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A conversation with Victoria E. Bynum

Author of *The Long Shadow of the Civil War: Southern Dissent and Its Legacies*

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Q. There seems no end to books about the American Civil War. What does *The Long Shadow of the Civil War* offer that is new?

A. Although Civil War books about the home front are not new, this is a new sort of home front study that focuses on three communities from three different states. Rather than close with the war and Reconstruction, *The Long Shadow of the Civil War* follows individual Unionists and multiracial families into the New South era and, in some cases, into the twentieth century. This historical sweep allows the reader to understand the ongoing effects of the war at its most personal levels.

Q. What led you to combine three Civil War home fronts, all noted as areas of violent disorder, in one study? Why these three?

A. Most basically, I combined them in order to provide in-depth comparisons of the communities within the same volume. But there's more to it than that; the communities have important links to one another. The North Carolina Piedmont was the ancestral seedbed of migration into what became Jones County, Mississippi. Later, East Texas attracted many non-slaveholding Mississippi families seeking a less-developed piney woods region.

All three regions exhibited fierce Unionist activity during the Civil War, with brothers fighting in separate deserter bands across state lines in two of the communities. So, combining them in one study provided a wonderful opportunity to identify common characteristics of Southern Unionism, while also showing how different geographic settings influenced the nature of the inner civil wars.

Q. What were the most important similarities among the three communities of dissent? The most important differences?

A. All three communities were located outside the South's plantation belt and all had large non-slaveholding majorities. Important differences were religious practices and length of settlement. The North Carolina Quaker Belt had a history of religious dissent that included Moravian, Mennonite and Dunker sects as well as Quakers.

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Beginning around 1848, Wesleyan Methodism, with its anti-slavery ideals, gained popularity in this region. The Quaker Belt was also a long-settled region of expansive, deeply entwined family networks that lent force and stability to anti-Confederate sentiments.

By contrast, neither Jones County, Mississippi, nor Hardin County, Texas, exhibited significant or organized religious dissent against slavery. As in North Carolina, family networks were important to anti-Confederate activity; however, in East Texas, more recent migration from states like Mississippi meant that family networks were less extensive there. Less cohesive and deeply rooted communities, coupled with politicians' successful linking of Texas's 1836 revolution to the Southern cause of secession, undermined organized anti-Confederate activity among non-slaveholders in East Texas.

Q. Why did you return to the Free State of Jones County, Mississippi, and to the North Carolina Quaker Belt, two regions that you wrote about in previous books, for this study?

A. Ever since I discovered that a splinter band of Unionist deserters, led by several brothers of members of the Jones County band, kept Confederate forces at bay in the Texas Big Thicket, and after discovering ancestral links between the North Carolina Piedmont and Jones County, Mississippi, I have wanted to combine the inner civil wars of these three regions in the same volume. Doing so also gave me the opportunity to analyze research materials that were not included in my earlier works: two examples are documents concerning the lives of freedpeople and poor whites in Orange County, North Carolina, and Newt Knight's 1887-1900 Mississippi claim files.

Q. You cite abolitionism as a motive for anti-Confederate sentiments in only one of your three communities: that of the Randolph County area of the North Carolina Quaker Belt. How and why did religion play such an important role in this region, but not in Jones County, Mississippi, or the Big Thicket of East Texas?

A. The Randolph County area of North Carolina (including Montgomery and Moore Counties) was the "heart" of the state's Quaker Belt. Quaker opposition to slavery had faded over time because of the state's changing demographics, but it never entirely disappeared, making this region fertile ground for Wesleyan Methodists who gained a foothold in the 1850s. In Montgomery County, the Rev. Adam Crooks condemned slavery from the pulpit of the Lovejoy Methodist Church. In contrast, Jones County, Mississippi and Hardin County, Texas, were Baptist strongholds during the secession crisis. I have found no evidence that any Baptist church in either county publically opposed slavery or secession; indeed, the Leaf River Baptist Church of Jones County publically supported the Confederacy.

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3-3-3 Long Shadow of the Civil War

Q. Newt Knight, the controversial “captain” of the Knight Company, is a polarizing figure who even today evokes heated arguments among readers. Why is this so, and how did it affect your historical treatment of him?

A. As long as we continue to debate the causes, meanings, and effects of the Civil War, Newt Knight’s motives and character will also be debated. We know that he defied Confederate authority during the war, supported Republican Reconstruction afterward, and openly crossed the color line to found a mixed-race community. To neo-Confederates, such facts make Newt a scoundrel and a traitor to his country and his race. To neo-abolitionists, he is a backwoods Mississippi hero who defended his nation and struggled to uplift the black race. My response to such powerful and emotional narratives is to examine critically not only the documentary evidence, but also the mountain of published opinions about Newt Knight that have too often functioned as “evidence” for both sides of the debate.

Q. Newt Knight, his white wife Serena, and former family slave, Rachel, were the founding parents of a multiracial community. What sort of a community was it in terms of racial identity? How did members of the community identify themselves racially, as opposed to how the larger white society defined them?

A. As segregation took hold in New South Mississippi (1880-1900), the descendants of Newt, Serena, and Rachel were increasingly defined by white society as black, i.e. as “Negroes,” despite being of European, African, and Native American ancestry. Before the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s, however, few of these descendants identified themselves as “black.” Depending on their physical appearance, including skin shade and hair texture, descendants of Newt and Rachel variously defined themselves as white, Indian, or colored. Whereas white society applied a “one drop rule” that grouped together all people of African ancestry, these descendants self-identified in ways that reflected their multiracial heritage.

