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The Reconstruction Trope: Politics, Literature, and History in the South, 1890-1941

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THE RECONSTRUCTION TROPE: POLITICS, LITERATURE, AND
HISTORY IN THE SOUTH, 1890-1941

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
History

by
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Accepted by:
Dr. Paul Anderson, Committee Chair
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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines how white southerners conceptualized Reconstruction from 1890 to 1941, with an emphasis on the era between the First and Second World Wars. By analyzing Reconstruction as it appears in political rhetoric, professional and amateur history, and southern literature, the thesis demonstrates how white southerners used the ‘tragic’ story of Reconstruction to respond to developments in their own time. Additionally, this thesis aims to illuminate the broader cultural struggle over Reconstruction between the First and Second World Wars. This thesis ultimately argues that the early revisionism in Reconstruction historiography was part of a broader reassessment of Reconstruction that took place in southern culture after the First World War.

DEDICATION

For everyone who is not here

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I would like to thank my thesis advisor and program coordinator Dr. Paul Anderson, for his guidance, motivation, and support while I was working on this thesis. I would also like to thank my committee members, Dr. Rod Andrew and Dr. Vernon Burton, for their thoughtful criticisms and advice throughout this project. Finally, I would like to thank my family and friends. This project would not have been possible without their unwavering support and endless encouragement.

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis analyzes how southerners conceptualized Reconstruction after 1877. More specifically, the thesis explores Reconstruction as a cultural trope in the South from roughly the late nineteenth century to the start of the Second World War. From 1890 to 1941 white southerners increasingly found a useable past in the South's Reconstruction history. But their Reconstruction was not a balanced or accurate portrayal of the period. Instead, as the thesis will demonstrate, white southerners propagated what I refer to as the 'tragic era' trope of Reconstruction.

White southerners recognized the powerful influence of the cultural trope. In constructing the tragic narrative stereotype, white southerners turned Reconstruction into a symbol of African Americans' incompetence in the political sphere. In addition to discrediting black political participation, the tragic Reconstruction story conveyed the notion that the federal government—in forcing political and civil rights for blacks upon the defeated states of the former Confederacy—created the conditions that made possible the chaotic nature of the post-Civil War South. In the late nineteenth century, the tragic story was a political tool for erecting barriers to black voting. This reading of history became entrenched in southern culture and reinforced the notion that disfranchisement was not only desired but imperative.

Between the First and Second World Wars, conservative white southerners reactivated the tragic narrative to preserve a society built by their nineteenth century predecessors. Despite its well-established position in southern culture, however, the tragic era narrative did not go uncontested. In both politics and print culture southerners

quarreled over fundamental assumptions inherent in the traditional Reconstruction story. Indeed, this thesis demonstrates that the early revisionism in Reconstruction historiography was part of a broader reassessment of Reconstruction that took place in southern culture between the First and Second World Wars. As white southerners continued to use a tragic Reconstruction as a mechanism for proving the recklessness of political and social equality, the younger generation of southerners were questioning the underlying assumptions of the tragic era trope.

The ‘tragic era’ trope of Reconstruction was a common and recurrent narrative that presented the period in an unfavorable light. The plot, characters, and themes that comprised the tragic era narrative may be briefly summarized as follows. After Presidential Reconstruction gave way to Radical Reconstruction, the South suffered through deplorable conditions that nearly led to the complete destruction of southern society. White southerners were subjugated and ruled over by an incompetent, corrupt, and oppressive Republican state government made up of unscrupulous carpetbaggers, turncoat scalawags, and vindictive and ignorant former slaves. This regime was backed by federal troops and supported by the federal government in Washington.

Inherent in this reading of Reconstruction was the notion that blacks were innately inferior and unfit to exercise the duties of citizenship after emancipation. As a result, carpetbaggers seeking personal aggrandizement successfully controlled the black vote through manipulation and deception. The heroes of the Reconstruction story were the conservative white Democrats, called ‘Redeemers,’ who led the resistance against Republican misrule and ultimately overthrew Reconstruction. In their quest to overthrow

the Reconstruction government native white southerners became a unified political force. The violent and fraudulent methods employed by Democrats during the campaign for Redemption were justified on the grounds of necessity: it had to be done for the restoration of ‘home rule’ and ‘honest government.’

The first chapter of this thesis explores how the tragic era trope became a fixture in southern society in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Southern politicians were adroit at using the agreed-upon tragic era narrative to disparage federal election bills and mobilize support for disfranchisement. At the 1895 South Carolina constitutional convention, for example, Ben Tillman justified his argument for disfranchisement by reciting a story of Reconstruction that portrayed blacks as irresponsible voters who were incapable of exercising judgment in the political sphere. The first chapter also examines developments in southern culture that perpetuated Tillman’s gloomy account of Reconstruction. While Reconstruction-themed novels and films like *The Birth of a Nation* depicted Reconstruction as a dangerous epoch for white southerners, red shirt reunions and public monuments glorified the white southerners who brought an end to the chaos. Additionally, I consider the role that professional historians played in fortifying the tragic era trope in southern society during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The second chapter examines southerners’ struggle over Reconstruction between the First and Second World Wars. As the title “Reassessment and Reaction” suggests, fundamental assumptions of Reconstruction were increasingly questioned, contradicted, and, in some cases, rejected during the 1920s, 1930s, and early 1940s. Although most

white southerners dismissed the revisionist work of black historian Alrutheus Ambush Taylor, they found it harder to dismiss the revisionist work of Francis Butler Simkins and Robert Hilliard Woody—both professional historians and native white southerners. I analyze this early revisionism in Reconstruction historiography and situate Simkins' interpretations within the context of the interwar years. This helps illuminate the broader reassessment of southern society that was occurring in 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s. This reassessment, however, provoked a backlash among conservative white southerners. A central aim of this thesis is to demonstrate how white southerners used Reconstruction as a literary and rhetorical device to respond to developments in their own time. As threats to southern traditions mounted, white southerners reactivated and disseminated the tragic era trope through Reconstruction publications and political rhetoric to discredit revisionist interpretations of the past and to denigrate reform efforts in the present.

Another aim of this thesis is to illuminate the broader cultural struggle over Reconstruction that ensued during the era of the Southern Literary Renaissance. Although many have noted the early revisionism in Reconstruction historiography from the interwar years, there remains a need to explore the theme of Reconstruction in other forms of southern literature from this period. Thus, in the third chapter I examine Reconstruction as it appears in the fiction of William Faulkner and the autobiographical writings of William Alexander Percy. For both Faulkner and Percy, to engage the story of Reconstruction was to engage in family legends and lore. I explore Faulkner and Percy's treatment and portrayal of carpetbaggers, redeemers, and the 'Mississippi Plan.' Faulkner, the chapter will demonstrate, explored Reconstruction in a manner that went

beyond the traditional plot of heroic redeemers triumphing over nefarious carpetbaggers, differentiating him from Percy and his contemporaries. Faulkner's drive to examine Reconstruction unencumbered by traditional themes ultimately led him to contradict fundamental assumptions inherent in the tragic era trope.

CHAPTER ONE

CONSTRUCTING THE TRAGIC ERA TROPE

In the decades before the First World War, developments in southern culture converged to perpetuate and bolster the tragic era Reconstruction trope. The dissemination of the ‘tragic’ story took different forms, some more discernable than others. Each of these developments, however, had the shared result of propagating a pro-southern interpretation of Reconstruction that permeated nearly every aspect of southern culture. As the nineteenth century gave way to the twentieth century, the tragic interpretation of Reconstruction became increasingly fortified in southern culture.

In the first section of this chapter, I examine the continued political relevance of Reconstruction in the South after 1877. Southern politicians in the late nineteenth century—Ben Tillman, for example—used a sordid story of Reconstruction to mobilize support for writing disfranchisement measures into state constitutions. In the second section, I explore the various mediums that disseminated the tragic era narrative in southern culture. More specifically, I analyze Reconstruction as it appears in southern fiction, film, reunions, monuments, and family lore. The third section of this chapter examines the interpretations of academic historians and how their views seemingly validated southerners’ belief in a tragic Reconstruction.

