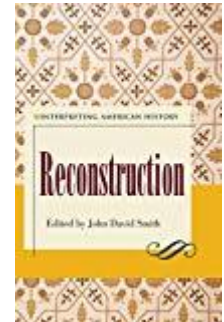


John David Smith, ed. *Reconstruction*. Kent: Kent State University Press, 2016. xi + 243 pp. \$29.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-60635-292-2.



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The Interpreting American History series, edited by Brian D. McKnight and James S. Humphreys and published by Kent State University Press, is designed for a specific purpose—namely, to provide a set of historiographical essays about a specific topic. Volumes published thus far deal with the Age of Andrew Jackson, the New Deal and the Great Depression, and Reconstruction. The chapters in this volume are designed to be accessible. They should not only introduce undergraduates to the scholarly literature, but also assist graduate students and postgraduate scholars who might need guidance about historiography. The Reconstruction volume is an excellent addition to this series.

After a rather lackluster commemoration of the Civil War sesquicentennial, we have transitioned into an extremely lackluster Reconstruction commemoration. Perhaps this should not come as a surprise. As many scholars have noted, a large segment of the public clings to the Dunningite interpretation of Reconstruction as a “tragic era.” Why, therefore, would they want to

have anything to do with any type of commemoration? While other people might not accept this interpretation, many simply do not know much about Reconstruction. Anyone who has taught a Civil War and Reconstruction course at the university level recognizes that students often know next to nothing about this period. This is not really their fault. Reconstruction is often ignored or passed over in a cursory fashion in secondary school classrooms. Lamentably, it is also too often shortchanged in college classrooms. One of the perils of splitting the US survey course into halves, at 1877, is that many professors rush their discussion of Reconstruction. Thus, many people embrace an outmoded interpretation, or simply do not have any knowledge about the period. For people who know something about Reconstruction, there seems little to celebrate. One could commemorate the major legislative milestones of the period, but the next logical step would be to consider how they were gutted after the death of Reconstruction. The relentless paramilitary violence perpetrated by white southern ex-rebels is,

for many people, easier swept under the rug than dealt with. This troubled (nonexistent?) commemoration speaks to a larger problem: people ignore Reconstruction because it makes them uncomfortable. And why spend time reading and thinking about something that makes you uneasy?

Thankfully, John David Smith's contribution to the series will help people gain a clearer understanding and more balanced assessment of the period. Smith, currently Charles H. Stone Distinguished Professor of American History at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, is a well-respected expert on the subject who has published widely. For this volume, Smith solicited chapters from scholars at various stages of their careers. The resulting eight chapters survey a century of historiography, explore different historiographical interpretations of Reconstruction, and offer ideas about how scholars can advance study of this period.

Smith's chapter, which offers an overview of Reconstruction historiography, does not begin where one might expect. In other words, Smith does not make William A. Dunning and his students, the Dunningites, the starting point of this chapter. Rather, he opens with contemporaries like James G. Blaine in order to describe a northern perspective on Reconstruction that differed wildly from and predated Dunning's. Blaine, not surprising given his political affiliation, placed most of the blame on white southerners, attacked Andrew Johnson, and defended military occupation. Blaine, Smith notes, was more partisan than scholar. Nevertheless, historians have embraced some of his ideas. Dunning and his students, on the other hand, "described Reconstruction as a twelve-year-long nightmare of debauchery, exploitation, and plunder of native white southerners by dishonest and greedy outsiders, shiftless insiders, corrupt Washington bureaucrats, and brutal freedmen bent on revenge and social and political equality" (p. 20). Smith argues that the Dunningite interpretation came under fire long before

the rise of the revisionists. As one might expect, he also considers Eric Foner and the post-Foner historiography. As Smith concludes, "historians no longer pass judgment on Reconstruction on its participants. Rather, they seek to extract meaning from the contingencies, contradictions, and even the margins of the complex postwar story" (p. 36).

Chapters 2 and 3 assess chronological periods. Kevin Adams explores the historiography of Presidential Reconstruction. As Adams astutely observes, the outpouring of research on the period between the Emancipation Proclamation and the beginning of the Fortieth Congress in 1867 "has done a marvelous job exploring the nuances of the time span that constituted Presidential Reconstruction, but remarkably few of these studies have attempted to say very much about Presidential Reconstruction itself" (p. 46). Adams argues that historians need to return the president to Presidential Reconstruction and laments the fact that "the portrait of a Presidential Reconstruction without a president continues to rule the historiographical roost" (p. 48). Adams also suggests that historians, Eric Foner for instance, tend to view Presidential Reconstruction as a colorful warm-up to Congressional Reconstruction. This is problematic, he contends, and historians need to treat this period as something more than a warm-up or a sideshow. Shepherd W. McKinley, on the other hand, analyzes Radical Reconstruction. After surveying how historians have analyzed this period, McKinley contends that recent scholars "seem willing to reassess all previous historiographical schools and to adopt what is of value in the old interpretations and discard what is not" (p. 86). In his view this is a positive approach that moves away from the scorched-earth battles between different schools of historians and allows us to see the benefits of different interpretations.

