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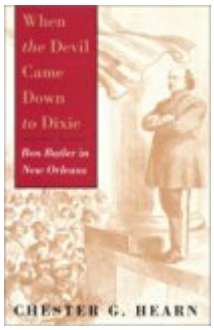

Chester G. Hearn. *When the Devil Came Down to Dixie: Ben Butler in New Orleans.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997. xii + 260 pp. $26.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8071-2180-1.

Reviewed by Michael Pierson

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Chester Hearn begins this book with the observation that he has "never written about a subject more fascinating than Ben Butler" (p. xii). Hearn's interest proves to be infectious, and his book reads quickly. Starting with Butler's youth, Hearn rapidly sets up a picture of the future general as a hard-working, ambitious lawyer and politician with a history of occasional, casual disregard for probity. By the end of page 51, Hearn is ready to dispatch Ben Butler to New Orleans with the ominous sentences: "Money would never become a problem for Butler. There were large sums of it hidden in New Orleans" (p. 51). The remainder of the book focusses on Butler's governance of the Crescent City.

Hearn provides capable, engaging narratives of Butler's administration, and the general and his numerous adversaries never fail to present him with stories to tell and quotable invectives. There are detailed treatments of Butler's wars against Mayor John Monroe and the city council, Butler's clashes with the city's occasionally rebellious women, Butler's imprisonment of unrepentant rebels and hanging of William Mumford for tearing down the U.S. flag, and, in a chapter that chronicles rather involved legal technicalities, Butler's disputes with the foreign consuls. Not surprisingly, however, given the legacy of accusations white southerners have lodged against Butler, the question that most intrigues Hearn is whether Butler stole from the city's residents or profited illegally from his reign. Hearn consciously builds up suspense regarding this matter, asking pointedly about the charges early in the book, "did he deserve their accusations?" (p. 6). Fortunately, Chapter Ten provides a fitting climax for these insinuations and provocative foreshadowings. Hearn wisely dismisses southern accusations of spoon stealing to focus on General Butler's collaboration with his brother and business partner Andrew and on Andrew's involement in illegal trade with the Confederacy. In a shrewd and ultimately ironic conclusion, given Butler's place in white southern lore, Hearn writes, "If the Butlers collaborated in schemes to trade with the enemy...their crimes were against the (U.S.) government, not the (Confederate) South, which benefitted from the trade" (p. 196). While Hearn's discussion of Butler's life and career before and after

New Orleans can be hasty and sensationalized, he assesses Butler's rule over New Orleans fairly and without obvious biases. That is no small accomplishment, especially while succeeding in maintaining the pace and style of good, popular historical writing.

Perhaps because his interest lies so strongly in relating lively stories of conflict, Hearn's choice of emphases can somewhat jar the academic historian. What is entertaining is not always what is important or lasting, and vice versa. Whenever possible, Hearn opts for the good story of clashing, quotable people, and this leads him away from some of the more important aspects of Butler's reign. Indeed, Butler's formulation of the "contraband" policy in Virginia and his occupation of Baltimore in 1861 may be his most important actions, but they necessarily get only brief mention here. In New Orleans, Butler's labor policies of returning fugitive slaves and of helping to maintain slave discipline on the sugar plantations of loyal masters receive only a few pages of text. Perhaps worse, in keeping with his propensity for telling stories as conflicts between individuals, Hearn discusses the slave policy as an administrative and personal struggle between Butler and fellow Union general John W. Phelps, whom Hearn describes as a "rabid abolitionist" (p. 206). This perspective may be entertaining, but it effectively removes black agency from the plot line. Most recent historiography, sympathetic to the black drive for immediate emancipation, would hesitate to say that Butler's commitment to maintaining slavery "worked well and became one of the better policies of Butler's administration" (p. 212). Certainly that conclusion needs further justification. This volume also fails to provide any meaningful analysis of Butler's relations with New Orleans unionists, the first reconstruction elections that sent Benjamin F. Flanders and Michael Hahn to Congress, or the nature of class conflict in the occupied city and the role it played in determining national loyalties. While aware that these people, events, and issues existed, Hearn makes only passing references to them. For academic historians concerned with larger questions about Butler's role in determining the federal government's policy on slavery, and his impact on political reconstruction, this book will only supplement, not replace, Hans Trefousse's 1957 work, ***Ben Butler: The South Called Him Beast***.

Despite these shortcomings, Hearn has written an engaging, fast-paced history that manages to distribute even-handedly its blame and praise of a controversial and notorious person.

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