Implementation

In their drive to overthrow Reconstruction, conservative Democrats in the southern states launched violent campaigns replete with bribery, terrorism, coercion, and

fraud. One by one the Republicans were defeated in the southern states during the 1870s. After usurping power from Republicans, southern Democrats worked to make the South a one-party region dedicated to the maintenance of white supremacy. Democrats argued that creating a solid Democratic South was the only way to preclude the federal government from intervening in southern race relations. As a result, Democrats embarked upon a crusade to disfranchise southern blacks and render the Republican party obsolete in southern politics. Embellished, partisan tales of a tragic Reconstruction were indispensable to this crusade. Democrats asserted that African American political participation—endorsed by the Republican party—was the primary cause for the evils of Reconstruction. Reducing the black vote, therefore, became urgent for southern Democrats in the decades after 1877.

The violent and extralegal political methods used to overthrow Reconstruction persisted in southern politics beyond 1877. In their push to eliminate blacks from politics, Democrats used intimidation, coercion, bribery, and violence to prevent blacks from voting for Republican candidates. In many cases, southern Democrats devised state laws to tighten their grip. After South Carolina Democrats overthrew Reconstruction in 1877, they used the machinery of government to redraw voting precincts. The result was that many blacks had to walk twenty miles to the nearest poll if they wanted to vote. In 1882 the Democrat-controlled South Carolina legislature passed the “eight-box law” to take advantage of black illiteracy. Instead of voting for a full party ticket, voters had to cast separate ballots for the eight individual offices with each box designated for a specific office. Voters had to list candidates for each office in the correct order on their ballot and

had to place their ballot in the correct box. Failure to place a ballot in the correct box resulted in an individual's ballot being discarded.¹

Though the registration and voting laws were successful in reducing registered black voters, many feared the federal government would reinsert itself into southern politics and threaten Democratic hegemony. The disputed election of 1876 and removal of troops in 1877 signaled a retreat from certain policies; it was not, however, a relinquishment of the federal government's governing capability or potentiality. The Reconstruction Amendments, particularly the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, symbolized the shift in power from individual states to the national government. The Fourteenth Amendment defined citizenship rights and established equal protection before the law and the Fifteenth Amendment, at least in theory, protected the voting rights of African Americans.

Fears of federal government intervention were intensified when the Republican-controlled House of Representatives passed the Lodge Federal Elections Bill in 1890. Initially proposed by Massachusetts congressman Henry Cabot Lodge in 1890, the Lodge Bill was designed to prevent election fraud in the South. The provision allowing for federal supervision of local elections would have protected the voting rights of black southerners. Moreover, the federal government could launch an investigation into cases of possible election fraud if one hundred voters within a congressional district suspected fraudulent or unlawful electoral methods. Disgruntled voters could petition the returns to

¹ Richard Zuczek, *State of Rebellion: Reconstruction in South Carolina* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996), 206-211; Stephen Kantrowitz, *Ben Tillman & the Reconstruction of White Supremacy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 80-109.

the federal government, at which point the federal government would select a board to investigate the charges.²

To many white southerners, the Lodge Bill signaled Republicans' renewed interest in promoting African American voting. Recognizing that black southerners would most likely vote for Republicans if given the opportunity, Southern Democrats feared the region's one-party politics would be a thing of the past should the Lodge Bill become law. The bill, as C. Vann Woodward argues, "caused more alarm and excitement in the South than any federal measure since 1877."³ Newspapers across the South cast vehement aspersions on the Lodge Bill, insisting that it threatened the region with a return to Reconstruction-era chaos. The *Atlanta Constitution* went so far as to threaten Republicans and the federal government with violence if the bill were to become law: the Atlanta newspaper warned, "what we did twenty years ago we can do again."⁴

Southern Democrats found negative accounts of Reconstruction useful in arguing against federal interventionism. Southern Democrats denounced the proposed Lodge Bill as a 'force bill' akin to Reconstruction-era policy. Twenty years before the Lodge Bill reached Congress, southern conservatives denounced similar legislation that provided for federal oversight of elections as 'force bills' and 'force acts.' In 1870-1871, Congress had enacted a series of Enforcement Acts—including what was known as the Ku Klux Klan

² William J. Cooper and Thomas E. Terrill, *The American South: A History, Volume II* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2009), 547-575. Also, see: Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 50-54. The Lodge Election Bill was introduced in June 1890 and defeated in January 1891. See, C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1971 edition; originally published in 1951), 235-263.

³ Woodward, *Origins of the New South*, 254.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 254-255.

Act—designed to curb election fraud, politically-motivated terrorism, and racial violence in the South. Provisions gave the President authority to appoint election supervisors, who had the power to bring cases of election fraud, bribery, and intimidation to federal courts. In addition, if states failed to respond adequately to crimes infringing upon an individual’s citizenship rights—depriving an individual of their right to vote or of their right to serve on juries, for example—then those crimes could be prosecuted under federal law.⁵

This was seen most notably in South Carolina during Reconstruction, where the Ku Klux Klan habitually terrorized black citizens who supported Republican candidates in state and local elections. Although over 1,000 South Carolina Klan members were indicted, a lack of resources and manpower prevented the federal government from prosecuting high-ranking members. In the end, the Enforcement Acts were not successful in eradicating terrorism and violence from South Carolina politics.⁶ The acts and subsequent trials, however, did prove useful for late nineteenth century southerners arguing against the proposed Lodge Bill. Ben Tillman interpreted the Lodge Bill as the federal government’s newest attempt to force biracial politics upon the South. As Stephen Kantrowitz notes, Tillman was adept and successful at “vilifying federal power as wholly devoted to the cause of black uplift.”⁷ Other politicians echoed Tillman’s sentiments.

⁵ Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2014 edition; originally published in 1988), 412-459.

⁶ Zuczek, *State of Rebellion*, 71-87; also see, Walter Edgar, *South Carolina: A History* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998), 377-406.

⁷ Kantrowitz, *Ben Tillman and the Reconstruction of White Supremacy*, 220.

Stephen Prince argues that regional politics were central to Reconstruction memory for white southerners in the late nineteenth century. In 1890 Alabama congressman Hilary A. Herbert and like-minded southern congressmen condemned the proposed federal oversight of elections by publishing a scathing indictment of similar efforts made during Reconstruction. In *Why the Solid South? or, Reconstruction and Its Results*, Herbert, Zebulon B. Vance, John J. Hemphill, Ethelbert Barksdale, and other southern congressmen contributed essays to the collection, with each essay describing Reconstruction in an individual southern state. Each essay was written by individuals who had actively participated in the events of Reconstruction, and, as Prince suggests, each essay sought “to prove to northerners just how little they knew about southern race relations.”⁸ By discrediting efforts during Reconstruction, the contributors sought to present a persuasive argument against electoral supervision for the late nineteenth century South.⁹

The defeat of the Lodge Bill ensured that federal election supervisors would not be involved in southern elections. The bill’s defeat was significant because it came at a time when the South was entering what would become the politically turbulent decade of the 1890s. The emergence of the Farmer’s Alliance, and later the third-party Populists, suggested that the solid Democratic South had to contend with internal as well as external challenges to the political status quo. Southern Democrats feared that an independent

⁸ K. Stephen Prince, “Jim Crow Memory: Southern White Supremacists and the Regional Politics of Remembrance,” in *Remembering Reconstruction: Struggles over the Meanings of America’s Most Turbulent Era*, eds. Carole Emberton and Bruce Baker (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2017), 17-34, 20 (quote).

⁹ Hilary A. Herbert, et al., *Why the Solid South? or, Reconstruction and Its Results* (Baltimore: R.H. Woodward Company, 1890); Kantrowitz, *Ben Tillman & the Reconstruction of White Supremacy*, 140-155.

third party would be detrimental to white unity because competing factions would vie for the votes of black southerners. Southern politicians, especially Ben Tillman, believed that biracial politics was the reason for the strife and disorder of the Reconstruction era. As a result, once it became clear that there would be no federal supervisors in southern elections, a disfranchisement wave swept across the region.

