H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Clyde A. Milner II, Brian Q. Cannon, eds. *Reconstruction and Mormon America.* Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2019. 270 pp. $34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8061-6353-6.

Reviewed by Adam Petty (The Joseph Smith Papers)

Published on H-CivWar (August, 2020)

Commissioned by G. David Schieffler (Crowder College)

Reconstruction and Mormon America is a collection of nine essays that originated in a June 2017 seminar hosted by the Charles Redd Center for Western Studies at Brigham Young University. The main object of the volume is to examine how Reconstruction applied to Latter-day Saints in Utah while comparing their experience with that of southerners and American Indians. At the core of this book lies the idea of "Greater Reconstruction" as articulated by Elliott West in the volume's introduction.[1] This approach not only expands the chronology of Reconstruction, which by West's reckoning began in the 1840s and ended around 1877, but also enlarges the geographic scope of Reconstruction by including the entire United States, especially the American West. The book is organized into three sections, each of which features a short introduction followed by three essays.

The first section, which is a grab bag of sorts, features essays by Angela Hudson, Christine Talbot, and Patrick Mason. Hudson's essay contrasts Latter-day Saint expulsions with those suffered by American Indians and concludes that any similarities between the two are largely superficial. Although the Saints were repeatedly driven from their homes, she argues that the trauma they experienced paled in comparison to the social death suffered by natives who were driven from ancestral lands. She also contends that the Saints' colonizing activities made them complicit in the dispossession of various Indian tribes and that federal Indian policies should not be considered part of a Greater Reconstruction. Talbot's essay then shifts the section's focus to the rhetoric surrounding anti-polygamy literature. Comparing it to anti-slavery writings, she found that both polygamy and slavery were attacked as antiquated, patriarchal social structures that threatened the emerging, democratic companionate marriage based on consent and affection rather than compulsion and power. Mason's essay applies Max Weber's idea of a state monopoly on violence to the conflict between the national government and the Latter-day Saints. He argues that the term "Reconstruction" should not be applied to the antebellum conflict between the Saints and the federal government. Instead, he suggests either applying it to the postbellum federal campaign to eradicate polygamy or limiting its use to after 1890 by which time the Saints had announced their intention to abandon any claim to sovereignty—including the right to use violence—and their practice of polygamy.

The book's second section contains essays by Brent Rogers, Brett Dowdle, and Rachel St. John. Of the book's three sections, this one most directly addresses the Latter-day Saint experience with Greater Reconstruction. Rogers's essay outlines

federal efforts to reconstruct the Latter-day Saints and is particularly useful for those who are looking for a short summary of the national government's extended campaign to eradicate polygamy and to exert sovereignty in Utah. The federal effort to reconstruct Utah, concludes Rogers, was one of the most successful applications of the national government's power during the era of Greater Reconstruction. Dowdle's essay complements Rogers's work by comparing Reconstruction in Utah with the experiences of southerners as well as Indians, Catholics, and the Chinese in the West. He contends that the federal government used military, economic, educational, and legislative means to reform these various groups so that they could be assimilated into the white Protestant mainstream of America. Dowdle's comparative approach provides useful context in which to place the Saints' experience and argues for the viability of Greater Reconstruction as a historical framework. In contrast to Rogers and Dowdle, St. John argues that Reconstruction should be confined to the American South. In particular, she contends that applying the term to western events lacks historical grounding and can lead to anachronisms. She also argues that Reconstruction is not a good word to describe what happened outside of the South and that the term could force disparate events into a southern framework. Finally, she expresses her concern that the motivation for promoting Greater Reconstruction was the desire to incorporate the West into the larger national narrative, or, in other words, an eastern framework.

The last section of the book has essays by Clyde Milner, Eric Eliason, and Jared Farmer, which attempt to explain why the Latter-day Saints never developed a "Lost Cause" in the same way that white southerners did. Milner emphasizes that the Saints in Utah focused their collective memory on their pioneer experience, as the continued celebration of Pioneer Day (July 24) in Utah suggests, rather than on federal oppression. Eliason, in turn, suggests a whole slew of potential reasons. For example, Latter-day Saints did not recognize that any cause was actually lost, there were cultural distinctions between southerners and Latter-day Saints, the Saints had a weak martial culture, and they had different priorities in the twenty-first century than they did in the nineteenth. Farmer's essay points out, among other things, that the Saints were trying to enter the American mainstream and gain statehood for Utah, which would have made the nurturing of a lost cause counterproductive.

Like any edited collection, the strength of this volume is that it brings together such a wide range of scholars, each bringing their own expertise and approach to the book's topic. Together these essays create an eclectic work that should appeal to scholars interested in Latter-day Saint history, southern Reconstruction, Greater Reconstruction, or Civil War memory. This volume also points to potentially fruitful avenues for further research. The sharp disagreement found in the book's second section over whether or not the term "Reconstruction" should be applied to Utah in particular and the West in general points to the need for additional research on this topic. How did nineteenth-century Americans define Reconstruction in the 1860s, 1870s, and 1880s? Did its meaning shift over time? Was it applied to federal activities in both the South and the West? Furthermore, an exhaustive study of federal efforts to reconstruct or Americanize the Latter-day Saints would be a welcome addition to the literature that could potentially help resolve some of these lingering questions about the nature and scope of Reconstruction.

Note

[1]. West explains his idea of the "Greater Reconstruction" in Elliott West, ***The Last Indian War: The Nez Perce Story*** (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); and Elliott West, "Reconstructing Race," ***The Western Historical Quarterly*** 34 (Spring 2003): 6-26.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-civwar

Citation: Adam Petty. Review of Milner II, Clyde A.; Cannon, Brian Q., eds, ***Reconstruction and Mormon America.*** H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. August, 2020.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=54371