There is no direct evidence of how Newt, Serena, or Rachel racially identified their multiracial descendants. Descendant Yvonne Bivins, the most thorough Knight researcher, was told by her elders that Newt Knight actively encouraged his descendants to identify as white. All that is certain—but nonetheless remarkable—is that they economically supported, nurtured, and lived openly among both white and multiracial kinfolk all their lives.

Q. By crossing the color line, Newt Knight deviated from the norm by acknowledging and supporting his multiracial descendants. What may we deduce from those facts about his political views on race relations in the era of segregation?

A. Since we don’t know that Newt Knight identified his multiracial descendants as “black,” we can’t deduce from his intimate relationships with them, or by his efforts to enroll them in a local school (one that he helped create) alongside his white descendants, that he supported equality for all people of African ancestry—that is, for
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people classed as “Negroes.” Only if we adhere to the “one drop rule”—and assume that Newt Knight did, too—can we conclude that Newt’s protection of his own kinfolk extended to all Americans of African ancestry.

Newt’s efforts on behalf of freedpeople as a Republican appointee during Reconstruction do not necessarily make him an advocate of black equality, as some historians have argued. There were many Reconstruction Republicans who supported the same basic rights of marriage and military service that Newt upheld for freedpeople, while supporting segregation and opposing black voting rights. We simply don’t know Newt’s political position on these issues.

Q. For thirty years, Newt Knight petitioned the federal government to compensate his ad hoc military band, the Knight Company, for its support of the Union during the Civil War. What do those petitions reveal about the claims process itself, as well as the Knight Band?

A. The transcripts from Newt Knight’s extensive claims files suggest the federal government’s hostility toward claims of Southern Unionism, especially after 1887, as the nation sank into a deep economic depression. That year, Newt renewed efforts begun in 1870 to win compensation.

Several depositions of Jones County men made a strong case for Unionism among the Knight Company. The passage of time, however, doomed Newt’s claim to failure. His Washington, DC lawyers were unfamiliar with the Jones County uprising, while witnesses’ memories of the war faded over time. Most damaging, crucial evidence presented in Knight’s 1870 petition was misplaced by the government and never presented after 1887. At the same time, an expanding literature that portrayed the white South as having been unified around secession made Northerners all the more suspicious of Southern claims of Unionism.

Q. The Long Shadow of the Civil War is as much about the legacies of Civil War dissent as about the war itself. Why did you include both topics in a single volume?

A. To truly understand the Civil War, we need to understand its long-term impact on the lives of those who endured it. Southerners who took a Unionist stance lived with that decision all their lives, as did their children and grandchildren. Some struggled to put the war behind them and never spoke of it again; others, like Newt Knight and Warren Collins, defended their actions all their lives, and went on to fight new political battles.

Multiracial communities that grew out of war and emancipation grew larger and more complex in the late nineteenth century. Faced with racial violence and segregation, many of their members exited the South during these years. But among those who remained, we witness the birth of a multiracial Southern middle class.

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5-5-5 Long Shadow of the Civil War

Q. You locate a long tradition of political dissent among certain Jones County families that found expression in third party political movements after the Civil War. How does this New South agrarian radicalism shed light on Civil War Unionism and vice versa?

A. In all three regions, I found examples of emerging class consciousness among non-slaveholding farmers as a result of the Civil War. Late in life, Newt Knight, for example, offered a class-based critique of Southern society. Two prominent Unionist brothers, Jasper J. Collins of Jones County, Mississippi, and Warren J. Collins of Hardin County, Texas, went even further, carving out political careers as populists and socialists in two separate states.

A close study of individual lives reveals how the Civil War reshaped their perspectives. Of course, the majority of Southern Unionists did not join third-party political movements in the aftermath of war. It appears, however, that some ideologically committed Unionists, such as the Collinses of Mississippi and Texas, grew ever more militant in their political views as the years passed.

Q. Your epilogue, “Fathers and Sons,” compares and contrasts three twentieth-century histories of individual guerrilla leaders written by their sons. What do these biographical sketches reveal about the impact of kinship and politics on the Civil War memories of Southern Unionist families?

A. All three biographies were written after the deaths of their subjects, and reflect the need for sons to defend notorious fathers against charges of treason, lawlessness, or ignorance—especially in the wake of New South glorification of the Confederate cause. Further complicating Tom Knight’s biography of Newt Knight was his effort to present his father as a hero to the segregated, virulently white supremacist society of the 1930s. At the time of Newt’s death, Tom was estranged from him and the family’s interracial community. He knew little about his father’s early years (his narrative is studded with factual errors) and his “memories” of Newt Knight during the Civil War and Reconstruction were profoundly influenced by his need to valorize Newt and thereby restore respect for his family. Though very different in tone and accuracy, Vinson A. Collins’s and Loren Collins’s biographies of their fathers, Warren J. Collins of Texas and Jasper J. Collins of Mississippi, are presented not only with a sense of each son’s relationship with his father, but also in the context of the nation’s politicized memories of the Civil War.

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This interview may be reprinted in its entirety with the following credit: A conversation with Victoria E. Bynum, author of *The Long Shadow of the Civil War: Southern Dissent and Its Legacies* (University of North Carolina Press, Spring 2010). The text of this interview is available at www.ibiblio.org/unncp/media/bynum/.
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