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EXPANDING THE BOUNDARIES OF RECONSTRUCTION

Justin Behrend

Steven E. Nash. *Reconstruction's Ragged Edge: The Politics of Postwar Life in the Southern Mountains*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016. xiv + 288 pp. Maps, tables, notes, bibliography, and index. \$39.95.

Carolyn L. Karcher. *A Refugee from His Race: Albion W. Tourgée and His Fight against White Supremacy*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016. xviii + 464 pp. Halftones, notes, bibliography, and index. \$34.95.

The historiographical boundaries of Reconstruction were once clear and well accepted. For much of the twentieth century, the field, to use Bernard Weisberger's term, was a "dark and bloody ground" of starkly different interpretations.¹ William Dunning and his acolytes set the tone by declaring Reconstruction an utter failure in no small part due to the efforts of radical Republicans to treat black people similar to white people. Revisionist scholars countered by arguing that Reconstruction was, in fact, a noble effort that moved former Confederate states toward democracy. Postrevisionists, however, questioned the significance of black male voting and Republican political power since former slaveholders retained their land and former slaves continued to labor in the fields. Then, in 1988, Eric Foner published his masterful synthesis, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution*, which sustained the revisionist interpretation and subsequently dominated the field.

But since Foner, the clear lines of Reconstruction historiography have blurred. Although historians have added much to our understanding of the era, there has not been a significant challenge to Foner's interpretation. Part of the reason for the sustaining nature of Foner's work is that the freedom narrative still has a powerful grip on conceptualizations of American history. Another reason is that Foner helped to solidify the chronological scope of Reconstruction and its primary focus on politics and governance. While other syntheses of Reconstruction have been published in recent years, neither departs substantively from Foner's interpretation and each accepts a similar scope and focus.²

Despite this continuity of framing, historians are increasingly pressing the boundaries of Reconstruction, challenging the chronology, exploring different places, and calling into question the very meaning of the term "Reconstruction." The two books under review here are part of this shift away from the traditional framework of Reconstruction historiography. Steven E. Nash directs our attention to the mountain South, while Carolyn L. Karcher focuses on Albion Tourg  e's long postwar struggle against white supremacy. Neither are large departures from the existing scholarship, but both show how the most innovative work in the postbellum era seeks to expand our conceptualization of Reconstruction.

In *Reconstruction's Ragged Edge*, Steven E. Nash largely adopts the traditional periodization of Reconstruction, but he shifts focus from the Deep South to Appalachia. In so doing, he reorients our perspective away from the story of how plantation districts shed slavery and instead focuses on the legacies of war's injustices, the new politics of

biracialism, and the challenge of adapting to greater market integration. The twenty-one mountain counties in western North Carolina that form the basis for this illuminating and deeply-researched account sat on the edge of the southern economy and at the margins of national politics. But the Civil War and Reconstruction, Nash contends, shattered “the localized world” of mountaineers, ushering in a series of new power brokers and subjecting local people to regional, national, and international transformations (p. 4).

Although the number of enslaved and free black people in western North Carolina was small, the region was closely tied to slavery. Mountain farmers produced a surplus of food and sold their excess to markets in the lower south. Mountaineers also held similar racist views toward black people as other white southerners did elsewhere. The war, however, ruptured the local rhythms of these counties. It pulled military age men out of the region and in to Confederate service, but it also brought to the region Confederate officials who increasingly disrupted local people’s lives through conscription, tax-in-kind policies, and the home guard. The outbreak of guerrilla war, with some white mountaineers fighting for the Union and others deserting from Confederate service to join the Federals, further unraveled the antebellum social order. The most pointed rupture came in March 1865 when General George Stoneman led a force of federal troops into the mountain counties to weaken and destroy the region’s capacity to wage war. With the surrender of Confederate armies, the region had been transformed, resulting in a devastated agricultural economy, the liberation of enslaved people, the deaths of approximately 6,000 Confederate soldiers, and bitterly divided loyalties.

