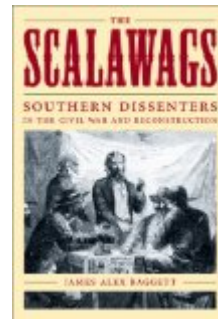


James Alex Baggett. *The Scalawags: Southern Dissenters in the Civil War and Reconstruction.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003. xvi + 323 pp. \$55.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8071-2798-8.



Reviewed by Hyman S. Rubin

Published on H-NC (November, 2007)

James Alex Baggett's purpose in *The Scalawags: Southern Dissenters in the Civil War and Reconstruction* is to answer one of the most difficult questions historians have asked about the Reconstruction era: why did some white southerners after the Civil War join African Americans and northerners in the Republican Party (thus becoming "scalawags" to their white Democrat neighbors), while most did not?

Of course historians have asked other important questions about these "southern dissenters" as well: how many scalawags were there? How important were they to Reconstruction's prospects? What did they accomplish? What persecution did they face? How honorable were they? How well did they cooperate with northerners and blacks? What became of them after Reconstruction? Baggett acknowledges these questions and provides partial answers for them, but they are clearly not his focus; this is a book about the choice to become a scalawag. Baggett describes his book as "an analysis of scalawag origins" (p. 7); he considers its "most important" result to be a demonstration of "why individuals

joined the party and became Republican leaders despite bitter opposition by most whites" (p. 13). While his single-minded focus renders the book's broad title a bit misleading, it also allows Baggett to achieve a remarkable success. To a degree unlikely to be surpassed, he has isolated the factors that made some white southerners do what others considered unthinkable: join the party of Lincoln.

Baggett's well-conceived method of isolating the variables leading to Republicanism begins with the creation of "a well-defined universe" of data: all white southern officeholders in formerly Confederate areas from 1863-1880. Baggett includes only the following officeholders: "governors, congressmen, state supreme court and circuit court judges, heads of state executive departments," "candidates for one of these offices," or federal "internal revenue collectors, customs collectors, or United States judges, attorneys, and marshals." Those who were white, southern, and Republican he counts as scalawags. He excludes about 20 percent of these officials because of insufficient information, leaving 742 scalawags in

his sample. The 666 Democrat officeholders Baggett counts as "redeemers" (pp. 7, 10).

Having established his universe of data, Baggett compares the redeemers to the scalawags in terms of prewar wealth, slaveholdings, educational level, vocation, office-holding, party affiliation, and stand on secession. He also compares their wartime activities, including Confederate or Union military service. Observing the diversity of his findings across the South, Baggett subdivides the former Confederacy into Upper South, Southeast, and Southwest. (Fortunately his quantitative analysis preserves state-by-state data as well as regional totals; these are summed up in six tables in the appendix.) All in all, he finds the redeemers and scalawags quite comparable in most categories, even if redeemers had a bit more wealth and education. The major difference, he finds, is that scalawags were significantly cooler to secession and the Confederacy than were redeemers (p. 262).

While his use of a specific set of scalawags is sound, it has drawbacks. For one thing, by definition his scalawags were officeholders; this leads to a focus on elite scalawags, not the rank and file. Baggett acknowledges the elite bias of his sample. Another problem is the lack of an appendix listing the scalawags who were part of the sample. Baggett makes mention of some individuals who were not scalawags in ways that might lead to reader confusion. Finally, readers will assuredly be confused at times about whether Baggett's reference to "scalawags" is intended to mean all scalawags or his chosen sample. Sometimes, because of the numbers involved, it obviously means the former: "Most north Alabama scalawags associated with the peace movement: some journeyed to Union-occupied Middle Tennessee, and more than 2,500 joined the United States Army" (p. 263). Sometimes it clearly means the latter, as when we learn of the scalawags that "most were lawyers" (p. 261). But sometimes it is ambiguous: "Whatever their political party alle-

giance in 1860, future scalawags overwhelmingly opposed secession, even after Lincoln's election in November" (p. 42). Despite these issues, Baggett's quantitative analysis will be of great interest to Reconstruction scholars.

