

Mark Wahlgren Summers. *The Ordeal of the Reunion: A New History of Reconstruction.* Littlefield History of the Civil War Era Series. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014. 528 pp. \$40.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4696-1757-2.



Reviewed by Elaine Frantz Parsons

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Commissioned by Michael J. Pfeifer (John Jay College of Criminal Justice, City University of New York)

Mark Wahlgren Summers's rich and careful new history of Reconstruction stands out in a crowded field. This scrupulously researched book challenges conventional understandings of the period with the claim that while we consider racial justice the central challenge of the postwar period, many contemporaries did not. For most northern whites, the goal of addressing the oppression of freedpeople was not paramount: many focused on the secure restoration of their prewar government and on private ends like profit. They were therefore reluctant to use the resources and the new capacities of the state to support freedpeople in exercising their citizenship. Where the goal of protecting freedpeople from white violence conflicted with other economic and political goals, northerners might fret and scramble to find compromise solutions, but inevitably were tugged toward the latter.

The political value that most often stood in the way of meaningfully supporting freedpeople was postwar Americans' urgent desire to contain the state capacities and majoritarian coercion that

had developed during wartime, and to restore the nation to its antebellum condition. "Many northerners felt considerably alarmed about the way that executive decree and military law, mob violence and patriotic cant, had unbalanced the system as they had known it till now.... There could be no long transition period, in which the South was held outside of normal political processes" (p. 17). Many postwar Americans thought it urgent that war powers be yielded quickly and thoroughly, even at the cost of freedpeople's rights. This book, for that reason, should be read alongside Gregory Downs's *After Appomattox: Military Occupation and the Ends of War* (2015), which shows how many national leaders held on to their war powers in hopes of achieving the war aim of racial justice. The two books are not incompatible with one another, but rather a matched set: each organizes itself around and develops one of two competing visions of postwar state power.

Summers concedes that, despite widespread anxiety about state power, the war also "had taught how effective government power could be"

in ways that tempted would-be reformers (p. 228). Southern Reconstruction would be a forum for some of this energy. Yet there were many less controversial competing outlets for state capacity. Postbellum federal and state governments began to make decisions and develop institutions that monitored and shaped the day-to-day lives of citizens. The federal government professionalized the census, dramatically expanded the scope of the postal service, and took on the task of regulating voting not only in the South but also throughout the nation. State governments set up insurance bureaus, bureaus of weight and measure, boards of health, and boards of charity, and set to work improving public morals with federal and state Comstock laws and state liquor laws.

Even as the war ended, the federal government was actively forcing Native American groups off western lands and opening them to white settlement; this fundamentally changed the landscape of Reconstruction in the South. As much as southerners complained of swarms of carpetbaggers, northerners never settled on southern land in the critical mass that could have made a sustained political difference. Cheap western land simply outcompeted cheap southern land. And as these western settlers demanded soldiers to protect them from displaced Native Americans, Washington heard their voices more clearly than those of southern freedpeople demanding the same soldiers for their protection. The government invested its resources more generously on a promising West than a suffering South. As Summers tellingly points out, “the government spent four times as much per person on those in the Mountain West as it did those in the South Atlantic States in 1870” (p. 191). And such was the national focus that events in the West came to shape responses to the situation in the South: when the opportunities of the West spawned massive corruption, and then public outrage at this corruption, the anticorruption forces turned on

southern Republican legislatures along with crooked western contractors.

This book distinguishes itself through its methodology, style, and craftsmanship. Summers is well known for his precision. Incredibly prolific as well, he already has several serious monographs under his belt, most of which support his work on this synthesis. He has a mind unusually capable of integrating a vast body of material into a single account, and is committed to the telling detail, so that his treatment is much denser, and includes many more argumentative threads, than most.

Summers takes a strikingly skeptical view of his subjects. His political leaders are all-too-human. Most historians write the history of this period in a tragic mode: black southerners fighting for freedom make great strides, but are defeated, or almost defeated, by the cruelty of their circumstance. The still-young nation itself is almost, but not quite, able to excise the racial oppression that has long been its cancer. A group of northern radicals with a passion for the project of racial justice give it all they have, but are defeated by the cupidity of others. But Summers does not allow us to imagine that a more moral order was ever as close as all that. It is misleading to say that this is a comic treatment of the Reconstruction period: Summers deeply feels the horrors and sufferings that followed the war. But his second life as an accomplished cartoonist is not irrelevant here: he has an eye for the grotesque elements of each historical figure’s personality. He refuses to find a hero to leave unscathed. He gives short shrift to the idealists, preferring to focus on their more pragmatic contemporaries.

This is a political and social history written at a moment of the hegemony of cultural history, which takes seriously the institutions and mechanisms through which decisions must flow. And it insists on the individual situations of decision makers and the contingency of local decisions and actions upon local conditions: power in Sum-

mers's Reconstruction is driven by small pragmatic decisions rather than by uncompromising ideas or some overarching national project. Discussing a policy decision made by a politician, Summers carefully places it in the context of competing pressures and policies that this politician was juggling. While many histories tell local stories to exemplify larger cultural forces, Summers does so to distinguish the workings of a political process in one location from its workings in another. This commitment to personal and local social and political dynamics is an important corrective to recent work. As far back as the Dunning school, which found in Reconstruction a perfect expression of the white racial spirit, writing about Reconstruction has had a particular tendency to pull even the most sophisticated historians toward the teleological. It makes sense to us to think of Americans (with some notable exceptions) as fundamentally sharing a "goal of reconstruction," though they inevitably fell short of their commitments. Summers stubbornly refuses to so simplify the national public, insisting that the diversity of issues facing the postwar nation and the messy power of the personal, the local, and the contingent were not distractions from one true national purpose, but were themselves equally important in driving historical change.

The book has its weaknesses. Because it emphasizes the localized, personalized, and contingent, it lacks the powerful and satisfying narrative arc that makes some books such a pleasure to read. Many historians sacrifice specific distinction and detail to their larger argument, giving the reader the feeling of swooping over the terrain; Summers takes his reader on a sweaty and rigorous hike, stopping frequently to draw their attention to wildflowers and scat, and insisting that they climb into the crevices and up the rocky hills. This is a story of Reconstruction that includes, along with the expected, gun rights, Married Women's Property Laws, anti-Catholic legislation, Jay Cook, the Fenian Invasions, and cattle ticks. And while there is something wonderful about

Summers's intensive use of older historiography (the average date of the books in the bibliography must be in the 1980s), I would like to have seen the book engage more directly with the cultural historians whose interpretations he is competing with.

Anyone serious about studying the history of Reconstruction will be richly rewarded when they take the time to slowly and carefully read this slow and careful book. Summers's mastery of the sources has allowed him to write an impressively thorough history of the period, and to pull together diverse strains with uncommon sophistication.

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