notes

[1]. Michael Fellman, *Inside War: The Guerrilla Conflict in Missouri during the American Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); Clay Montcastle, *Punitive War: Confederate Guerrillas and Union Reprisals* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009); and Daniel E. Sutherland, *A Savage Conflict: The Decisive Role of Guerrillas in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

[2]. Thomas D. Mays, *Cumberland Blood: Champ Ferguson's Civil War* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 7.

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