Southern states adopted laws designed to keep African Americans in an inferior political and social position. Mississippi led the charge in the South-wide movement to eliminate blacks from politics. In 1890 a constitutional convention was called to devise disfranchisement measures that circumvented the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. The convention passed new voting requirements such as literacy tests, “understanding clauses,” property qualifications, and poll taxes, which had the effect of disfranchising most blacks and many poor whites. Although only Mississippi, South Carolina, Louisiana, Alabama, and Virginia held official constitutional conventions to pass disfranchisement measures, every southern state adopted the poll tax as a voting requirement. Eight years later in *Williams v. Mississippi* (1898), the United States Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of literacy tests and poll taxes in Mississippi.¹⁰

The tragic Reconstruction story proved useful for those advocating for the disfranchisement of southern blacks. During the disfranchisement movement, as C. Vann Woodward notes, “the legend of Reconstruction was revived, refurbished, and relived by

¹⁰ Kermit Hall, et al., *American Legal History: Cases and Materials, Fourth Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 282-286, 453-454.

the propagandists as if it were an immediate background of the current crisis.”¹¹ In constitutional conventions across the South, politicians insisted that the South’s Reconstruction experience should serve as a cautionary tale against African American political participation. Politicians mobilized contrived horror stories from Reconstruction because they knew that such tales would resonate with white southerners in the late nineteenth century. Southern politicians were so successful in their efforts that “a new generation of Southerners was as forcibly impressed with the sectional trauma as if they had lived through it themselves.”¹²

In the fall of 1895, South Carolina became the second state to construct a constitution littered with disfranchisement measures. For the third time since the Civil War, South Carolina held a constitutional convention to address the question of suffrage. The 1895 constitutional convention attracted the interest of the national media and, consequently, turned into a national story. In the end, the new constitution revealed that South Carolina had adopted the most recent ‘Mississippi Plan.’ In addition to the poll tax voting requirement, the new South Carolina constitution contained literacy, education, and understanding provisions that greatly reduced the number of registered black voters.¹³

¹¹ C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow: Third Revised Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974 reprint; originally published by Oxford University Press in 1955), 85-86.

¹² *Ibid.*, 86.

¹³ In 1894, the call for a constitutional convention was approved after a close vote: 31,402 were in favor while 29,523 opposed. Only six members of the convention were black with Tillman supporters accounting for 70% of the delegates. The new constitution became law immediately after its completion in November 1895 and was not submitted to South Carolina citizens for ratification. See, Edgar, *South Carolina: A History*, 443-452 and Francis Butler Simkins, *Pitchfork Ben Tillman: South Carolinian* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2002 edition; originally published by Louisiana State University Press, 1944), 285-309.

Debates over the proposed suffrage restrictions were fierce and impassioned. Ben Tillman was unequivocal in stating the purpose for the assemblage. As the dominant figure in the convention, Tillman declared that “the question of suffrage and its wise regulation is the sole cause of our being here.”¹⁴ He was eager to eliminate the 1868 constitution, which had endured beyond its Reconstruction origins as the Palmetto State’s constitution. Tillman never accepted the 1868 constitution as legitimate because it had been penned primarily by blacks, ‘carpetbaggers,’ and ‘scalawags.’ The final defeat of Radical Reconstruction, Tillman believed, could only come with the eradication of the 1868 Reconstruction-era constitution.¹⁵

The greatest resistance to Tillman’s complex suffrage restrictions came from two black delegates who had helped pen the 1868 state constitution. Robert Smalls and William J. Whipper, both Republicans from Beaufort, addressed the convention to oppose Tillman’s plan. They argued that blacks had made positive contributions to both the nation and South Carolina, and rejected the widely-held assumption that blacks were innately inferior. Smalls and Whipper cited the positive developments that came from Reconstruction—particularly free public education as first established by the 1868

¹⁴ Tillman speech, in *Journal of the Constitutional Convention of the State of South Carolina* (Columbia, SC: Charles A. Calvo, Jr., State Printer, 1895), 443; accessed at http://www.carolana.com/SC/Documents/Journal_of_the_Constitutional_Convention_of_the_State_of_South_Carolina_1895.pdf.

¹⁵ The call for the 1868 constitutional convention was approved after most blacks voted yes, while native whites boycotted the vote as a strategy to thwart the constitutional convention. The convention was comprised of 73 black delegates, 15 northern whites, and 36 native white southerners. For the most part, native whites had very little input in the writing of the 1868 constitution. See, Edgar, *South Carolina: A History*, 385-394.

constitution—to demonstrate the ways in which the state government from 1868-1876 benefitted the state.¹⁶

Faced with this opposition, Tillman used the cultural trope of Reconstruction to plead his case. He told a dark story of Reconstruction to advance his argument for the necessity of disfranchisement measures. To discredit Smalls and Whipper, Tillman read investigative reports documenting the examples of government corruption under the Republican regime. During Reconstruction, according to Tillman, “the State House was filled with the minions of Black Republicanism” and led by “white thieves.”¹⁷ Tillman declared that once radical Republicans assumed the controls of government in 1868, there ensued “eight years of misgovernment and robbery.”¹⁸ This incompetent government was responsible for the “villainy, anarchy, misrule, and robbery” perpetrated against native white southerners, who lived in fear for their lives during the years of Reconstruction.¹⁹ Tillman also censured the black state militia from 1868-1876, asserting that black soldiers frequently made threats “to rise up and exterminate the white men from the face of the earth and take this country.”²⁰

Tillman believed that white southerners needed to eliminate black voters to prevent them from electing unscrupulous whites as they had done after the Civil War. “The negroes,” Tillman said, “put the little pieces of paper in the box that gave the commission to these white scoundrels who were their leaders and the men who

¹⁶ Simkins, *Pitchfork Ben Tillman*, 299-302.

¹⁷ Tillman speech, in *Journal of the Constitutional Convention of the State of South Carolina*, 444.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 445.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 462.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

debauched them.”²¹ Although the eight-box law and registration laws had decreased the number of black voters in the decades after Reconstruction, the threat remained. African American political participation, Tillman told the convention, is “like the viper that is asleep, only to be warmed into life again and sting us whenever some more white rascals, native or foreign, come here and mobilize the ignorant blacks.”²² He believed that the deplorable conditions of Reconstruction were direct consequences of biracial democracy. Because of this, Tillman argued that the example of Reconstruction “must be our justification, our vindication and our excuse to the world” for the need to “restrict the suffrage and circumscribe it.”²³ Taking the ballot away from blacks was the only way to ensure “that this infamy can never come about again.”²⁴

Throughout the convention, Tillman boasted of how he and the native whites overthrew Reconstruction through “fraud and violence.”²⁵ Three years later, Tillman’s glorification of violence inspired a new generation of red shirts. In 1898 Tillman traveled to North Carolina and delivered a speech to a crowd of Democrats and red shirts. He recounted the familiar story of how the red shirts, by any means necessary, secured Democratic victory in 1876. In the months following Tillman’s speech, the Democratic state chairman in North Carolina frequently ordered North Carolina red shirts to break up rallies and events held by the Republican-Populist coalition.²⁶ For South Carolinians, however, the 1898 Phoenix riot in Greenwood County, South Carolina brought back

²¹ Ibid., 463.

²² Ibid., 463-464.

²³ Ibid., 463.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Woodward, *Origins of the New South*, 348-349.

memories of Hamburg in 1876. On election day in the village of Phoenix a riot broke out after black and white Republicans challenged the suffrage restrictions. When the dust settled, at least seven blacks and one white had been killed in the confrontation.²⁷

As Ben Tillman's 1895 oration demonstrates, the tragic story of Reconstruction was a powerful tool for political mobilization. Their summations of Reconstruction were successful because it played upon the fears of white southerners living in the late nineteenth century. Tillman and other southern politicians made Reconstruction their primary justification for implementing disfranchisement measures. Tillman's manipulation of the past helped him erect barriers designed to eliminate black voting in the South. Tillman's interpretation of Reconstruction soon became ubiquitous in southern culture.

