



Nicole Etcheson. *A Generation at War: The Civil War Era in a Northern Community*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2011. xii + 371 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-1797-5.

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## The Civil War's Impact on an Indiana County

A resurgence of scholarship in political and social history has begun to reexamine the Civil War in the North. Moving beyond studies of the home front, the best of these works reinterpret the ways in which Northerners experienced the entire period from the antebellum years through the Reconstruction era. This new periodization connects the prewar and postwar years and looks at both the continuities and changes wrought by the war that redefined the United States. Nicole Etcheson's splendid microhistory of Putnam County, Indiana, brings together the now-tired lenses of race, class, and gender with political history, local matters, and memory in a groundbreaking study that shows how the Civil War transformed life in a Midwestern community.

For a generation of historians, race, class, and gender have offered the conceptual framework for insightful analysis of the past. Etcheson, Alexander M. Bracken Professor of History at Ball State University, employs this familiar conceptual triad at the local level, combining them with gripping stories embedded in the context of place as well as time, illustrating how well-worn concepts might still be usefully applied to gain new insights and fresh perspectives. She argues that for a "microhistory to have validity, the community under study must have some claim to representativeness or significance." Etcheson is quick to note that "no single location, of course, can represent the larger society," but, still, "a rural Midwestern community such as Putnam County, Indiana, may tell us much about a Northern society that was itself still primarily agrarian" (p. 13). She then demonstrates that the county serves as an ideal representation for Northern society in the era by listing the quantitative evidence showing that the area was both agrarian and industrial enough, both rural and urban enough, both politically and demographically diverse enough to offer insights in comparison with the rest of the North. She then argues that gender roles, racial views, class relationships,

and political power were all affected during a generation marked by war.

Etcheson begins with the story of an ax murderer, using the grisly tale of a man killing his wife in 1857 and his subsequent trial and execution as a window on the antebellum world of Putnam County. Despite what a traveler might have surmised while observing the countryside, farms, and villages along the National Road, the county was far from a tranquil rural idyll. The growing market economy brought not only more industry and the profit motive, but also the expansion of internal improvements like roads and railroads. Class divisions surfaced politically in issues like temperance, as nativist fears of immigrants combined with Protestant Christian worries about the dangers of alcohol. Differences between the emerging middle class in places like Greencastle and the rural farmers revealed themselves in different ideas about gender. Middle-class notions of separate spheres challenged the old patriarchal order, but change was slow in coming, as most county citizens held to male-dominated views. The new Republican Party represented the middle-class residents and sought a more active government, while the Democrats held to the Jacksonian principles favored by the poor and rural factions of the county. White supremacy prevailed in Putnam County, as few African Americans lived in the area and those who did were pushed out in the decade before the war. Democrats appealed to racism, as local politicians supported the exclusion of blacks from Indiana (a measure passed as part of the new state constitution in 1851) even as Republicans rallied their supporters with anti-slavery rhetoric designed to whip up fears of the growing Slave Power in the South. Thus, as represented in Putnam County, the antebellum North was already experiencing the conflicts wrought by a changing society.

Prewar conflict expanded once the fighting began. Putnam County Democrats led by politicians like Daniel

Voorhees resisted the efforts of Republicans like President Abraham Lincoln and Indiana Governor Oliver Morton. Violence erupted, as Indiana's own internal civil war caused riots, gun battles, and mob actions. Unionists battled the Copperheads (as the most extreme Democratic opponents of the war were called), draft evasion was widespread, and secret societies operated even as official, legal politics continued with electoral victories and defeats for both of the political parties. Morton and other Republicans recognized that they needed the support of War Democrats to maintain power and win the war and this required them to pursue a more bipartisan agenda under the auspices of the Unionist party. But they still attempted to implement Republican policies designed to extend industrial capitalism and expand the power of the government. The divided Democrats went to great lengths to support their various positions, with War Democrats cooperating with their political rivals while those opposed to the war sometimes engaged in treasonous plotting against the Union. Both parties tried to fix elections, and the violence that tore the community apart made it difficult to forget the bitterness it engendered. Indeed, as Etcheson puts it, the war's "animosities shattered county residents' faith in the power of shared political principles to transcend partisan differences." In fact, "the Civil War had so divided Putnam County that its people could no longer join together even to celebrate a universally beloved Union" (p. 122), as the two parties sponsored separate, exclusive Fourth of July celebrations in 1863. The war affected gender roles, as women fulfilled the tasks usually done by the men now gone off to fight. Families struggled to maintain the bonds that held them together through letters and packages sent to the soldiers and visits home or to the front. Such efforts allowed men to keep their authority, as they directed family affairs from afar. Women worked in charitable organizations to aid the war effort, the community tried to help the soldiers' families with measures like reduced rent, and everyone worried about money. Despite their efforts to maintain contact, the war created a huge gap in experience between soldiers and civilians. Of course, the "greatest example of the gulf between soldiers and civilians was in the reality of death," as many soldiers died during the war and families could not understand what the men had seen even as they often dealt with their own grief over the loss of loved ones. Etcheson argues that, ultimately, "the war did little change gender roles," as "both soldiers and civilians struggled to preserve their roles as providers, fathers, and community members despite the war's disruptions" (p. 147). Men who fought were changed, but they were not