The aftermath of the Civil War, Nash asserts, is best understood in the context of a vigorous struggle over loyalty between Conservatives and anti-Confederates. After Confederate defeat, Conservatives returned to a Whiggish-infused Unionism and quickly made amends with President Johnson's conditions for reconstruction, including the abolition of slavery. But mountain Conservatives had no room for those who allied with or fought with the Union during the war. As a result, Nash contends, the "prewar political culture . . . between the wealthier mountaineers and their poorer white neighbors broke down" (p. 66). Unresolved grievances, both personal and political, from the war years prompted Conservative officeholders to lash out at local Unionists. In response, non-elite whites looked to the federal government, in particular the Freedmen's Bureau, for protection. Where the Bureau could not provide protection, white Unionists began to reorganize militias, known as "Heroes of America" or "Red Strings," to better defend themselves from those who remained loyal to the Confederacy. Meanwhile at the state level, anti-Confederates found themselves increasingly sidelined in state politics. They had hoped for a relatively swift return to the Union (and thus endorsed the Fourteenth Amendment), but Conservatives embraced a more reactionary and oppositional position. A path to power lay before them in an alliance with a newly mobilized African American population under the guise of the Republican Party.

The registration of black male voters in 1867, the subsequent election of constitutional delegates, and the constitutional convention of 1868 marked a sea change in the mountains, the state, and the nation. The key factor in these transformations, argues Nash, was the Freedmen's Bureau, which provided a space for political organizing by cracking down on Conservative harassment. But Nash is less convincing when he argues

that the “bureau brought together African Americans and white Republicans” (p. 90). While both groups had an interest in voting for Republican candidates and against Conservatives, there is little evidence of open collaboration. This seems to be due, in part, to the small number of black people in the region—the voting population was slightly more than three percent in some counties and never more than thirty percent. But it also seems to be the result of local whites who preferred black subordination and labor exploitation.

Nevertheless, the unlikely alliance of mountain blacks and whites helped carry the state for Republicans in 1868, implementing a radical constitution and democratizing county government. But from the moment that “a fairly steady Republican enclave” emerged in the western counties, Klansmen and other conservative whites besieged this new biracial alliance (p. 119). The Klan attacked economically prosperous or politically active black men in nighttime raids, but they also struck at white Republicans and others who assisted federal officials. Combined with the withdrawal of the Freedmen’s Bureau and the growing unpopularity of a federal tax on whiskey production, local support for Republicans collapsed by the early 1870s.

The last chapter in *Reconstruction’s Ragged Edge* shifts focus away from the explicitly political struggle in the western counties to the issue of economic development. This shift, on the one hand, anticipates the change in national Republican Party politics by about a decade, in which the party gave less attention to civil and political rights and instead focused on enhancing capital investments and integrating local markets into the national and international economy. On the other hand, the shift is a bit jarring in the book. The individuals and issues that were covered over the previous five chapters recede to the

background. Instead, Nash focuses on efforts to connect the region to broader markets through railroad construction, sheep farming, and mining. But it was not until the 1870s and the acceleration of tobacco cultivation that western North Carolina became fully connected to the national economy. The openings that the war and Reconstruction had provided eventually “broke down mountaineers’ resistance to external forces,” which led to the inflow of capital and industry to the region after 1880 (p. 6).

Reconstruction seemed to follow a similar path in western North Carolina as it did other southern regions. Nash points to the centrality of Republican power in fostering the conditions that gave rise to black empowerment, the establishment of public schools, and the democratization of local offices. He also notes that these gains in racial equality and working-class advancement also triggered a “massive backlash” (p. 178). Despite these similarities, there are enough divergences in the mountain South to show how the Reconstruction process does not fit within the typical boundaries. Most white mountaineers supported the Confederacy and the denigration of African Americans, yet a biracial coalition did take shape. Relatedly, the embrace of capital investments shows how the postbellum experience in southern Appalachia mirrored developments in other places across the continent. The struggle to adapt to external forces and outside powerbrokers was not merely a southern Reconstruction story.