Dissemination

For the first thirty years after the Civil War, romance and sectional reconciliation were prominent literary themes in southern fiction. At the end of the nineteenth century, however, alterations in race relations engendered a change in how southern authors approached historical fiction. As Jim Crow segregation and discriminatory laws were being implemented across the southern states, authors began to write historical fiction within the context of a legally segregated South. Authors had to present their subject matter in a way that would explain, justify, and legitimize the new developments in

²⁷ Bruce Baker, *What Reconstruction Meant: Historical Memory in the American South* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2007), 27; Edgar, *South Carolina*, 447-448; Woodward, *Origins*, 348-349.

southern race relations. “As they remembered Reconstruction,” Stephen Prince notes, “turn-of-the-century white southerners were actually speaking about their own place and time.”²⁸ Turn-of-the-century southern authors presented a story of Reconstruction that was compatible with the systematic disfranchisement of African Americans.

Reconstruction emerged as a popular subject precisely when disfranchisement and segregation were being written into state law. Thomas Nelson Page, Joel Chandler Harris, and Thomas Dixon, to name a few, were among the southern authors who cornered the market on Reconstruction novels. Transcending regional boundaries, Reconstruction-themed novels were popular on a national scale. Thomas Nelson Page’s *Red Rock: A Chronicle of Reconstruction* (1898) reached number five on the 1899 best-seller list and Thomas Dixon’s *The Clansman* (1905) ascended to number four on the 1905 best-seller list.²⁹ Both novels were saturated with a virulent racism that strengthened southerners’ belief that blacks, under the supervision of their carpetbagger and scalawag allies, were unpredictable and malicious after securing citizenship rights.

In both *Red Rock: A Chronicle of Reconstruction* and *The Clansman*, Reconstruction is portrayed as a dangerous epoch, especially for white southerners. Both novels fall squarely within the white supremacist Reconstruction narrative. Page asserted that under Republican government, white southerners “were subjected to the greatest humiliation of modern times: their slaves were put over them” until white southerners

²⁸ K. Stephen Prince, *Stories of the South: Race and the Reconstruction of Southern Identity, 1865-1915* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 234.

²⁹ Ayers, *The Promise of the New South*, 340-362.

“reconquered their section and preserved the civilization of the Anglo-Saxon.”³⁰ Dixon’s racist sentiment was more profound and explicit. Dixon insisted that Thaddeus Stevens implemented Reconstruction policies to “Africanize” the southern states. Dixon contended that the Ku Klux Klan—the heroes of *The Clansman*—fought “against overwhelming odds, daring exile, imprisonment, and a felon’s death, and saved the life of a people,” an event Dixon believed was “one of the most dramatic chapters in the history of the Aryan race.”³¹

Grace Elizabeth Hale explores the connection between racist Reconstruction fiction and the emerging Jim Crow system erected in the South around the turn of the century. Hale argues that the South’s culture of segregation depended on the creation and maintenance of separate spaces for blacks and whites. Southerners authoring Reconstruction-themed novels, especially Page and Dixon, aided southern elites in perpetuating the need for racial separation by depicting African Americans as beastlike savages terrorizing white southerners during Reconstruction. The result, Hale maintains, was that “white southerners made Reconstruction the first black space of their new culture of segregation.”³² Since African Americans’ political participation reached its zenith during Reconstruction, it was imperative for white southerners to condemn the democratic ideals behind Reconstruction-era policies.

³⁰ Thomas Nelson Page, *Red Rock: A Chronicle of Reconstruction* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1912 reprint; originally published in 1898), viii-ix.

³¹ Quote from “To the Reader” in Thomas Dixon, *The Clansman* (2016 reprint; originally published in 1905).

³² Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940* (New York: Vintage Books, Division of Random House, 1998), 75. Hale argues that the creation of a collective white identity involved the “cultural work of othering southern African Americans.” White southerners did this, in part, by attempting to “control both the geographical and representational mobility of nonwhites.”

The government-sponsored savagery presented in *The Clansman* was given illustration ten years after its publication. In 1915 D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* was released in the United States. Griffith's film revolutionized the film industry and became one of the most influential movies of the silent film-era. The screenplay was based on Thomas Dixon's 1905 novel *The Clansman* and was initially given the same name before the decision was made to change the title to *The Birth of a Nation*. Griffith employed a scale of production and technological innovation that was unprecedented in the early twentieth century. As Melvyn Stokes notes, Griffith's film was "the first American film to be twelve reels long and to last around three hours. It was the first to cost \$100,000 to produce."³³

The film's commercial success ensured that Griffith's portrayal of Reconstruction would reach a vast, national audience. *The Birth of a Nation* played at the Liberty Theater in New York for a record-breaking forty-seven weeks, and was also the first film to be shown in the White House. After viewing *The Birth of a Nation*, President Woodrow Wilson claimed the film was "like writing history with lightening."³⁴ Films like *The Birth of a Nation* and, later, *Gone With the Wind* contributed immensely to the enduring negative perceptions of the period.³⁵

The parts of the film set during Reconstruction provided visuals and imagery to the tragic-era trope. Reconstruction, as portrayed in *The Birth of a Nation*, was a time

³³ Melvyn Stokes, *D.W. Griffith's The Birth of a Nation: A History of 'The Most Controversial Motion Picture of All Time'* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 3.

³⁴ George B. Tindall, *The Emergence of the New South, 1913-1945* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967), 186.

³⁵ For more on Reconstruction and film, see: Ron Briley, "Hollywood's Reconstruction and the Persistence of Historical Mythmaking," *The History Teacher*, vol. 41, no. 4 (August 2008): 453-468.

when Radical Republicans and carpetbaggers came to South Carolina with the intent to punish native white southerners. Carpetbaggers manipulated the former slaves into voting for the Radical Republicans, who sought to cripple the Democratic party and establish Republican hegemony in the South. These unscrupulous motives were symbolized in the character of Senator Stoneman, whose personal hatred of the South influenced his political decisions during Reconstruction.

Griffith, moreover, depicts African Americans as malicious individuals who pose a dangerous threat to white southerners and especially to white women. In one scene, black soldiers under the supervision of a white scalawag carry out a raid on the Cameron house. The soldiers destroy the Cameron's property and cause white women to fear for their lives. In another scene, Florida Cameron—the youngest daughter of the Cameron family—jumps off a cliff to evade an African American male who she believes will rape and kill her.³⁶

Reunions and public gatherings lionized the men who overthrew the Republican state governments. From 1908 to 1911 Red Shirt reunions were held in various South Carolina cities. Red Shirt veterans modeled these reunions largely after the ones staged by Confederate veterans. The reunions were popular social events. At these reunions, veterans of the 1876 campaign would arrive wearing the old tattered red shirts, listen to enthusiastic speeches, and parade through the streets of the host city. A band would march in a commemorative parade to recreate the optics of Wade Hampton's 1876

³⁶ Terry Christensen, *Reel Politics: American Political Movies from Birth of a Nation to Platoon* (New York: Basil Blackwell Inc., 1987), 13-18.

gubernatorial campaign. Politicians and former red shirts exhorted the younger generations to appreciate the heroic efforts of their fathers and grandfathers for helping to overthrow the carpetbagger-led government. Children also took part in the festivities. At the 1908 red shirt reunion in Pendleton young boys dressed themselves in red shirts, organized themselves into a company, and participated in the commemorative march.³⁷

During the 1909 reunion in Anderson, South Carolina, Ben Tillman extolled the red shirts for their leadership in the 1876 Democratic campaign. In his speech, Tillman condoned and celebrated the violent tactics and racial conflicts of 1876, insisting that “nothing but bloodshed and a good deal of it could answer the purpose of redeeming the state from negro and carpet bag rule.”³⁸ He recited a story of Reconstruction that he had mobilized in the 1890s. Tillman described the overthrow of Reconstruction as “the triumph of the whites over the blacks; of civilization and progress over barbarism and the forces which were undermining the very foundations of our commonwealth.”³⁹ Moreover, he asserted “that we have good government now is due entirely to the fact that the red shirt men of 1876 did all and dared all that was necessary to rescue South Carolina from the rule of the alien, the traitor, and the semi-barbarous negroes.”⁴⁰ These reunions were instrumental in perpetuating the heroic image of the Redeemers.

Although the red shirt reunions were ephemeral, the tragic-era trope was visible in other public displays. Through monuments and statues, the tragic-era trope assumed

³⁷ Baker, *What Reconstruction Meant*, 54-68.

