

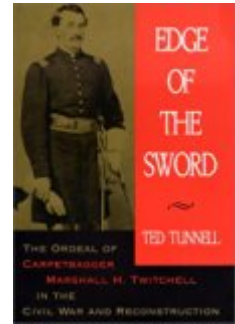
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Ted Tunnell. *Edge of the Sword: The Ordeal of Carpetbagger Marshall H. Twitchell in the Civil War and Reconstruction*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000. xvi + 326 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-2659-2.

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The word “Carpetbagger” once evoked—and, in too many minds, still evokes—images of anti-slavery northerners descending upon the post-Civil War South to wreak havoc and to profit from the travails of a proud region. However, thanks to recent historical writing, the picture has grown much clearer. While the Reconstruction historiography of the last four decades has gradually rehabilitated the Radical Republicans, and “carpetbagger” retains some of its old status of insult and derision, most historians agree that the northerners who moved south after the Civil War may have sought profit, but they also fit into a tradition of nineteenth-century American reformers, fighting in the South for civil rights and a better political and educational system.

One of these emigrants, Vermonter Marshall H. Twitchell, fit the old image of the fiscally minded Yankee seeking wealth, but also the more recent appreciation of the Carpetbaggers’ moral and political commitment. Ted Tunnell found Twitchell in the course of his research on Louisiana during Reconstruction, and later edited his autobiography. Now Tunnell has written a full-fledged biography of Twitchell, but that understates this book’s value. It is a piercing study of a time and place, a textbook example of how to write the biography of someone other than a “great man,” and a literary tour de force.

Tunnell traces Twitchell’s life from his upbringing in Vermont to his service in the Civil War. Tunnell captures the alternating tedium and excitement of the Civil War soldier, and delves into personal in-fighting, the raising of black regiments, and medical treatment—how these affected Twitchell, and how they affected soldiers in general. He also examines Twitchell’s work as the

first Freedmen’s Bureau agent in Sparta, Louisiana. The job proved impossible. Twitchell had to deal with the hopes of freedmen and the demands of white southerners, who distrusted him from the outset—just as he distrusted some of those with whom he worked, from officers to schoolteachers.

Most of the book deals with Twitchell’s role in Reconstruction. He held no federal office, but served in the legislature, held political posts in Red River Parish, and invested in land. Yet, Twitchell was hardly an obscure figure in Louisiana. He abandoned his support for Governor Henry Warmoth when Warmoth joined in the Liberal Republican revolt of 1872. Tunnell backed Ulysses S. Grant-supporter and state senator William Kellogg, whom Democrats charged with usurpation and eventually impeached; Twitchell played a key role in the maneuvering that led to Kellogg’s acquittal. However, neither he nor Kellogg could stop the violence inflicted upon Louisiana freedpeople, and Twitchell became a victim in his own right: after his wife died of tuberculosis and several family members died violently (of nine Twitchells who lived in Louisiana, only he and his mother survived), Twitchell fell victim to a would-be assassin, losing both of his arms. He left Louisiana, finding satisfaction and some degree of happiness as an American consul in Canada, remarrying and raising a family.

To summarize Twitchell’s story in this space is difficult because there is so much to tell. Tunnell has the space, though, and takes full advantage of it. As he explains, Twitchell’s autobiography is spotty and disorganized, but a careful examination demonstrated that the facts were largely accurate. Tunnell builds on this foun-

dition to take in the sweep of the Civil War and Reconstruction. Thus, while this is very much a biography of Marshall Twitchell, this book is much broader than that limitation suggests. Indeed, Twitchell's presence proves not limiting, but liberating. Tunnell never hesitates to digress onto related subjects, from health issues to anti-Semitism, tying these threads back to the man at the center of the book. The beauty of this work is that the reader never feels that the author has jumped off the track; rather, it all somehow seems related, and Tunnell is confident enough in his sources and his writing to hold the story together.

Indeed, the only question may be whether Twitchell's story is fascinating or Tunnell has made it fascinating by telling it brilliantly. The answer is, both. The book begins with a quotation from the Book of Job, from which the title is taken. Throughout the pages, Tunnell makes clear why he chose the quote, yet the book proves not sorrowful but inspirational and illuminating. "The notion of carpetbaggers as unprincipled scoundrels, one and all, is as dated as the 'darkie' images in *Gone With the Wind*. It is time that our entire culture, not solely academic historians, looks at men like Twitchell and knows them by their deeds" (p. 7). Ted Tunnell's *Edge of the Sword* is a long and eloquent step in the right direction.

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