While Nash expands the geographical boundaries of Reconstruction, Carolyn L. Karcher in *A Refugee from His Race* presses the temporal boundaries in her study of Albion Tourgée. It is not a traditional biography of the Ohio-born, white Republican judge in North Carolina, and best-selling novelist; rather, it is a sustained examination of Tourgée’s later

career and his collaboration with African American activists in the 1890s. As a result, the book is not explicitly framed as a Reconstruction history; nevertheless, Reconstruction left a deep imprint on Tourgée, inspiring him to demand racial equality in public life even as more white Americans were growing ever fonder of white supremacist thinking. Indeed, his noble, yet failed effort to undo Louisiana's railroad segregation law may mark a more definitive conclusion to Reconstruction than Rutherford B. Hayes's elevation to the presidency in 1877.

Unlike previous biographies of Albion Tourgée by Otto Olsen and Mark Elliott, Karcher does not attempt a comprehensive study of his life. Instead, she focuses on his "steadfast alliance with African Americans" in the late nineteenth century (p. xii). Thematic chapters cover Tourgée's novel *Pactolus Prime*, his newspaper column, the National Citizen's Rights Association (NCRA), the anti-lynching campaign, the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case, and a final chapter on his abandonment of activism in favor of taking a diplomatic post in France. Although weighed down by excessive examples from Tourgée's numerous writings, *A Refugee from His Race* is nonetheless an excellent study of cross-racial civil rights activism. The book's title comes from Joel Chandler Harris, the white southern author and editor who gained fame by presenting slavery as a benign institution in the Uncle Remus stories. Reviewing Tourgée's 1890 novel *Pactolus Prime*, Harris could not understand the positive portrayal of a white man who becomes black and experiences the bitterness of American racism. For Harris, Tourgée must be either "a monomaniac, or simply a refugee from his race" (p. xiii). Ironically, the novel also foreshadows a fundamental conundrum that Tourgée would face in the coming decade. His characters were trapped by widespread

racism, much as African Americans were in the 1890s, yet because white Americans were indifferent at best, he could not imagine a solution to the race problem.

African Americans praised Tourgée not just because he truly believed in racial equality but also because they believed that he could speak to and sway Northern white people. By the mid-1880s, as his career as a novelist began to falter, he shifted gears and began publishing a popular weekly column titled “A Bystander’s Notes,” for the *Chicago Daily Inter Ocean*. From 1888 to 1898, his columns called attention to attacks against black people and the growing white acceptance of black subordination. Tourgée’s answer to these problems was to badger black people into action. At times this form of patronizing militancy was expressed in calls for confrontation—sometimes violent—but at other times the shape of the needed action was never fully defined. Nevertheless, the column offered an opportunity for a national debate on race. Because he quoted from and summarized letters from ordinary black people, he put them in dialogue with other public voices and thus exposed the white public to African American views.

Tourgée’s popularity among African Americans and his strident columns helped create the National Citizens’ Rights Association. Frustrated at inaction from the Republican Party in defense of equal rights, Tourgée launched the NCRA in October 1891 and quickly added 250,000 members to an explicitly “interracial solidarity movement” (p. 150). The rapid growth of the NCRA surprised Tourgée and suggests a latent popular desire to revive the old abolitionist spirit and forcefully counter the scourge of lynchings and growing inequalities. Southern black people made up the largest share in the membership rolls, and those who wrote to Tourgée described the desperate and dangerous situations they faced

on a daily basis. But Tourgée was no organizer. He dutifully championed the NCRA in his “Bystander” columns and collected membership certificates, but he did not have the skills to transform his large membership list into an advocacy organization.

Tourgée had better luck in his anti-lynching campaign because he worked jointly with Ida B. Wells and Harry C. Smith, the editor of the *Cleveland Gazette* and an Ohio state legislator. His “new style of collaboration with African Americans,” Karcher asserts, led to his greatest achievement: the passage of Ohio’s antilynching law in 1896 (p. 198).