³⁸ Ben Tillman, *The Struggles of 1876: How South Carolina Was Delivered from Carpet-bag and Negro Rule* (Speech at the Red-Shirt Reunion at Anderson, S.C.: Personal Reminiscences and Incidents by Senator B.R. Tillman, 1909), 17.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 32-33.

permanent visibility in South Carolina society and, in its own way, bolstered the notion that the ‘Redeemers’ were heroes for ending Reconstruction. In 1903 the governor appointed a commission to oversee the construction of an equestrian Wade Hampton statue on the statehouse grounds in Columbia. The state government contributed twenty thousand dollars to the project, while businesses and organizations throughout the state donated money to help fund the project. The statue was erected in 1906 and accelerated Hampton’s transformation from a political figure to a cultural hero in South Carolina society.⁴¹

Public monuments, however, were not just reserved for political leaders. In 1916 a monument was erected in North Augusta that publicly commemorated McKie Meriwether—the lone white man killed during the Hamburg Massacre of 1876. The project was funded by the South Carolina state government. For Tillman and like-minded southerners, McKie Meriwether best represented the selfless white southerner who sacrificed his life in the struggle for ‘redemption.’ John C. Sheppard, ex-South Carolina governor and red shirt veteran, presided over the monument’s official opening. At one point during the ceremonial proceedings, Daniel S. Henderson addressed the assembled crowd. Henderson was the attorney who had defended the white men charged with murdering six African Americans during the Hamburg Massacre. During his oration, Henderson presented McKie Meriwether as a martyr whose killing galvanized white southerners to organize and run a ‘straight-out’ Democratic ticket in 1876. In addition,

⁴¹ Baker, *What Reconstruction Meant*, 21-43.

Henderson showed no contrition for the six African Americans that were executed on that July day in 1876.⁴²

The Meriwether monument was part of a regional trend of monument-building that swept across the South in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As Fitzhugh Brundage notes, the African American experience was absent from most of the public monuments erected in the South. Brundage argues that “at its most fundamental level, the project of public history in the early twentieth century South was the archiving of white civilization.”⁴³ The Meriwether monument, perhaps, best exemplifies Brundage’s assessment.

Family history was important to the dissemination of the tragic era trope. For many southerners, personal implications were at stake in the struggle over South Carolina’s Reconstruction history. Growing up in families that contained participants in the South’s Reconstruction drama, many young southerners had frequent opportunities to hear tales of how the federal government’s ill-advised policy in the defeated South brought near annihilation to a once prosperous region. The importance of family tales in laying the groundwork for young southerners’ understanding of the era cannot be understated. The recollections and views expressed by participant-observers served as the intellectual framework and foundation in shaping young southerners’ understanding of a complicated era. Many of the authors discussed in the following chapter had intimate connections with the men responsible for overthrowing Reconstruction.

⁴² Ibid., 64-68.

⁴³ W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *The Southern Past: A Clash of Race and Memory* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2005), 121.

Validation

In many ways, the views of professional historians confirmed and strengthened southerners' belief that Reconstruction was an unprecedented tragedy. In the late nineteenth century, Columbia University was home to John W. Burgess and William A. Dunning. By the early twentieth century, Columbia had become the leading academic institution for the professional study of southern history and especially Reconstruction. Over the course of his lengthy career, Dunning published influential historical scholarship as well as supervised numerous theses and dissertations that studied Reconstruction in the individual southern states. Dunning and his students were the first academic historians who studied the Reconstruction era in America. The interpretations of Reconstruction found in these studies became known as the "Dunning School" and was considered the authoritative account of Reconstruction for the first half of the twentieth century.⁴⁴

Dunning was one of many American historians in the late nineteenth century influenced by Leopold von Ranke's notion of 'scientific history.' To Dunning and his students, as James S. Humphreys notes, "researching and collecting the facts of history

⁴⁴ William A. Dunning taught at Columbia University from 1885 until his death in 1922. While at Columbia, Dunning advised eight dissertations focusing on Reconstruction in individual southern states and ten theses on subjects related to the Civil War and Reconstruction. Dunning's graduate students most associated with the "Dunning School" are James W. Garner, Walter Lynwood Fleming, William W. Davis, J.G. de Roulhac Hamilton, Charles W. Ramsdell, C. Mildred Thompson, and Ulrich B. Phillips. For more on John W. Burgess, William Dunning, Dunning's graduate students, and Reconstruction historiography, see collection of essays in: John David Smith and J. Vincent Lowery, ed., *The Dunning School: Historians, Race, and the Meaning of Reconstruction* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2013).

mattered more than attempting to divine the meaning of the past.”⁴⁵ Stressing empiricism and eschewing hypothesis, Dunning and his students based their conclusions on the research of primary sources—newspapers, personal papers, government documents, congressional testimony and other public documents. But because these studies narrowly focused on political and economic subjects—and also rested on the historians’ racist assumptions—these histories essentially told the tragic story of a corrupt government comprised of carpetbaggers, scalawags, and ignorant blacks exploiting a defeated, penitent South and oppressed native white southerners.

Despite minor differences among themselves, Dunning School historians shared a gloomy assessment of Reconstruction.⁴⁶ After Republican policy supplanted President Andrew Johnson’s policy in 1868, according to the Dunning interpretation, northern Republicans—carpetbaggers—came South for personal, political, and economic aggrandizement. The northern interlopers were aided by traitorous scalawags, dangerous state militias composed primarily of African Americans, vengeful ex-slaves, federal soldiers, and vindictive Republicans in Washington. Dunning historians emphasized the fraud and corruption carried out by Reconstruction governments, as well as perpetuated the notion that blacks were innately inferior human beings. In the minds of Dunning and

⁴⁵ James S. Humphreys, “William Archibald Dunning: Flawed Colossus of American Letters,” in *The Dunning School: Historians, Race, and the Meaning of Reconstruction*, ed. by John David Smith and J. Vincent Lowery (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2013), 80.

⁴⁶ For Reconstruction histories representative of the Dunning School, see: James W. Garner, *Reconstruction in Mississippi* (1901); Walter L. Fleming, *Civil War and Reconstruction in Alabama* (1905); John S. Reynolds, *Reconstruction in South Carolina, 1865-1877* (1905); William A. Dunning, *Reconstruction, Political and Economic, 1865-1877* (Harper & Brothers, 1907); Charles W. Ramsdell, *Reconstruction in Texas* (1910); William Watson Davis, *The Civil War and Reconstruction in Florida* (1913); J.G. de Roulhac Hamilton, *Reconstruction in North Carolina* (1914); C. Mildred Thompson, *Reconstruction in Georgia* (1915). The last major Reconstruction history written within the Dunning framework was published in 1947. See: E. Merton Coulter, *The South during Reconstruction* (1947).

his students, native whites were justified in using violent and extreme tactics to overthrow the Reconstruction governments; it was necessary for the restoration of ‘good government.’ In the end, Dunning and his disciples concluded that Reconstruction, as Eric Foner claims, was “the darkest page in the saga of American history.”⁴⁷

The Dunning interpretation became the standard account of Reconstruction. As Peter Novick observes in *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession*, American historians applied the scientific method to their work, and believed that conclusions based on the research of primary sources “might ultimately produce a comprehensive, definitive history.”⁴⁸ Dunning and his students presented their Reconstruction histories as objective truth, which served to validate southerners’ unfavorable perception of the period. The claims to scientific history and objective truth also discouraged and quite possibly prevented widespread challenges to the Dunning interpretation. According to Novick, historians in the early twentieth century recognized that “if they deviated seriously from established orthodoxy” then their views “would fail the test of objectivity.”⁴⁹

In 1909-1910, W.E.B. Du Bois strayed from established orthodoxy and, therefore, failed the ‘test of objectivity.’ Du Bois’ 1909 speech at the American Historical Association’s meeting in New York City—published as an essay in *The American Historical Review* the following year—questioned and challenged standard assumptions

⁴⁷ Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877*, xviii.

⁴⁸ Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 37.

