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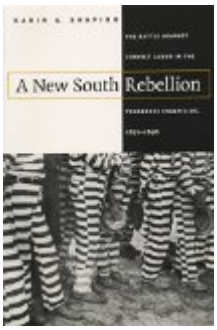

Karin A. Shapiro. *A New South Rebellion: The Battle Against Convict Labor in the Tennessee Coalfields, 1871-1896.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998. xvi + 333 pp. $55.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8078-4733-6.

Reviewed by Brian Kelly

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Audacity and Conservatism in the Making of the Southern Working Class

In a period when many historians have retreated into marginal debates within the limited borders of their own sub-specializations, Karin Shapiro's important study of a tumultuous chapter in the story of New South industrialization demonstrates the enduring merit of posing "large questions in small places." If one important measure of good scholarship is its ability to speak with authority to historians beyond the boundaries of its own home turf, then *New South Rebellion* is an unqualified success. Deeply grounded in a broad range of sources from labor, government, and employer archives, contemporary newspapers and court records, Shapiro's study fashions from a remarkable series of upheavals in the Tennessee coalfields a window with which to view, in all its multi-dimensional complexity, the unique historical juncture that was the New South. In the process she produces a study of lasting value not only for students of southern industrial and labor history, but one which offers a fresh vantage point from which to revisit the most salient historical debates regarding post-Reconstruction race relations, the limitations of southern Populism, and the shape of Gilded Age politics generally.

In recent years, scholars have followed up C. Vann Woodward's cursory remarks about the function and significance of the penal system in the New South social order and the convict lease in particular with detailed studies that emphasize its brutality, its importance in perpetuating the region's racial hierarchy and its role in anchoring the region's distinct political economy. Shapiro's study chronicles the trajectory of "one of the most far-reaching challenges to governmental and industrial authority in the New South" (235), an intermittent, year-long armed rebellion by Tennessee coal miners aimed at denying their employers access to unfree labor. However, she necessarily begins elsewhere, with the effects of the convict system upon the state's (mostly white) free miners.

From the very beginning of the state's Redemption-era embrace of industrialization, Tennessee's leading employers looked to the convict system as an insurance policy against the disrup-

tive potential of assertive free labor. Free miners, for their part, "bitterly resented both the ability of coal operators to break strikes through the use of convicts and the downward pressure that prison labor placed on wages" (75). The first open rebellion against the convict lease in Tennessee began on July 14, 1891, when a mob of armed miners and supporters freed forty convicts being held at Briceville, in east Tennessee, and packed them aboard Nashville-bound trains. The incident, and three subsequent outbreaks over the next year, raised tensions between corporate lessees and state authorities even as it compelled them to close ranks in defense of law and order.

The rebellion challenged both major political parties to live up to their formal commitment to abolition, a test which neither the Democrats nor the Republicans would pass, and it exposed irreconcilable divisions wracking the state's variant of Populism. But most importantly, for Shapiro, the rebellion illustrated the contradictory character of mineworkers' activism; singularly audacious in their organization of armed military detachments to press their grievances against the convict lease system, but essentially conservative in their deference to elected authority.

This duality in the nature of the Tennessee convict wars is the central problem which the author sets out to unravel. Immediately after convicts had been shipped out to Nashville, a mass meeting of "miners, farmers, merchants, and property-holders" (81) in the vicinity of Briceville dispatched a telegram calling upon the governor to lend his aid as their "protector". The cross-class character of this appeal is in itself significant for Shapiro. It was rooted, in part, in the absence of the company towns from the Tennessee fields. In communities where miners spent their earnings with local merchants rather than the company store, all sections of the community shared a stake in the miners' material prosperity and abolition of the convict lease.

The miners' inability to "conceive of themselves in full-fledged rebellion" (195) and their unwillingness to openly engage state troops in battle had ideological roots as well: miners held to a republican worldview which accepted competitive capitalism even as it opposed monopoly and the subversion of egalitarian democracy by corporate interests. But such ideas were fluid, and necessarily so, in a time when southern society was undergoing profound transformation. The "political ideas these men espoused," the author suggests, "were not ideological straightjackets." Rather, miners "tailored their rhetoric and fitted their political strategies to circumstances" (83). Indeed, by the end of this series of upheavals, a new, class-conscious perspective had emerged, driven by the "realization that industrial society would not easily accommodate [their] updated philosophy of equal rights" (247).

