

Book Review

Edited by Tom Costa

Jonathan Sarris, *A Separate Civil War: Communities in Conflict in the Mountain South*, *A Nation Divided: New Studies in Civil War History*, ed. James I. Robertson Jr. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006), ISBN: 0-8139-2549-5.

Brian D. McKnight, *Contested Borderland: The Civil War in Appalachian Kentucky and Virginia* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2006), ISBN: 0-8131-2389-5.

Since the influential publication of Kenneth Noe and Shannon Wilson's edited anthology *The Civil War in Appalachia* in 1997, scholarly interest in Civil War-era Appalachia has expanded. Recent works such as Noel Fisher's *War at Every Door* (1997), W. Todd Groce's *Mountain Rebels* (2000), John Inscoe and Gordon McKinney's *The Heart of Confederate Appalachia* (2000), Martin Crawford's *Ashe County's Civil War* (2001), and Robert Tracy McKenzie's *Lincolmites and Rebels* (2006) have moved the experiences of Civil War-era Appalachia from the margins of Civil War historiography to the subject's core. These works have collectively overturned aged stereotypical depictions of wartime Appalachia as a Unionist-dominated land occupied by a reclusive population that was disconnected from matters of regional and national economics and politics. While these historians have made significant contributions to the literature, their works have focused primarily on only two Appalachian sub-regions: East Tennessee and Western North Carolina. This lack of geographic diversity raises questions concerning whether the histories of East Tennessee and Western North Carolina represented the entirety of the Civil War-era Appalachian experience.

Jonathan Sarris's *A Separate Civil War: Communities in Conflict in the Mountain South* and Brian McKnight's *Contested Borderland: The Civil War*

in *Appalachian Kentucky and Virginia* examine the Civil War-era history of two mountain regions previously ignored by scholars. Sarris's research focuses on two adjoining counties in Northeast Georgia — Lumpkin and Fannin. The book's thesis contends that in these Northeast Georgia counties "loyalty to the Confederacy depended in most cases upon local conceptions of allegiance, manhood, duty, kinship, and economics [That] depended upon a number of factors — ideological, economic, familial, and situational." (pp. 3-4) The Rebels and Unionists found within Sarris's work are not primarily motivated by ideology. For these mountaineers, the "Civil War was refracted through the prism of local perceptions." (p. 182)

Sarris's documentation of life and politics in Lumpkin and Fannin counties before, during, and after the Civil War is one of *A Separate Civil War's* strengths. Few studies of Civil War-era Appalachia include accounts of both the antebellum and Reconstruction periods. The author's discussion of the area's antebellum history is a vital part of the book. While these counties shared a common geography and Democratic Party allegiances, "the two counties," Sarris argues, "responded differently to the war because of different histories, economic foundations, and demographic realities." (p. 7) The discovery of gold in 1829 in the area that later became Lumpkin County had a profound influence upon that county's antebellum development. By the start of the Civil War, Lumpkin was a commercially active community divided socially between affluent middle-class town dwellers and less affluent yeoman country farmers. Meanwhile, Fannin County was poorer, less developed, and largely disconnected from the rest of Georgia. Sarris contends that these differences uniquely affected each county's war-time experiences.

Lumpkin and Fannin opposed immediate secession but, nonetheless, provided the Confederate States of America with human and natural resources. Following the attack at Fort Sumter, approximately 25 percent of military-aged men in each county volunteered to fight in the Confederate army. These enlistment rates failed to convince outsiders that north Georgia mountaineers were devoted Confederates. In an effort to assuage these concerns, local pro-Confederates embraced regional stereotypes that depicted mountaineers as ferocious and violent — negative images that Lumpkin County businessmen had spent decades trying to erase — "to assure others of their allegiance to the Confederacy." (p. 63)

By 1863, a groundswell of opposition had formed among Fannin and Lumpkin residents who had become disillusioned with the Confederacy's management of the war. The passage of conscription and impressment acts caused widespread desertion and draft evasion among locals. Deserters returned home to protect their families and sought refuge in the region's mountainous environment. The Georgia State Line militia under the command of Colonel George W. Lee invaded the region in search of deserters and draft evaders. North Georgians, according to Sarris, "perceived the centralizing impulses of the Richmond government as a direct assault upon the community." (p. 74) The perceived illegality of the government's policies created waves of discontent that turned many pro-Confederates into avowed Unionists.

An internal civil war erupted throughout North Georgia during the final years of the Civil War. As the Union army pushed toward the region, many residents sought refuge within their lines. Unionist home-guard units formed to protect "Tories" from a variety of pro-Confederate forces. Intra-community combat pitted neighbor against neighbor and divided families into warring factions. The violence escalated with each brutal incident as arrests, bushwhacking, murders, and executions became routine events. Meanwhile, vigilantes such as John Gatewood entered the area and preyed upon civilians regardless of their political affiliation. The Confederacy's collapse brought an end to the violence, but "north Georgia's Civil War did not end in 1865," Sarris argues, "it simply shifted theaters — from the battlefield to the minds and memories of the participants." (p. 144)