⁴⁹ Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 68.

of the Reconstruction period.⁵⁰ Charges of incompetency, theft, and extravagance levied against the biracial Reconstruction governments, Du Bois asserted, were “in part undoubtedly true, but they are often exaggerated.”⁵¹ Moreover, Du Bois had a message for those who believed that black voting was responsible for the problems of Reconstruction: “remember that if there had not been a single freedman left in the South after the war the problems of Reconstruction would still have been grave.”⁵²

Du Bois also refuted the Dunning School’s negative conclusions about the state governments by arguing that “the negro governments in the South accomplished much of positive good.”⁵³ He highlighted three developments in particular that the Reconstruction governments gave to the South: “1. Democratic government. 2. Free public schools. 3. New social legislation.”⁵⁴ Interestingly, Du Bois used the South Carolina 1868 state constitution as a model “modern democratic document...which did away with property qualifications and based representation directly on population instead of property.”⁵⁵ In 1913 John R. Lynch—former government official in Reconstruction Mississippi—echoed Du Bois’ critique of the Dunning School in *The Facts of Reconstruction*. Yet, because Du Bois and Lynch were African Americans and deviated from conventional beliefs, most whites dismissed their interpretations of Reconstruction and critique of prevailing judgments on the period.

⁵⁰ W.E. Burghardt Du Bois, “Reconstruction and its Benefits,” *The American Historical Review*, vol. 15, no. 4 (July 1910), 781-799.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 789.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 781.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 795.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

John S. Reynolds' *Reconstruction in South Carolina, 1865-1877*, published in 1905, found a more receptive audience. Reynolds' 500-plus page account was "the standard treatment of Reconstruction in South Carolina for twenty-seven years."⁵⁶ Though not a student of Dunning nor a professional historian by trade, Reynolds' 1905 publication, as Bruce Baker suggests, "straddled the divide between amateur and professional history."⁵⁷ Reynolds did not include footnotes but did inform readers that "public records have been used wherever accessible" and that his statements regarding the character of individuals "have been carefully verified by reference to such records or to other sources of equal authority."⁵⁸ These claims to factual information seemed to legitimate and validate white South Carolinians' perception of Reconstruction in the Palmetto state.

Reynolds consulted records from the investigating committees—established after 1877 by the Democratic-controlled state government—which had exposed government corruption and scandals under Republican rule from 1868-1876. As a result, Reynolds concluded that the Reconstruction government was "irresponsible, debased and corrupt."⁵⁹ The Republican state governments were inept largely because Reynolds believed that African Americans were an inferior race, describing them as a "race

⁵⁶ Neill W. Macaulay, Jr., "South Carolina Reconstruction Historiography," *The South Carolina Historical Magazine*, vol. 65, no. 1 (January 1964), 24.

⁵⁷ Baker, *What Reconstruction Meant*, 36; Reynolds was an editor for various South Carolina newspapers in the late nineteenth century: *The Columbia Register*, the *Columbia Evening Record*, and the *Columbia State*. Reynolds was working as a librarian of South Carolina's Supreme Court around the time that *Reconstruction in South Carolina, 1865-1877* was published in 1905.

⁵⁸ John S. Reynolds, *Reconstruction in South Carolina, 1865-1877* (Columbia, SC: The State Company Publishers, 1905), iv.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 506.

incapable of forming any judgment upon the actions of men.”⁶⁰ Reynolds levied withering criticism against the state government composed of carpetbaggers, scalawags, and former slaves. He asserted that the Reconstruction government was “a ‘stench in the nostrils of decent people’ and a disgrace to the country.”⁶¹

Like most historians, Reynolds justified the extreme course taken by white southerners in 1876 and suggested that Republicans used intimidation against black Democrats far more than Democrats had done with black Republicans. When Reynolds was not justifying white violence, he was downplaying the impact that those tactics had had on the 1876 election. He insisted that “if all the fraudulent or otherwise illegal votes had been eliminated Hampton would still have been elected.”⁶² Reynolds’ publication would not be supplanted until 1932, when professional historians Francis Butler Simkins and Robert Hilliard Woody published *South Carolina during Reconstruction*.

By the time of the First World War, the tragic era trope was firmly entrenched in southern culture. Moreover, the way that Reconstruction was used in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries fortified the connection between black voting and Reconstruction-era turmoil. A negative story of Reconstruction was indispensable to the erection of Jim Crow and disfranchisement measures. After World War I, however, a new

⁶⁰ Ibid., 504.

⁶¹ Ibid., 514.

⁶² Ibid., 504.

generation of white southerners would reexamine fundamental assumptions of Reconstruction.

CHAPTER TWO

REASSESSMENT AND REACTION

*Sometimes Southern historians forget that what is often important to Southerners is not what actually happened but what is believed to have happened.*⁶³

--Francis Butler Simkins

By the 1930s, the ‘tragic’ story of Reconstruction had become a cultural axiom disseminated to the new generation of southerners. Yet, during the Southern Literary Renaissance, southern writers grappled with the inherited truths of Reconstruction. Below the Potomac, there ensued an intellectual struggle over the cultural trope of Reconstruction. While many southerners continued to adhere to traditional beliefs regarding the South’s Reconstruction experience, others began to question and contradict entrenched assumptions about the meaning of Reconstruction.

In the first section of this chapter, I examine the early revisionism in Reconstruction historiography by analyzing the works of Alruthus Ambush Taylor and especially Francis Butler Simkins. In the second section, I discuss the implications of revised interpretations in Reconstruction historiography and analyze the reaction it provoked among conservative white southerners. I then analyze three Reconstruction publications authored by conservative white southerners between the world wars. In the third section, I explore how southern politicians, especially Ellison “Cotton Ed” Smith, conceptualized and used Reconstruction during the heated battles over federal anti-

⁶³ Francis Butler Simkins, “Tolerating the South’s Past,” *Journal of Southern History* 21, no. 1 (1955): 14.

lynching legislation. As threats to southern traditions mounted, Ed Smith reactivated the tragic era trope in a manner reminiscent of Ben Tillman.

Rethinking Reconstruction, Past and Present

African Americans remained the most vocal critics of prevailing Reconstruction views. In 1924, Alrutheus Ambush Taylor published a historical account of South Carolina during Reconstruction. Unlike previous Reconstruction histories, Taylor's *The Negro in South Carolina during Reconstruction* presented black southerners as active and capable participants during South Carolina's Reconstruction years. Taylor chided the Dunning School historians for their racism, neglect of nonpolitical developments, and use of partisan newspaper sources. These flaws, Taylor argued, made their studies "practically worthless in studying and teaching the history of the reconstruction period."⁶⁴ The real purpose behind the Dunning histories and similar publications, Taylor lamented, was "to prove that the Negro is not capable of participation in government and to justify the methods of intimidation instituted to overthrow the reconstruction governments of the Southern commonwealths."⁶⁵

While most white southerners dismissed Taylor's—and later Du Bois'—work on the account of race, critiques that emanated from the pen of white southerners could not be as readily dismissed. Between the world wars, there were white southerners—more specifically, southern writers—who were more inclined to question than accept dogma.

⁶⁴ Alrutheus Ambush Taylor, *The Negro in South Carolina during Reconstruction* (New York: Russell & Russell; originally published Association for the Study of Negro Life and History in 1924), 2.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 1-2.

This was especially true for the generation of southerners born around the turn of the twentieth century, who grew up amidst the changes and consequences engendered by the First World War. As Richard King argues, a “crucial segment” of this generation “came to feel increasingly estranged from the tradition.”⁶⁶ Moreover, Daniel Singal argues these southerners had “an unparalleled opportunity to view the South with fresh eyes.”⁶⁷

Lillian Smith appeared to exemplify the critical attitude while reviewing books for *Pseudopodia*, a prominent liberal quarterly in the 1930s and 1940s.⁶⁸ Born in 1897 in Jasper, Florida before moving to Georgia in 1915, Smith would become one of the most influential southern liberals in the interwar years. Both Smith and Paula Snelling, co-founder of *Pseudopodia*, wanted the quarterly to express a more critical and honest view of the region. Smith was extremely critical of Margaret Mitchell’s nostalgia and sentimentality in *Gone With the Wind*. Moreover, in 1937 Smith censured James G. Randall, Carl Russell Fish, and Paul Buck for their books on Reconstruction. In her review, Smith suggested that the historians’ biased views against African Americans and egalitarianism prevented a complete and accurate portrayal of the period.⁶⁹

For Reconstruction scholarship, however, fresh eyes came in the form of Francis Butler Simkins. Simkins’ environment, childhood, and education seemed to suggest that

⁶⁶ Richard King, *A Southern Renaissance: The Cultural Awakening of the American South, 1930-1955* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 15-16.