The remaining five chapters deal with specific themes rather than broad periods. R. Blakeslee Gilpin analyzes the historiography of emancipation and race and explores the radical partisan-

ship of Reconstruction historiography. J. Vincent Lowery explores gender and labor. He sensibly comments that historians will likely continue to study these topics at the state and local levels while they build on the idea of a “long Reconstruction” (p. 147) advanced by historians like Steven Hahn. Edward O. Frantz discusses national politics in the period 1865-77. Frantz correctly argues that, compared to the politics of the Civil War and the Progressive Era, “the politics of Reconstruction seemed liked a distant, awkward cousin who was, at best, tolerated but frequently better to ignore” (p. 112). Nevertheless, Frantz finds interest among scholars in the politics of Reconstruction, as well as plenty of important work. K. Stephen Prince investigates intellectual life and historical memory. At first glance, Prince notes, the field might seem rather barren. However, “scholars working on a wide variety of topics have recognized that the period posed intellectual problems just as surely as political and social ones” (p. 152). Thus, the history of Reconstruction is a history of ideas. Like many of the authors in this collection, Prince highlights areas for further study.

Andrew Zimmerman’s chapter on transnational history rounds out the volume. Many historians have considered Reconstruction an exclusively national affair. Thus, they have not considered it in comparative perspective or analyzed international dimensions. Zimmerman, however, sensibly argues that, rather than being too narrowly national to merit an international approach, Reconstruction “appears as a particularly influential instance in a number of interrelated worldwide processes of the nineteenth century” (p. 171). To be sure, Zimmerman notes, there are both costs and benefits to taking an international approach to Reconstruction. However, he correctly considers this research vital to our understanding of the period and encourages scholars to pursue international dimensions and to focus on individuals “to expand the single perspective to the transnational” (p. 188).

In a review of Eric Foner’s *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (1988), Michael Perman famously wondered “what is left to be done.”[1] Although Foner’s synthesis has loomed over the field, it did not choke off conversation and research. Each chapter, in a volume written nearly three decades after Foner published his synthesis, suggests there is still much to be done in a post-Foner world. Scholars still have a great deal to discover about this momentous period in US history. In that vein, much of the work that could profitably be done concerns how we conceptualize Reconstruction. Was Reconstruction something that happened from 1863-17 in the eleven states of the Confederacy? Or perhaps something more? One common theme among these chapters is the notion that scholars should continue to broaden Reconstruction.[2] In other words, the story of Reconstruction should not just be a story of how life unfolded in the eleven Confederate states. Rather, as historians have begun to demonstrate, one can study Reconstruction in the northern states, the West, and internationally. [3] In 2003, Elliott West spoke of a “greater Reconstruction” and this idea has prodded scholars to rethink the geographic and chronological boundaries of the period.[4]. Indeed, much work remains to be done!

This is an exciting collection of well-written and thought-provoking chapters. This volume would function well in an undergraduate seminar and I plan to use some of these essays the next time I teach the Introduction to the Civil War Era course. However, also exciting is the fact that this volume has plenty of thought-provoking ideas to reward scholars who do know something about this period. In sum, this volume is appropriate for students and scholars at all stages of their careers as well as a nonacademic audience. It should be read widely and carefully.

Notes

[1]. Michael Perman, "Eric Foner's Reconstruction: A Finished Revolution," *Reviews in American History* 17, no. 1 (1989): 73–78.

[2]. In *The Ordeal of the Reunion: A New History of Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), Mark Wahlgren Summers includes chapters on the West and overseas expansion.

[3]. For examples of works with broader conceptions of Reconstruction see Heather Cox Richardson, *The Death of Reconstruction: Race, Labor, and Politics in the Post-Civil War North, 1865-1901* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), *West from Appomattox: The Reconstruction of America after the Civil War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007); Joshua Paddison, *American Heathens: Religion, Race, and Reconstruction in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012); D. Michael Bottoms, *An Aristocracy of Color: Race and Reconstruction in California and the West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2013); Stacey L. Smith, *Freedom's Frontier: California and the Struggle over Unfree Labor, Emancipation, and Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013); *Civil War Wests: Testing the Limits of the United States*, ed. Adam Arenson and Andrew R. Graybill (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015); and *Empire and Liberty: The Civil War and the West*, ed. Virginia Scharff (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015).

[4]. Elliott West, "Reconstructing Race," *Western Historical Quarterly* 34 (Spring 2003): 6-26.

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