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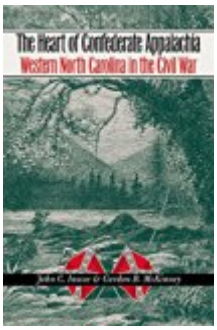

John C. Inscoe, Gordon B. McKinney. *The Heart of Confederate Appalachia: Western North Carolina in the Civil War.* Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2000. xi + 368 pp. $39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8078-2544-0.

Reviewed by Wallace Hettle

Published on H-South (August, 2000)

Authors John Inscoe and Gordon McKinney describe their book as the result of two emerging trends in Civil War scholarship: a new appreciation of community studies, and a growing attention to civilian life. This thoroughly researched and vividly written book focuses on the mountain counties of North Carolina. The authors weave a fascinating narrative based on the diverse experiences of a variety of characters, including masters, slaves, bushwackers, soldiers, deserters, draft dodgers, women, ministers, and politicians. This book's signal achievement is to provide a vivid sense of the texture of life on the Confederate home front in a region torn by conflicting loyalties and vicious infighting.

A brief review cannot do justice to the variety of experience portrayed in this book, based on an impressive array of literary evidence. While the authors cast this book as a community study, they avoid the dull number-crunching and dry theorizing that sometimes characterize the genre. Instead, the authors eloquently recount the stories of people trapped in the chaos of Civil War western North Carolina. The diversity of human experience in the mountains, illustrated with aptly selected anecdotes, makes this book a pleasure to read.

The authors make two notable contributions to the historiography of the Civil War in Appalachia. First, Inscoe and McKinney offer insight into the transformation of the mountain South into a modern economy. Too often, studies of the antebellum mountain regions have suggested that subsistence agriculture produced a static economy that could only be described with awkward words such as "precapitalist," "premodern," and "precommercial." By contrast, the authors describe Western North Carolina in 1861 as an acquisitive, entreprenurial society blending subsistence agriculture with market activity. According to the authors, the flexible and variegated market economy in the mountains was distinctive because it depended neither on staple crop production nor on access to railroads. Western North Carolina before the war was "a society on the rise led by men on the make" (p. 27). The market orientation of these North Carolinians helps explain their desire for state-sponsored internal improve-

ments and the persistence of the Whig Party in that state.

The war tested the strength of the mountain economy, producing scarcity and contributing to serious setbacks in agricultural production by 1862. While many western North Carolinians had been subsistence farmers, these farmers were also involved in the exchange of goods and services. Local citizens traded with merchants and drew on the specialized skills of millers, tanners, and blacksmiths. As the war progressed, however, mountain residents dealt with scarcity and hyperinflation. Local citizens became angry as farmers and merchants drained the local food supply to seek high prices elsewhere. Yet even as the war brought economic chaos, it also, paradoxically, revealed how thoroughly western North Carolinians had come to rely on sophisticated trade networks. In an epilogue, the authors discuss the contribution of postbellum railroad development to the growth of the logging industry and tourist trade. Inscoe and McKinney describe how postwar writers, ignoring evidence of continuous economic change, created a distorted image of a static "hillbilly" society in the Carolina mountains.

The authors also seek to deny the myth of a solidly Unionist Appalachia, arguing that the west North Carolina mountains offered no refuge from the destructiveness of war. In the wake of Fort Sumter, the authors note, Union sentiment quickly evaporated as the mountains mobilized for war. Of course, many local citizens ultimately opposed the Confederacy, particularly after the beginning of conscription in 1862. However, "wartime Unionism . . . hit its stride only during the second half of the war and reemerged primarily in response to the exigencies of war rather than to any deeply held love of the Union or opposition to slavery or slaveholders" (p. 86).

Internal divisions did produce vicious infighting in many mountain counties of North Carolina, and the authors vividly describe incidents of partisan violence and outright murder. Such internal warfare meant that many Unionists were afraid to openly profess their opposition to the war, and that "no combination of deserters, draft evaders, and Unionists was strong enough to assume military control of any significant segment of the North Carolina Mountain Counties" (p. 145). Lacking military control and personal security, Unionists encountered intimidation as one of many obstacles to successfully challenging the Confederacy in the political arena.

On at least one occasion, the authors make their case against the myth of a solidly Unionist region with excessive zeal. They cite an 1866 estimate that 5,790 whites from North Carolina's twenty-one westernmost counties crossed the lines to the Union army. While the authors may be correct in suggesting that this number could have been padded, their assertion that the number is too high would be more persuasive if they could provide alternative data. Moreover, they are even less convincing in suggesting that joining the Federal army should not be viewed "as a strict measure of loyalty to the Union" since the "motivations behind anti-Confederate thought and action remain as elusive and complex as ever" (p. 104). It is hard to imagine a more clear-cut demonstration of loyalty to the Union than the act of volunteering to join its army. This is why Richard Nelson Current's description of white southerners that fought for the Union as "Lincoln's loyalists" remains an apt one.

But interpretive excess is the exception rather than the rule in this persuasive and gracefully written book. In addition, the authors provide a complete bibliography, something that is lacking in too many current scholarly works. Most importantly, by ably demonstrating that the southern home front offered little shelter from the storm brought by war, Inscoe and McKinney offer a valuable contribution to our growing body of knowledge about civilian life in the Confederacy.

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Citation: Wallace Hettle. Review of Inscoe, John C.; McKinney, Gordon B. *The Heart of Confederate Appalachia: Western North Carolina in the Civil War.* H-South, H-Net Reviews. August, 2000.

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