Like *A Separate Civil War*, Brian D. McKnight's *Contested Borderland: The Civil War in Appalachian Kentucky and Virginia* provides readers with a first look at a previously understudied Appalachian sub-region. McKnight's focus is central Appalachia and the Virginia and Kentucky counties located around the Cumberland Gap. This region's "location, geographic features, and mineral resources," argues McKnight, "made the central Appalachians a goal of both nations." (p. 1) *Contested Borderland* places Appalachia's geography within the context the region's Civil War experience. "The power of military force," asserts McKnight, "gave way to the power of geography" in the Cumberland Gap. (p. 2) The army that occupied the gap controlled major transportation routes into Kentucky, Tennessee, and Virginia and used the position as a staging point for launching invasions. Supply problems, however, hampered each army's defense of the gap. The region's salt

mines were vital to the Confederacy and a principal target for Union raiders. In September 1864, Union cavalry struck Saltville, Virginia. The raid failed to capture the town. Following the battle, Confederate soldiers from Tennessee murdered a number of wounded members of the Fifth Colored U.S. Cavalry. The massacre at Saltville remains one of the war's most controversial debates. The Confederates, according to McKnight, "simply killed for vengeance." (p. 213)

Contested Borderland displays the best characteristics of the "New Military History." Like George Rable's *Fredericksburg!* and Kenneth Noe's *Perryville*, McKnight blends accounts of important battles and troop movements with analysis of the communities and people of Appalachian Kentucky and Virginia. The Cumberland Gap, despite its perceived military advantages, was "a position of ultimate strength proved untenable for peripheral reasons, a factor that proved the norm throughout the region." (p. 2) The precarious nature of the gap's defenses mirrored the populace's shifting loyalties. Unionists in southeastern Kentucky and Confederates in southwestern Virginia clung to a fragile majority in each of their respective regions. Local allegiances waffled in favor of whichever side appeared most dominant at a given moment. Bands of guerrillas, bushwhackers, home guard units, and partisans battled each other and committed acts of violence against civilians as they struggled to control local affairs. Civilians, however, were far from passive victims. Locals, according to McKnight, "frequently chose to play an active role in the conflict by either offering his resistance or support to one or the other of the warring sides." (p. 232) Like the war described by Sarris in northeast Georgia, the conflict in central Appalachia created a series of private wars as men organized to fight neighbors and partisans that threatened their homes and families. McKnight concludes that the region's wartime violence personified a brand of fierce individualism typical of frontiersmen that likely influenced postwar hostilities among feuding mountaineers.

Contested Borderland is an exceptional example of historical research and writing. One of the book's few weaknesses is its failure to carry the narrative forward through the Reconstruction period. The reader is left wondering how the conflicts of the Civil War might have affected the region's subsequent history. McKnight offers some theories about the relationship between the region's wartime and post-bellum histories but neglects to fully explore those ideas. This criticism should not undermine the fact that

this is a superb piece of scholarship. Readers will simply want more out of McKnight than his project allowed.

Jonathan Sarris and Brian McKnight have produced a pair of beautifully written and persuasively argued works of local history that in combination fill-in a number of voids within the current historical literature. Local history is an invaluable historical methodology that has muddied existing master narratives of the Civil War period. As more local studies are produced, the need to synthesize this geographically diverse research into a narrative that will be attractive to larger audiences of readers becomes more apparent. Local scholars must take a step back and begin drawing connections among their works.

Sarris and McKnight's books overlap in a number of areas that allow for some meaningful comparisons to be made. For example, Unionist sentiment in both regions lacked the support of a majority of the population throughout the war. In each region, opposition to the Confederate government grew, starting in 1862, in response to the rebel government's perceived abuses and ineffective bureaucracy. Both authors skillfully differentiate the distinction between ideological Unionism and pragmatic war weariness. Despite escalating opposition, significant numbers of residents in each region remained loyal Confederate nationalists. The proximity of enemy forces, whether that enemy was Confederate, Union, or in some cases both, had an immediate effect upon the level of violence in each region. The arrival of the enemy carried with it a time of violent retribution, persecution, and bloodshed. The removal of enemy forces further continued each region's cycle of violence. Partisans, bushwhackers, thieves, and deserters filled the vacuum of authority that was created following each military occupation. Their violence was perhaps even more frustrating to locals who struggled to differentiate between friend and foe.

Ultimately, the image of wartime Central Appalachia and Northeast Georgia resembles that of numerous other communities scattered throughout the Confederacy. While factors such as geography and market access differentiated many Appalachians from their Southern kin, conscription, military occupation, partisan violence, and war weariness affected nearly all Confederates similarly regardless of their locale. If anything, local histories of the Civil War, especially those that do not lose sight of the war's national perspective, such as these two works, prove the consuming power of the war to inflict suffering and create division among large sections of the Confed-

erate populace. Southern Appalachia did not have a monopoly on disagreement and resistance to Confederate authority. Such issues contributed to the Confederacy's internal erosion in other parts of the South. Nor did geography shield Appalachia from some of the same types of violence, death, and hardship experienced by Confederates elsewhere, who likewise saw their homes develop into military theaters. Sarris and McKnight, as well as a number of other Appalachian scholars, have permanently undermined notions of Appalachian exceptionalism. Audiences who read these works will come away with a sense that Appalachia's Civil War was America's Civil War.

Scholars and history enthusiasts alike will enjoy *A Separate Civil War* and *Contested Borderland*. While Sarris and McKnight have shed light upon two important Civil War-era Appalachian sub-regions, other mountain areas remain noticeably absent. Scholars have yet to produce a history of northwest Georgia and north Alabama. Both areas experienced a number of major military invasions and Federal Army occupations. Fortunately, if interest in Civil War-era Appalachia continues to grow, these regions will not remain neglected for long.

Keith S. Hebert
University of West Georgia