Tourgée’s success, Karcher explains further, came from his embrace of an African American perspective on lynching. He recognized that lynchings were just the most blatant and public of the many types of violence targeted at black people, and he asserted that African Americans should shoot back when mobs attacked. Nine states would follow Ohio’s lead in drafting anti-lynching legislation modeled after the one that Tourgée authored. But in this and other areas, Karcher tends to inflate the impact of Tourgée. While he did draft the anti-lynching bill, it was Smith who brought it to the floor of the Ohio House and championed it relentlessly in his newspaper.

Perhaps Tourgée’s most consequential collaboration was with Louis A. Martinet, a Creole-of-color, editor of the *New Orleans Crusader*, and leading member of the Citizens’ Committee that challenged the constitutionality of Louisiana’s separate rail car law. Both Martinet and Tourgée had much in common, including a strong interest in legal challenges, a disdain for career politicians, marriages strained by financial uncertainty, and an abiding passion for equal rights. They also thought carefully about how best to bring a case before the U.S. Supreme Court. But their plans, begun in 1891, did not anticipate the reactionary

turn on the Court two years later. Where they had once counted on three or four justices to be favorable to their case, by 1893, they could only count on one. As a result, they hoped to delay the case until the national mood shifted. By 1896, however, the acceptance of white supremacist ideology on the Court and among the white public showed no signs of dissipating. Sensing the impossibility of gaining a favorable ruling, Karcher argues, Tourgée crafted his brief and oral arguments not to win the case, but to appeal to “future generations” who might be better disposed to see the value of equal rights and upholding the Reconstruction amendments (p. 273). The Court ruled as expected, establishing the constitutionality of segregation; nevertheless, it was still a crushing blow. As a result, the Citizen’s Committee folded, and Tourgée succumbed to depression and decided to quit the fight. He concluded that there was no immediate or short-term hope for improving the treatment of African American citizens.

Karcher concludes by asserting that Tourgée’s collaborative alliance with African Americans deserves a more central role in late nineteenth century history. Certainly in the context of the 1890s, as Jim Crow racism spread across the south and began to infect the nation, Tourgée’s biracial activism stood out when so many other white leaders either actively supported or tolerated racial segregation. But the value of *A Refugee from his Race* is not just in its claims about the role of white progressives; rather, it shows how Reconstruction struggles persisted long into the late nineteenth century. Indeed, Tourgée’s career and influence cannot be understood apart from his direct involvement in Reconstruction and his extensive efforts to champion racial equality and biracial cooperation. Karcher’s book also offers a less celebratory lesson, one that was foreshadowed in *Pactolus Prime*. Even Tourgée, in the end, was not immune to the

poisonous ideologies of white supremacy. As U.S. consul to Bordeaux, France, he defended American imperialistic ventures and supported discriminatory policies against people of Japanese, Chinese, and Hawaiian descent. He seemed unable or unwilling at this time to recommend equality and political empowerment as he had previously done for African Americans. Indeed, his inability to extricate himself from racist assumptions highlights the deep and broad acceptance of white supremacist ideology. And it highlights the massive and decades-long challenge that advocates of Reconstruction faced as they attempted to move American society towards equality.

The difficulty in sustaining biracial political coalitions and contesting white supremacist thinking does not seem so distant in our own age of mass incarceration and resurgent white nationalism. In the midst of another reactionary turn, we might think anew about how to conceptualize Reconstruction in a way that gives greater emphasis to those struggling for equality and full citizenship. The struggles that mountaineers faced after the war and that black southerners faced at the height of the lynching era are part of a broader and deeper history that challenges conventional historiographic frameworks.

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1. Bernard A. Weisberger, "The Dark and Bloody Ground of Reconstruction Historiography," *Journal of Southern History* 25 (November 1959): 427-47.
2. Michael W. Fitzgerald, *Splendid Failure: Postwar Reconstruction in the American South* (2007); Douglas R. Egerton, *The Wars of Reconstruction: The Brief, Violent History of America's Most Progressive Era* (2014); Mark Wahlgren Summers, *The Ordeal of the Reunion: A New History of Reconstruction* (2014).