My first introduction to the American Civil War and Reconstruction was through a novel. Growing up, I read and reread Irene Hunt’s 1964 Newberry Award-winning *Across Five Aprils*, which follows young Jethro Creighton as he comes of age during the war years. Later I learned much more about young people and the war from James Marten’s path-breaking monograph, *The Children’s Civil War* (1998). Both the novel and the monograph share a commonality: the focus is on the war itself, with Reconstruction either wholly absent or viewed from many years later as historic memory. Both represent a broader trend in the literature, both fictional and historiographical. We know much about young people in wars themselves, but we know far less about what happened to children and youth in the years immediately following conflicts. Hence, Catherine A. Jones’s *Intimate Reconstructions* is a most welcome addition, not only to the history of children and youth, but also to the broader story of Reconstruction itself.

Like Irene Hunt, Jones sets her story in a state so divided that part of it seceded and joined the Union in 1863. That secession from secession does not play a role in Jones’s story. Instead, her narrative is confined mostly to the tidewater and mostly to the families, white and black, who lived out there lives in Virginia’s plantation slavery regions. Focusing on this area and these social groups produces fruitful results, allowing Jones to show the centrality of children in the postwar world. “Children,” she argues, “were at the heart of disputes over how emancipation and defeat would reshape the constellation of household relationships formerly anchored by slavery” (p. 2). Emancipation opened new vistas for African American children as black families struggled to control the terms of their labor and gain a foothold on freedom. Conversely, defeat shaped the lives of white children and their families, as young people became a bellwether for what it meant to live without slavery. For agents from the North, especially the Freedmen’s Bureau, children defined the model of a modern, liberal domestic regime that reformers hoped to deploy in place of the plantation household. As a result, “children shaped the course of Virginia’s Reconstruction through direct action and their potency as cultural symbols” (p. 8). Jones does not limit this narrative arc to the household, however. In the book’s most valuable contribution, she links the private history of family reconstruction to the narrative of political Reconstruction that reached its climax in Virginia in the struggle over public schools during the Readjuster movement. The public school controversy both shows “how children had become the foundation for imagining a compelling public interest that bridged divisions in the state” and highlights “their importance in contesting the boundary between public and private responsibilities” (p. 13).

The book opens with a treatment of children during and immediately after the war, outlining wartime dislocation, injury, and privation. The war itself, Jones demonstrates, blurred the boundaries between the public and private realms, a dynamic that continued during Reconstruction. The wartime story also prefigured ques-
tions about the labor capacity of black children and the

disputes that erupted over control of that labor in the

postwar period. These themes continue in separate treat-
ments of black and white children in subsequent chap-

ters. Drawing on limited sources, Jones paints a vivid pic-
ture of freed households and the young people in them

as freedpeople sought to reconstitute families sundered

by slavery and war. She stresses that kinship was the

linchpin of these movements. While African American

families struggled to control the labor of young people,

planter families also found domestic labor arrangements

disrupted by emancipation. “The destruction of slavery,

along with the war that hastened it, precipitated changes

in the domestic order of white families that recast rela-
tionships between parents and children,” Jones argues (p.

76). In working out how to deal with wartime death, the

loss of labor, and the decline of privilege itself, planter

families also relied on kinship networks.

Leaving the intimate realm, Jones devotes two chap-
ters to “public children” and “Confederate orphans.” In

these sections, she does an excellent job of showing how

children became a guiding light in policy decisions that

shaped the whole of public action and discourse. Such

was the case because “children’s dependency created a

strong imperative for federal and local authorities to en-
sure that public children were subject to household gov-

erance, whether voluntarily or through coercion” (p.

104). Jones sees the long struggle over bound appren-
ticeship in this light, deepening our understanding of that

oft-told story. For white children, war orphans provided

the vehicle for creating an essential part of what would

become the Lost Cause. “Confederate orphans, like fallen

soldiers, became important figures around which inter-

pretations of the past and visions of the future coalesced,”

Jones writes (p. 133). Investigating closely three local in-
stitutions devoted to orphans, she carefully traces how

local authorities created the “Confederate” orphan as a

figure in public discourse, a move that linked orphan sta-

tus to emerging postwar racial ideologies. While actual

practice in orphanages did not live up to the inflamed

rhetoric of fundraising campaigns, the image left by those

racialized appeals remained.

Those familiar with the history of Virginia in the

postwar period will also be familiar with the last part

of Jones’s story, the Readjuster movement. Focused on

the question of paying the state debt, this political con-
troversy became interwoven with the public school sys-

tem that had been established in the state during Recon-

struction. Jones rightly understands the coming of public

schools as something less than a radical reconstruction of

society, noting that school advocates often openly sold

the system as a mechanism of social control. Nonethe-

less, she concludes, the schools “constituted an impor-
tant development in postemancipation understandings of

citizenship. Within the span of a decade, public schools

had become sufficiently naturalized as an obligation of

the state that anger over efforts to starve them helped to

drive Virginians to create new political coalitions that cut

across racial and geographic divisions” (p. 159). Indeed,

African American families seized on public schools as

primary means to define and defend freedom. In general,

Jones argues, Virginia families “largely welcomed public

schools as institutions that advanced their aspirations for

the future” (p. 181). This apparent public consensus helps

to explain the strength of the Readjuster movement and

the denouement of Reconstruction in the state.

A monograph of this nature has limitations, some im-

posed by the nature of the subject, some by the author.

Jones readily acknowledges that the book is primarily

about black and white children in the plantation districts.

While such a focus is understandable, it does leave open

the question of whether the book’s generalizations apply

to other parts of the state or to the South more broadly,
especially in that part of the state that was no longer part

of Virginia. One could imagine that children in Unionist

households in West Virginia (or Virginia proper) experi-

enced “defeat” differently. Likewise, although Jones ar-

gues that Virginia is the perfect place to study children,

the war, and Reconstruction, it could be argued that a

place so ravaged by the war was too unlike much of the

South. Similarly, slavery in Virginia had evolved consid-

erably in the decades before the war, a fact that Jones

does outline early on. Still, it would seem that house-

holds in the region were already undergoing change be-

fore the war, emancipation, and Reconstruction sped up

the process.

These are minor issues. A perhaps more significant

matter is the fact that Jones consistently speaks only of

“children” throughout the book. Collapsing the experi-

ences of young people into one category does yield in-
sights. Indeed, Jones strongly declares that “conceiving

of childhood as the absence of autonomy and adulthood

as its fulfillment obscures the reality that interdepen-
dence, rather than dependency, is a permanent dimen-
sion of human experience” (p. 191). This sweeping state-
mament is a powerful admonition, one that all historians

should consider. This noted, most historians of child-

hood or children usually add “and youth” to the cate-

gory. In a book that covers more than fifteen years, many

young people who started as toddlers would have been
teenagers by the end and those who started as teenagers would have been approaching middle age. Missing from Jones’s treatment are the experiences of young people as they move through different life stages. While this lacuna does not detract from her argument, some attention to it might have deepened the analysis.

These points aside, *Intimate Reconstructions* gives a rich portrait of the lives of children in postwar Virginia. The links Jones outlines between public and private life add much to what we know about how the social and political changes of the period depended on one another.

Her story lets us see how the experiences of white and black children were separate yet closely connected. The book’s careful narrative of public schools in the state is highly valuable in its own right as a significant addition to the history of education. Like the best of social and cultural history, Jones’s work shows us that the public depends on the private and that all reconstructions are intimate.

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