disconnected from home. Meanwhile, women "accepted the political or social roles assigned to them as women; they sought to accommodate the authority of even absent males." But the war "radically changed the position of African Americans. Blacks' role in the war threatened white supremacy and the racial order of prewar society" (p. 147). Indeed, African Americans serving as soldiers convinced many in Putnam County that blacks should enjoy full citizenship, although some racist whites resisted any notions of emancipation meaning equality.

The postwar period brought struggles over the meaning of the war and the settlement of the peace and Putnam County, like the rest of the country, was divided over the issues of Reconstruction. The political battles over Reconstruction legislation animated debates in Indiana as well as the South. Economic policy mattered, as the dramatic growth of industrial capitalism and class conflict spurred by the war continued in the so-called Gilded Age. Putnam County residents argued about currency, banks, railroads, immigration, and the rights of farmers and workers. Republicans waved the bloody shirt to remind voters of the Civil War even as the Democrats tried to offer an alternative and the Grange attempted to organize farmers. Everyone accused their rivals of corruption and evil intent. The Radical Republicans pushed a new racial order and supported the expansion of government to achieve it, but they also used that government power to promote capitalism rather to regulate it. Thus, the victorious party became conservative on economic issues. The Democrats held to conservative policies socially, but increasingly became associated with criticism of capitalism. But the national government committed itself to supporting the war's veterans and pensions gave the former soldiers "unique economic advantages—and status as the saviors of the nation" (p. 197). Putnam County erected monuments to honor their war heroes and soldiers' organizations were formed. Republican politicians used the Grand Army of the Republic "as a political vehicle" (p. 207), and the veterans enjoyed the benefits of government power in the form of pensions. Women's clubs in Putnam County, however, did not "lead woman to challenge precepts of their society." While women's rights "received more support in the later decades of the nineteenth century than in the past" (p. 219), women mostly continued in traditional roles. Even when they were active in movements like temperance, women found themselves subordinate to male leaders. Men were still breadwinners and still held authority. Class divisions still animated politics. The issues were sometimes different, but much continued over the course of the generation that spanned from the 1850s to

the dawn of the twentieth century. The one area where Putnam County saw truly dramatic change was race. In 1879-80, large numbers of African Americans became Exodusters, fleeing the South after the official end of Reconstruction. Some Exodusters came to Putnam County, where they met with ambivalence from white citizens. To be sure, some white residents held to their racist views and opposed black settlement. But many in the county embraced the emancipationist vision of the Civil War and adopted new views of African Americans. Where they often had thought of blacks as lazy before the war, many whites in Putnam County changed their minds after seeing black soldiers and hardworking black citizens. These egalitarian visions “marked a revolutionary change from the attitudes of the prewar period, in which antiblack racism had been universally accepted” (p. 259). Racial attitudes changed again in later decades, but the Civil War generation underwent a tremendous shift.

A fine storyteller, Etcheson traces the lives of individuals, allowing the reader to “get to know” the characters. But she might have given more attention to economic issues other than class conflict. In her conclusion, Etcheson employs the concept of historical memory to show how the Civil War generation recalled the war that dominated their entire lives. She uses the story of the building of the Indianapolis Soldiers’ and Sailors’ Monument on the Circle in downtown Indianapolis as an

other window into the world of Putnam County. In this brief section, one wishes that the author had included the Unionist/Nationalist memory as well as the reconciliationist and emancipationist visions of the Civil War, but that her work raises more questions only points to its value. A Putnam County resident was the leading proponent of building the monument dedicated in 1889 and Etcheson argues that the “monument’s story captures many aspects of the Civil War era in the North” (p. 262). The monument honored the soldiers and political leaders, commemorated “the contribution of women” (p. 263) and, unusually for Civil War memorials, also included a representation of emancipation. The meanings of the images on the statue remain controversial. For example, the emancipationist vision of a slave holding up his broken chains to the goddess Peace stirred debate in the early twenty-first century as an artist used it as a model for a piece along Indianapolis’s cultural trail, raising objections from those who saw it as racist. Etcheson notes that the rendering “is typical in its representation of the helplessness of the slave and his need for others to liberate him” (p. 266). Clearly, the memory of the Civil War continues to be contested today. But the monument also captured the visions of a generation at war and the story serves as a fitting end to a well-written book that contributes much to our understanding of the Civil War in the North.

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