Beyond their general attachment to a common republican outlook, there existed considerable differences in the traditions which Tennessee miners carried into the convict wars. As a bastion of Republican party strength in the state, East Tennessee proved relatively impervious to the Populist challenge but, ironically, more prone to labor militancy and interracialism. In the period preceding the clash over convict lease, an alliance between plebian and commercially-oriented elements in the Republican party was relatively easy to maintain, but upheaval threatened to pull the party apart as elite elements grew impatient with their rebellious constituents and attempted to distance the party from events.

By contrast, mid-Tennessee miners were latecomers in the upheaval, having enjoyed (at the expense of black workers) a more cooperative relationship with Tennessee Coal and Iron's mine management and being more closely wedded to the Democratic party. Even when the Farmers' Alliance took hold in the center of the state, its orientation was "much more conservative than [in] the western states" (131). The influence of conser-

vative, white property-holders in its ranks rendered it unwilling to take up the convict lease issue, both because they wished to maintain low property taxes and because they feared that the rebellion might set an example for propertyless black Tennesseans. Ironically, laws restricting the franchise, aimed squarely at blunting the Populist challenge, were passed in Tennessee with the support of the Alliance (133).

A New South Rebellion reaffirms that even when the race question did not figure explicitly, it loomed large just beneath the surface of events. Shapiro advances a fluid, even-handed account of racial dynamics in the mining communities, one which acknowledges the relative egalitarianism that bi-racial unionism encouraged without underestimating the degree to which pragmatic collaboration could accommodate the racial status quo. But she is unequivocal about the positive effects of the UMW presence on coalfield race relations. The central irony of the convict war is that while the miners ultimately succeeded in compelling the state to abolish the lease system, union organization declined precipitously in the wake of the upheaval. "[A]t the same time that union membership plummeted," Shapiro writes, "racial attitudes hardened" (228).

The explanation is fairly straightforward: in the aftermath of the rebellion, white miners (particularly those in the center of the state, who had been ambivalent, at best, in their attitude to interracial unionism) began to raise demands for an independent, southern-based miners' federation. Black UMW Vice President William Riley recognized this for what it was an attempt to get out from under the influence of a national union committed to organizing across the racial divide and he resisted attempts to break away even while railing against unequal treatment within the UMW itself.

On one or two points readers may question whether the author has made her case. Although formally committed to the idea that the miners' republicanism was a fluid set of ideas, and subject to change under the impact of events, Shapiro seems inclined, in places, to a more mechanical view of the relation between material circumstances and ideology. She makes too much, one suspects, out of the high level of homeownership among them, suggesting that in the absence of real, tangible independence (which had been declining almost since it was enshrined in the Jeffersonian period), miners held on to their status as homeowners as the last vestiges of such freedom. But it is unclear whether this played an essential role in holding them back from "the wholesale transformation of America's economic and political institutions" (247). Indeed, there are few major working class upheaval anywhere in the world which did not begin with modest, even parochial aims and move on to more general problems.

The second point relates to the author's claim, near the end of the book, that the upheaval in Tennessee represented the high point in southern labor's battle against the convict system. She asserts, somewhat mistakenly, that "in neither [Georgia nor Alabama] did resistance to the use of prison labor in mines extend beyond legislative petitions" (239). Part of the reason, she suggests, is that the presence of "a large percentage of black miners [in Alabama] militated against a frontal assault on convict labor." But in Alabama, at least, localized strikes did take place over the expansion of the convict system, and on occasion miners, probably inspired by the Tennessee example, threatened to march on the convict camps.

But even conceding that the fight against convict labor did not take the dramatic form that it did in Tennessee, one has to question whether armed operations involving, at their peak, a thousand miners and supporters, was a more effective way of pressing grievances over the convict lease than mass industrial action involving upwards of twenty thousand black and white miners. It is worth considering, at least, whether the opposite may be true: that the more visually impressive

military operations of the Tennessee miners were necessary because they were unable to pull off sustained strike action involving the vast majority of free miners. The form which the rebellion took may very well be an expression of miners' confidence and strength, but it could also indicate weakness.

But these are minor questions that do not detract from the obvious strengths of a study with so much to offer for students of southern, labor, and industrial history. Solidly researched and imaginatively conceived, *A New Rebellion* significantly advances our understanding of the tremendous social pressures released by the process of New South industrialization, and provides a careful, multi-layered analysis of a region in upheaval. Perhaps the most fundamental question thrown up by the events, and by other mini-rebellions similar in scope and audacity to the Tennessee convict war, is how the New South held together at all under such strains. Part of the answer lies, no doubt, in the attachment of a newly emerging southern working class to a set of ideas borrowed from the past, but being rendered increasingly anachronistic by the forward march of industrialization.