

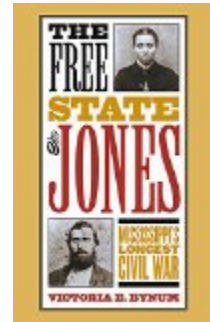
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Victoria E. Bynum. *The Free State of Jones: Mississippi's Longest Civil War*. The Fred W. Morrison Series in Southern Studies. Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2001. xvi + 316 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2636-2; \$22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-5467-9.

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Not Just Another Race, Class, and Gender Book

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Victoria Bynum has done an impressive job of research that goes a long way toward explaining how race, class, and gender affected, and were affected by, the development of social customs in the South. She uses as her central focus the Free State of Jones, formed by the infamous secession of a northern Mississippi county from the Confederacy, and investigates why the participants were so willing to flout authority during the Civil War. She ends by analyzing a trial in 1948 that decided whether one of the descendants of the leader of the Free State of Jones was legally white. Throughout the book, the depth of research is astounding.

In part 1, Bynum looks into the ancestry of the people of northern Mississippi and finds that their forebears during colonial and Revolutionary times were just as resistant to central authority as any fire-eater. Most northern Mississippi families came from South Carolina, but their parents had lived in North Carolina and taken part in many small-scale rebellions. These colonists were part of the Regulator movement that resisted the concentration of power into the hands of a few wealthy landowners. The eventual settlers of northern Mississippi were also part of the more independent Baptist sects that resisted central power in a church hierarchy, and many also resisted the peer pressure to own slaves. Bynum makes it clear that resistance during the Civil War was nothing new for these families.

Bynum traces the settlement patterns of these families as they moved into Georgia and Alabama before finally putting down roots in Mississippi. This westward mobility was not unusual, of course, but Bynum shows that the types of land that people moved onto can serve as a clear indicator of their later political views. Families who settled on rich river bottoms tended to become wealthy slaveowners, while families and parts of families who stayed, by choice, in the less fertile hills tended not to own slaves, though some did garner considerable wealth. The plantation owners in any extended family were the strongest supporters of the Confederacy, while the backwoods subsistence farmers were more skeptical of any authority.

Religion also played a part in the division of family groups into those who defended the Confederacy and those who wanted no part of it. Most residents of northern Mississippi were Baptists, but the Baptist church itself was anything but unified. Post-Great Awakening exhorters clashed with more modern missionary congregations. Bynum shows which families belonged to the different styles of Baptist church and then demonstrates that individuals who were members of independent churches were more rebellious toward authority than those who supported the unification of all congregations into one hierarchy. Bynum also traces the experiences of family members who were chastised by their church—a serious social discipline. Not surprisingly, long-time members gave less trouble politically

than those who were often censured by their congregations.

The second part of *The Free State of Jones* deals with the Civil War, Reconstruction, and the twentieth century. It was during the Civil War that some families of the county of Jones in northern Mississippi, led by Newt Knight, declared themselves independent of the Confederacy and proclaimed the Free State of Jones. To frame her arguments, Bynum uses the device of contrasting two novels published about this event. *Tap Roots*, by James Street, was published in 1943 and ignited arguments over what really happened in Jones County. One of Knight's descendants, Ethel Knight, counterpublished *Echo of the Black Horn* in 1953, a novel reeking with Lost Cause overtones, just in time for Massive Resistance to the Civil Rights movement.

Bynum uses these two novels to pose the question, "Who owns history?" Each side claimed their version of events as the truth. Was Newt Knight a good man who resisted serving in the Confederacy because he believed it was a rich man's war and a poor man's fight? Or was he an evil, power-hungry man who used the anarchy of the war to aggrandize himself? Bynum uses the usual scholarly sources to find out what really happened, but she also pays heed to current versions of the past to analyze the effect of those events on modern Southerners. The fact that Newt Knight had a long-standing relationship and several children with Rachel Knight, a mulatto woman and former slave, brought the race issue to the forefront of many arguments. The fact that Rachel was a strong woman who took responsibility for her own life in difficult circumstances made gender a definite factor in

what people wanted to believe, during the war and later.

All of these facts and factors came together in the miscegenation trial of Davis Knight, the great-grandson of Rachel, who married a white woman in 1948. Bynum suggests that the publication of *Tap Roots* in 1943 renewed awareness of Newt Knight and his offspring, and so Davis's marriage five years later became a matter in which townspeople felt they had a vested interest. Davis, who was probably of one-thirty-second part African descent, was found to be legally white and therefore not guilty of miscegenation. Race, class, and gender issues influenced the legal examination of his status, just as they inform Bynum's careful analysis.

Bynum brings together three turbulent times in American history—the Revolutionary Era, the Civil War and Reconstruction, and the Civil Rights movement—and shows how several extended families participated in all of these upheavals. Her variety of sources is stunning, ranging from the manuscript census to church records, county records, and oral traditions. There is enough research here for three books, but Bynum's writing is so good that readers are simply swept along by her story.

The only shortcoming, if it is such, is that Bynum does not always hammer her point home. She has a tendency to present the evidence and let the readers draw their own conclusions. This methodology could make for some interesting classroom discussions. *The Free State of Jones*, which was released in paperback earlier this year, is recommended for upper-undergraduate- and graduate-level classes in the Civil War and Reconstruction, African American History, Women's Studies, or historical methods.

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