

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Christopher Lyle McIlwain Sr. *Civil War Alabama*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2016. 456 pp. \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8173-1894-9.

Reviewed by Christopher Rein (Air University, Air Command and Staff College)

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey



Tuscaloosa attorney Chris McIlwain's *Civil War Alabama* is a long-overdue, single-volume correction to Walter L. Fleming's horribly flawed *The Civil War and Reconstruction in Alabama* (1905), going beyond editor Kenneth's Noe's excellent collection of essays (*The Yellowhammer War*, 2013) focused on selected aspects of the state's role, to weave a comprehensive narrative, spanning the secession crisis to "The Day of Jubilee," when legal slavery finally ended in the state.[1] Along the way, McIlwain upends many myths of the "Lost Cause," perhaps most importantly that the state unanimously supported secession and remained steadfastly loyal to the Confederacy throughout the conflict. He sheds important new light on the presence and strength of a peace faction of "reconstructionists" in a state largely untouched directly by military operations. His most revolutionary assertion, that secessionists may have even been in the minority during the crisis, is a compelling example of the pervasiveness of neo-Confederate revisionism that still dominates popular interpretations of the Civil War in Alabama. By focusing primarily on political events and the role that the legal profession had in precipitating the secession crisis and sustaining the rebellion, McIlwain re-centers political history in the discussion and understanding of the war's course and consequences. While perhaps not the definitive work on the subject, which by his own admission omits "analysis of critically important social, political and economic and military components of the story" (p. 1), as well as racial and some military aspects, the work does provide both an important corrective to popular opinion as well as an enjoyable and manageable read that will interest both scholars and lay readers alike.

McIlwain traces the course of the Civil War in Al-

abama from roughly the secession crisis of the 1850s through the close of hostilities. The first two sections focus on political events and early efforts to crush internal opposition to secessionists' efforts to foist rebellion on their fellow citizens. The next two sections focus on the war's conduct largely outside of the state, alternating with internal developments, including the rise of a growing peace faction and heated gubernatorial and legislative elections in 1863 that threatened to place "reconstructionists" (those willing to explore reunion, with protections for slavery similar to those offered to the border states, in exchange for peace) in the legislative halls in Montgomery and Richmond. The final four sections (including part 6, "Bowling Down to Mars," and part 8, "The Holocaust") highlight the inevitable consequences of the failure of this effort, or rather its suppression by "original secessionists," which resulted in the destruction of Alabama's nascent economic and industrial infrastructure, most notably during the final few months of the war. Throughout, the reader learns that these identities were remarkably flexible, depending on events, as Unionists occasionally became "reluctant rebels" to preserve their necks and apparently ardent Confederates could take loyalty oaths when it suited their interests. As a result, it is almost impossible to accurately measure sentiment for or against the war, as it ebbed and flowed through the conflict. The best McIlwain can offer is that a majority were apparently in favor, or at least not inclined to violently oppose secession at the outset, and that most were opposed, ambivalent, or simply dead, by war's end.

McIlwain's extensive background in the legal profession both hinders and helps the work, but mostly the latter. He clearly has extensive experience in constructing an argument and marshalling evidence, laying a strong

case for the diversity of Alabama's political opinions before a panel of inquisitors. Indeed, he closes with the assertion that "any politician who caused that (secession and war) would be hard-pressed to merit a favorable verdict from an unbiased jury" (p. 267). The twenty-five chapters are brief and buttressed with copious footnotes, demonstrating that he has clearly prepared his case well. But a trained historian might have selected additional or alternate sources, and interrogated them more thoroughly. Much of McIlwain's evidence comes from contemporary newspapers, which provide frustratingly little detail and context, especially during a time when presses had moved across the South and editors frequently reprinted stories that first appeared in other papers. However, he is quick to point out excesses and Confederate propaganda, especially in regards to Bedford Forrest's overhyped but clearly inadequate exploits. (Interestingly, he repeatedly refers to Forrest as the "War Eagle," perhaps in an attempt to stain his alma mater's biggest rival with an association with the founder of the Ku Klux Klan!) Citing only edition and date makes it difficult to identify the author and any possible motive. McIlwain supplements the newspaper accounts with a large number of available journals, from a cross-section of the population, as well as official military and legal records and the copious array of secondary works, which demonstrate at least familiarity, if not deep engagement, with the arguments contained therein.

The book repeatedly highlights the irony of a movement founded on treason and dissent effectively squelching any opposition to either secession or the Confederacy through any available means, legal or illegal. McIlwain traces the careers and consequences for antebellum lawmakers opposed to secession, primarily from the state's northern tier of counties but also sprinkled throughout, as ardent secessionists attempt to exclude them, and their views, from the secession debate and then marginalize them before resorting to terrorism and violence, if necessary, to preserve their unholy rebellion. In tracing the careers of several men, Thomas Peters and Christopher Sheats among them, who not only opposed secession but worked through secret "union leagues" to hasten their state's reconstruction, even while the war still raged around them, McIlwain confirms that opposition to the war did not come primarily from poor "mudsills" but found voice across geographic, economic, and social boundaries. Even some putatively "loyal" Confederates, such as Senator Robert Jemison, entertained doubts about the war's prospects and whether the state's best interests would be served by continuing to support it.

The most compelling, and perhaps most relevant ar-

gument for present and future political affairs, stems from McIlwain's assertion that attorneys such as William Yancey used their prestige and influence, as well as the significant levers of power within the state, to foist secession and rebellion on the state's at best ambivalent and at worst, opposed citizenry. While empirical data, especially election returns and the number of soldiers in Confederate gray, seems to undermine this assertion, McIlwain builds on much recent scholarship, especially Noe's *Reluctant Rebels*, to suggest that loyalty to the Confederacy did not run deep and often evaporated after continued exposure to the flames of war.[2] Election results become untrustworthy against a backdrop of voter suppression and intimidation, and it is extremely difficult to accurately account for the large number of deserters and Unionists "lying out" to avoid Confederate conscription agents.

Interestingly, McIlwain's account of a secessionist conspiracy places neo-Confederates especially and conservatives generally on opposite sides of a debate. If excessive government power is to be feared, then no better example can be found than the efforts of a few self-interested attorneys, slave-owners, and politicians who foisted four years of death and destruction on their state, all in a futile attempt to preserve their own selfish ends. Indeed, the work calls into question the wisdom of deferring to practitioners of the legal profession in political affairs at all, given how deeply involved they were in the fomenting of rebellion and in justifying their extralegal attempts to crush any internal resistance to it in Alabama during the war. Sadly, this class's action in "redeeming" their state escapes coverage in McIlwain's work, but one suspects their actions during Reconstruction would not substantially enhance their legacy.

Little of what McIlwain has uncovered will surprise dedicated historians of the conflict within the state, but he still deserves much credit for weaving together a century's worth of scholarship into a readable narrative that fleshes out current interpretations and hopefully serves as a corrective to dedicated defenders of Confederate imagery and the myths perpetuated by such groups as the United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Sons of Confederate Veterans, among nefarious others. Exhaustively researched, skillfully compiled, and engagingly written, McIlwain's impressive volume is a service to scholars searching for greater detail and support for their own work, as well as Alabamians hoping to understand exactly how their state could fall into the grip of destructive demagogues and ruinous rebellion.

Notes

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