

Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Civil War South

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Review

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McCurry, Stephanie *Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Civil War South*. Harvard University Press, \$35.00 ISBN 978-0-674-04589-7

Questioning Confederate Dedication

It has been a decade and a half since the appearance of Stephanie McCurry's dazzling study of South Carolina's Lowcountry yeomanry up to 1860. Solidarity among white male heads of households was the prevailing theme of *Masters of Small Worlds* (1995) and the state's political unity during the secession crisis marked that book's natural stopping point. In its closing pages, however, came the suggestion of a more dramatic story of disunity and collapse that lay on the horizon. Perhaps with a book like *Confederate Reckoning* already in mind, McCurry noted how the creation of an independent proslavery republic would in short order obliterate "precisely those masterly prerogatives it was founded to preserve" (*Masters of Small Words*, 301).

McCurry's new account of the Confederacy's self-wrought destruction elaborates upon earlier themes, albeit with a marked shift in scale and tone. Discerning cartographies of power and the political encoding of gendered practices remain central to her analysis. But the legal and religious materials suited to a local investigation are set aside in favor of letters to and among those who, in mobilizing slave society for war, inadvertently precipitated a political no less than a social revolution. The need to marshal social and economic resources provided unexpected opportunities to those formally excluded from politics. Dramatic upheavals in the polity thus becomes the study's main theme, which are brought to life with the elemental imagery of earthquakes, storms, fires and, in the book's cover image, a sinking ship fashioned to resemble the Confederate flag.

McCurry begins her account by explicating the "Confederate project" launched in 1861 by a supremely audacious set of slaveholders. These "masters

of large worlds" (to use a phrase McCurry herself never deploys) sought to establish a polity "dedicated to the proposition that all men were not created equal" (1). These founders went beyond a simple defense of slavery so as to propagandize on behalf of bound labor, strict racial hierarchy, and (perhaps with less systematic zeal) of their system of male patriarchy. In taking their case to a global audience, Confederates like Alexander Stephens showed far more confidence than slaveholding nationalists in the earlier United States or in contemporary Brazil.

The book's middle chapters turn from the slaveholding elite to address the "female part of the Confederate governed" (217). In discussing "the politics of subsistence" and in explaining how the "soldiers' wife" became a new political category, these chapters extend arguments already set forth in a series of earlier path-breaking articles and book chapters. Incidents such as Benjamin Butler's "Woman Order" in New Orleans and the wave of urban bread riots of 1863 are spun out so as to dramatize how war worked to "widen the field of popular democratic practice" for poor white women (217). The crisis of military invasion provided white females excluded from antebellum power with leverage, which helped them to alleviate the worst of their wartime suffering. Such politicization did not have any simple long-term ramifications, however, and McCurry explicitly disavows any link between the actions of the 1860s and the postbellum politics of women's rights.

The book's final chapters address the collapse of chattel slavery, a development more easily connected to the subsequent course of Southern history. Here, McCurry cogently explains how actions undertaken by enslaved women and men in plantation settings reverberated throughout the Confederate polity, in ways that resembled the wartime crisis of slavery in the late-eighteenth-century Francophone Caribbean. Especially effective is the last chapter's discussion of the impressment of slave laborers in 1864, which forced white Confederates to confront the question of slave volition head-on. In these deliberations, white military commanders, office-holders, and editors readied themselves for those arguments over enlisting slave soldiers that roiled Confederate politics in 1864-65 and have recently been the topic of considerable scholarly discussion.

As McCurry tells it, the crisis of Confederate nationhood turned largely on questions of military mobilization and its attendant social disruption. She has little to say about the framework of providential destiny that transfixed so many

evangelical masters and slaves who found themselves caught up in forces beyond their control. White Confederates' wartime efforts to grapple with higher powers reached their fullest expression in the so-called "slavery reform" movement that a number of leading white clergy undertook so as to placate the Almighty and to stabilize Southern society from the ground up. That McCurry does not address this episode (which is covered at length in Clarence Mohr's *On the Threshold of Freedom* (1986), Eugene Genovese's *A Consuming Fire* (1998), among other works) betrays her relative disinterest in matters of faith. Given her earlier appreciation of the power of proslavery religiosity in the Carolina Lowcountry, this neglect was likely a considered choice rather than an oversight, but it is one that she might have accounted for more fully.

While *Confederate Reckoning* implicitly challenges the salience of evangelical religion during the 1860s, the book is infused with a sharply developed moral perspective on the demise of the planter class. Indeed, readers might wonder whether *Confederate Comeuppance* might have been a better title to convey the book's indignant stance towards the white South's failed nationalist venture. As one of the leading historians of nineteenth-century America, McCurry makes her readers care about how scores were settled and wrongs righted without sacrificing any analytical sharpness along the way. She thus encourages us to exercise our moral imaginations and invites a latter-day reckoning with the inescapable matters of justice and retribution borne of American's most consequential war.

Robert E. Bonner, Associate Professor at Dartmouth College, is the author of Mastering America: Southern Slaveholders and the Crisis of American Nationhood (2009) and is now at work on a new book, titled Master of Lost Causes: Alexander Stephens and the Confederate Legacy.