⁶⁷ Daniel J. Singal, *The War Within: From Victorian to Modernist Thought in the South, 1919-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 111.

⁶⁸ The publication became the *North Georgia Review* in 1937, then *South Today* in 1942. The last year of publication was 1945.

⁶⁹ Anne C. Loveland, *Lillian Smith: A Southerner Confronting the South, A Biography* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), 27-28. Also see, King, *A Southern Renaissance*, 177-179 and, Hale, *Making Whiteness*, 269-270.

he was more likely to adhere to the central tenets of the Reconstruction trope than to question them. Simkins was born on December 14, 1897 in Edgefield, South Carolina, a county in the upstate with a dark history of racial violence. Martin Witherspoon Gary’s “No. 1 Plan of the Campaign” in 1876—in which Gary condoned the murder of Republicans—is still known by some as the “Edgefield policy.” Edgefield was also home to Ben Tillman, who before becoming an influential politician had played an active role in the violent campaign of 1876. In the 1890s, Tillman would employ the tragic-era Reconstruction narrative to mobilize support for the disfranchisement of blacks. From an early age Simkins was familiar with the history of Edgefield and with prominent Edgefield natives. In his youth, as his biographer notes, Simkins “heard countless stories, tinged with partisanship and romance, about the celebrated past of upcountry South Carolina.”⁷⁰

Simkins’ road to becoming an academic historian began at the University of South Carolina, where he received his B.A. in 1918. Simkins pursued his graduate work at Columbia University, earning his M.A. in 1920 and Ph.D. in 1926. Columbia was home to William A. Dunning, considered to be at the time the leading historian of the Reconstruction era. In many ways, the Dunning School interpretation confirmed and strengthened southerners’ belief in the tragedy of Reconstruction. Because this interpretation echoed the views of nineteenth century southern politicians, Dunning and

⁷⁰ James S. Humphreys, *Francis Butler Simkins: A Life* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2008), 19.

his graduate students, as John David Smith claims, “documented and then propagated the myths and legends of a ‘tragic’ Reconstruction rather than creating them.”⁷¹

Simkins took a few courses with Dunning—primarily in history and political theory—while at Columbia but was never heavily influenced by Dunning, who was then in the latter stages of his life. As James S. Humphreys notes, Simkins’ intellectual development at that time had reached the point where he was more inclined to question historical interpretations than blindly accept them. At Columbia Simkins also took courses in anthropology under Franz Boas, whose research contradicted the prevailing notion of scientific racism. Traces of Boas’ findings would appear later in Simkins’ revisionist work on Reconstruction.⁷²

In 1932 the University of North Carolina Press—then under the direction of William Terry Couch—published *South Carolina during Reconstruction*, co-authored by Simkins and fellow southerner Robert Hilliard Woody. The agreement between author and press was appropriate, for Couch was interested in publishing works that were critical of the South. Believing that conflict was essential to a healthy society, Couch published books on southern history, the contemporary south, literary criticism, folklore, and other disciplines. Many of the publications dealt with controversial topics plaguing the contemporary South such as lynching, poor conditions in mill villages, and economic inequities. Overall, as Daniel Singal argues, “inculcating a critical attitude among

⁷¹ John David Smith, “Introduction,” in *The Dunning School: Historians, Race, and the Meaning of Reconstruction*, ed. John David Smith and J. Vincent Lowery (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2013), 7; Humphreys, *Francis Butler Simkins: A Life*, 4-71.

⁷² Humphreys, *Francis Butler Simkins: A Life*, 51-71.

southerners at all social levels became the press's central mission."⁷³ Simkins' contrarian Reconstruction account was well-suited to advance Couch's drive for home-grown southern criticism.

Simkins' work was a drastic departure from the traditional approach to analyzing Reconstruction. Instead of "following in the footsteps of historians who have interpreted the period as only a glamorous but tragic melodrama of political intrigue," Simkins sought "to recreate the life of a people during a short span of years."⁷⁴ To do this, Simkins and Woody analyzed nonpolitical developments—more specifically, economic and social factors—that had been neglected in previous Reconstruction histories. They researched and analyzed developments in transportation, commerce, economics, religion, social life, agriculture and more. After studying nonpolitical as well as political aspects of Reconstruction, Simkins and Woody believed that Reconstruction contained developments "less showy and of a more constructive significance."⁷⁵

To claim that Reconstruction featured positive developments was anathema to most whites living below the Mason-Dixon line in 1932. Advocating for the positives also contradicted the assumption that Reconstruction was nothing but disastrous to southern society. But Simkins' openness to contrary viewpoints allowed him to transcend the regional and racial partisanship harbored by most white southerners. For Simkins, the Reconstruction era had lasting and positive contributions to South Carolina. Additionally, he treated African Americans more sympathetically than other white historians of his

⁷³ Singal, *The War Within*, 275.

⁷⁴ Francis Butler Simkins and Robert Hilliard Woody, *South Carolina during Reconstruction* (UNC Press, 1966 reprint; originally published, Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1932), viii.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

generation, and portrayed southern blacks as active citizens in South Carolina's Reconstruction history.

One area where Simkins diverged from standard accounts of Reconstruction in South Carolina was in his treatment of the 1868 constitutional convention and the constitution it produced. In 1905 John S. Reynolds' *Reconstruction in South Carolina* argued that the "ruling characteristic" of the 1868 constitutional convention, and every other Republican-dominated convention, "was its irresponsibility."⁷⁶ Simkins, however, rejected this view. He argued that "the manner in which the convention went about its work was almost exemplary," and that "the delegates did not create 'the Negro bedlam' which tradition has associated with them."⁷⁷ Many black delegates, Simkins showed, conducted themselves honorably during the proceedings and "insults were avoided in referring to the whites."⁷⁸

The 1868 South Carolina state constitution, according to Simkins, embodied "some of the best legal principles of the age."⁷⁹ He argued that "in letter," the 1868 constitution "was as good as any other constitution the state has ever had."⁸⁰ For positive provisions of the 1868 constitution, Simkins cited the establishment of free public education, reform to local and judicial administration, universal manhood suffrage, and

⁷⁶ John S. Reynolds, *Reconstruction in South Carolina, 1865-1877* (Columbia, SC: The State Company Publishers, 1905), 504.

⁷⁷ Simkins, *South Carolina during Reconstruction*, 105.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 105; 90-111.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 94.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

the removal of property qualifications for voting. Simkins noted that the Tillman-inspired 1895 constitution was “scarcely more than a revision of the handiwork of the Radicals.”⁸¹

Equally significant was Simkins’ chapter devoted to black religion in the Reconstruction period. He called “the winning of religious independence” by blacks “the most momentous social change of Reconstruction.”⁸² Very few historians up to that time had dealt with black religion in any considerable fashion. Simkins’ analysis of the black religious experience, therefore, signaled a significant departure from the conventional approach to the study of Reconstruction. He even noted that although southerners frequently disparage the years when South Carolina was under the control of radical Republicans, “no one at the present ever dreams of challenging” the religious segregation that originated in Reconstruction.⁸³

The concluding chapter, “The Heritage of Reconstruction,” however, featured Simkins’ most insightful analysis. Here, Simkins listed the harsh methods whites had used after Reconstruction to keep African Americans in an inferior political and social position. He noted that poll tax requirements, literacy tests, the Eight Box Law, and “other laws in which the issue of race is not mentioned have usually been applied so as to discriminate against the Negro.”⁸⁴ In addition, though Simkins did not advocate for integrated schools, he did spell out the inequities in finances between white and black schools. After 1877, wrote Simkins, the “financial support given Negro schools

⁸¹ Ibid., 561.

⁸² Ibid., 395.