Not content to crunch numbers, Baggett also fleshes out the origins of each southern state's Republican Party with more traditional (but hardly less impressive) archival research. Baggett has found the key personalities among each state's scalawag element, and he demonstrates the individual and local circumstances leading to the founding of state parties. He understands that southerners did not take calculators into the polling place; they made decisions about politics on the basis of family, friendship, and community ties. Like other scholars, Baggett finds family networks and like-minded communities essential to the creation of white Republicans. In addition, he finds influential individuals (like Lewis E. Parsons of Alabama, William H. Holden of North Carolina, William G. Brownlow of Tennessee, and Ossian B. Hart of Florida) who attracted whites to the Republican Party by virtue of their personal popularity. These like-minded communities and influential individuals were almost always those who had had a long record of Unionism.

The conclusion Baggett draws from all this is that prewar and wartime Unionism were the keys to postwar Republicanism; as he envisions it, the farther a southerner moved along a spectrum of pro-Union positions between 1860 and 1865, the more likely that southerner became a Republican in 1867 and 1868. Baggett presents the spectrum thus: "an 1860 antisecessionist Breckinridge supporter/1860 Bell or Douglas supporter/1860 antisecessionist passive wartime unionist/peace party advocate/active wartime unionist/postwar Union party supporter" (p. 271).

Baggett does not go much beyond 1868; in fact, the eighth of ten chapters is titled "Birth of a Party." (Most of the book discusses the years from 1860 to 1866; only chapter 9 discusses Congress-

sional Reconstruction at any length.) Nevertheless, his findings have three important implications for Reconstruction's prospects, and none of them leads to much optimism about what might have been. First of all, his conclusion might be restated thus: Republicanism was the most extreme expression of Unionism. If so—if scalawags were indeed the "Radicals" their opponents said they were—then it stands to reason that they could only have comprised a minority of white southerners. (Based on Baggett's widely scattered references to numbers, some 20 percent of white southerners may have flirted with Republicanism in the early stages of Reconstruction; see pp. 126, 129, 144, 146, 186, 191, 199, 200, 208, 219, 227, 249, 267.)

The second implication of the statement that Republicanism was the most extreme expression of Unionism is this: southern Republicanism came with an expiration date. Baggett's scalawags are rarely shown as crusaders for equal rights, or even for economic modernization. They are not motivated by the new issues of the postwar era, but rather by the old issue of the Union. While devotion to the Union was a powerful force in the lives of many white southerners, when translated into politics it amounted to a strong position on an issue that had just been definitively settled. By 1866 it was clear that the Confederacy was dead and the Union had been preserved. While Unionists might vote to avenge themselves against secessionists in 1868, they would have new problems and would be focused on new issues by 1878 or 1888. Indeed, in many states Baggett finds few converts to Republicanism after 1868 (see for example pp. 238, 248, and 257).

Finally, Baggett convincingly shows, through anecdote and through data, how distinct the Republican parties in different southern states were. In some states most Republicans were white, while in other states most were black. In some states the top party positions were held by northern migrants, while in others native southerners ran the party. In some states moderates dominat-

ed, while in others more radical leadership prevailed. But there was one constant: by 1900 all the Republican parties in the South were defeated and irrelevant. It would have been interesting had Baggett speculated on how the Republicans could have succeeded in the South, but such a question is far from his interests here.

Baggett sets three tasks for himself in *The Scalawags*, and he accomplishes all three extremely well: he identifies as much as is possible the factors leading one southerner to become a scalawag while another became a Democrat; he explains in great detail the local variations among scalawags and the Republican parties to which they belonged; and he provides a fair and reasonable basis for statistical comparisons between Republican and Democratic officeholders in the Reconstruction era. While many readers will wish he had taken on other questions as well, it is hardly a scathing criticism to say that Baggett leaves Reconstruction scholars wanting more.

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

Citation: Hyman S. Rubin. Review of Baggett, James Alex. *The Scalawags: Southern Dissenters in the Civil War and Reconstruction*. H-NC, H-Net Reviews. November, 2007.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13866>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.