⁸³ Ibid., 383-395.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 553.

immediately became less than that given white schools, and as the years passed this disparity became greater.”⁸⁵

Simkins believed that the suffrage restrictions of the 1895 constitution were not the primary reason for the small number of registered black voters. Instead, he asserted that “everyone familiar with conditions in the rural counties knows that the possibility of violence is the principal reason why there are not more Negro voters.”⁸⁶ Simkins’ commentary on the 1895 constitution undoubtedly alarmed white supremacists. “The suffrage restrictions instituted by Tillman have not had the desired effect” because, wrote Simkins, “the Negro still has the potential right to vote, and a few of them have always done so since 1895.”⁸⁷

He also dealt with the uphill battle that black southerners faced in the courts: “Juries have, in almost all cases, consisted exclusively of whites, and they have seldom turned a Negro free for an alleged crime against a white person and they have seldom convicted a white person for an alleged crime against a Negro.”⁸⁸ Simkins addressed the problem of lynching in the South at a time when southern senators vehemently resisted the passage of anti-lynching legislation, in part, by activating the tragic-era trope in marathon filibusters. Simkins asserted that “white public opinion has not always been content to let the law take its course in dealing with Negro culprits; since Reconstruction

⁸⁵ Ibid., 443.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 551.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 553.

white mobs have lynched several scores of Negroes, and no one has been punished for these lawless acts.”⁸⁹

The native southerner then turned his attention to the ‘tragic’ Reconstruction trope, which had become axiomatic in southern culture and society. “Perhaps the most significant influence of Reconstruction,” Simkins wrote, “has been the interpretation which has been put upon it.”⁹⁰ He argued that historians of Reconstruction had merely echoed the judgments of Ben Tillman’s racist dogma, and noted “the general character of the period has been portrayed in lurid colors.”⁹¹ In his assailing of previous Reconstruction histories, Simkins took direct aim at amateur historians John S. Reynolds and Henry Thompson—who will be discussed later in this chapter—for consigning unscrupulous motives to radical republicans, justifying the violent measures employed by white southerners, and portraying those who ‘redeemed’ the state as heroes.⁹²

Simkins elaborated on his theories in an article published in *The Journal of Southern History* in February 1939.⁹³ Titled “New Viewpoints of Southern Reconstruction,” Simkins argued that the traditional Reconstruction interpretation was “woefully one-sided and unhistorical” and that it was the historian’s “serious civic duty” to “foster more moderate, saner, and perhaps newer views of his period.”⁹⁴ Later in life,

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 556.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid., 556-561.

⁹³ Francis Butler Simkins, “New Viewpoints of Southern Reconstruction,” *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (Feb., 1939), 49-61.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 51.

as Simkins' biographer notes, Simkins claimed that "New Viewpoints of Southern Reconstruction" was the most important article he ever wrote.⁹⁵

"The capital blunder of the chronicler of Reconstruction," Simkins believed, "is to treat that period like Carlyle's portrayal of the French Revolution, as a melodrama involving wild-eyed conspirators whose acts are best described in red flashes upon a canvas."⁹⁶ Simkins suggested that Reconstruction policies were not as radical as typically portrayed in histories, and that the failure of Reconstruction can be attributed to white southerners' commitment to white supremacy. In those days "the crime of crimes," wrote Simkins, "was to encourage Negroes in voting, officeholding, and other functions of social equality."⁹⁷

Simkins also dealt with the historical implications of the tragic era narrative in southern society. He lamented that southern politicians in the late nineteenth century justified the disfranchisement of blacks by condemning the era featuring the highest levels of black voting. "A biased interpretation of Reconstruction," wrote Simkins, "caused one of the most important political developments in the recent history of the South, the disfranchisement of the blacks."⁹⁸ After overthrowing Reconstruction, white southerners promptly seized control of and disseminated an account that justified blacks' inferior social position in the South; according to Simkins, "victory was in white hands—the actuality as well as the sentiment and the tradition."⁹⁹ Simkins suggested that

⁹⁵ Humphreys, *Francis Butler Simkins: A Life*, 163.

⁹⁶ Simkins, "New Viewpoints of Southern Reconstruction," 51.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 57-58.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 57.

historians of Reconstruction had merely echoed the same sentiment espoused by southern politicians like Ben Tillman. Simkins believed that historians' negative attitude toward Reconstruction stemmed from a motivation to justify blacks' subsequent exclusion from politics. As a result, historians have "condemned the Reconstruction measures as sweepingly as have the Southern politicians."¹⁰⁰

Equally troubling for Simkins was the ease with which white southerners absorbed the traditional tragic Reconstruction story. White southerners, Simkins contended, "accept these judgments as axiomatic."¹⁰¹ Simkins went further. "The wickedness" of the Reconstruction regime "and the righteousness of the manner in which it was destroyed are fundamentals of his [white southerners] civic code."¹⁰² He recognized the enduring relevance that Reconstruction continued to wield in the twentieth century South. Despite the passage of time, the biased interpretation of Reconstruction, as Simkins noted, was "invoked to settle issues of even the remote future."¹⁰³ Evincing a deep concern for his native region, Simkins was alarmed with how the biased interpretation of Reconstruction continued to cripple race relations in the South.

In the article, Simkins attacked the notion that blacks were innately inferior humans on the account of race. This was, perhaps, the most significant component of the article. In a tacit nod to Franz Boas, Simkins noted that "the conclusions of modern anthropology casts grave doubts on the innate inferiority of the blacks."¹⁰⁴ Since the

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 50.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 51.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 51.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 58.

behavior of blacks could not be explained on racial grounds, Simkins insisted that historians needed to explain blacks' conduct during Reconstruction—as well as during other historical periods—on nonracial grounds. Modern anthropological findings lead Simkins to reject “the gloomy generalization that the race, because of its inherent nature, is destined to play forever its present inferior role.”¹⁰⁵ Simkins' rejection of scientific racism made him a racial liberal for his time.

Simkins' research and interpretations challenged fundamental assumptions of the tragic era trope. His argument that Reconstruction featured positive developments, and his assertions that charges of corruption and white suffering had been exaggerated contradicted the prevailing belief that Reconstruction was an unmitigated disaster. Moreover, Simkins' rejection of scientific racism undermined the theory that blacks were inherently incapable of exercising sagacity and judgment in the realm of politics. While southern politicians continued to invoke Reconstruction as an example of what would happen if disfranchisement measures were swept away, Simkins' revisionist interpretations were challenging the central tenets of the tragic era trope.

Simkins' reassessment of Reconstruction coincided with the reexamination of certain disfranchisement and segregation measures. Some of the barriers that were implemented, in part, thanks to a negative account of Reconstruction in the late nineteenth century, were tested and reexamined in the 1920s, 1930s, and early-1940s. After the last Reconstruction state governments were expelled from power in 1877, southern states adopted various laws designed to keep black southerners off the voting

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

rolls and away from the polls. In addition, states across the South updated their constitutions to include legalized segregation after the Supreme Court's ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896). Disfranchisement provisions and segregation, however, were not immune from reassessment or reproach after the First World War.

The “separate but equal” doctrine, although not overturned until *Brown v Board* in 1954, was tested and reexamined in the 1930s. Two cases involving law schools—the University of Maryland and the University of Missouri—suggested that segregation was not immune from reassessment. The case involving the University of Missouri reached the United States Supreme Court and, as a result, became the first instance since 1896 that the “separate but equal” doctrine was revisited. Moreover, the Scottsboro case earlier in the decade established two important precedents relating to equal protection: in capital cases, due process mandated that the defendant have adequate counsel, and that blacks could not be systematically excluded from juries.¹⁰⁶ The legal challenges to Jim Crow between the world wars were not successful in overturning legalized segregation. Nevertheless, these legal challenges tested the boundaries of the South's racial caste system and laid the groundwork for the post-World War II civil rights movement.

The all-white primary was also reexamined after the First World War. On two occasions—*Nixon v. Herndon* (1927) and *Nixon v. Condon* (1932)—the United States Supreme Court ruled against the all-white primary in Texas. The court argued that it violated the equal protection clause guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment. The

¹⁰⁶ Tindall, *Emergence of the New South*, 558-565; William J. Cooper, Jr. and Thomas E. Terrill, *The American South: A History, Volume II* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2009), 716-719.

Democratic Party responded by transforming itself into a private organization to circumvent court decisions. In *Smith v. Allwright* (1944), however, the Supreme Court ruled that the Texas primary laws were in violation of the Fifteenth Amendment and, therefore, ruled the white primary unconstitutional.

In addition, campaigns to abolish the poll-tax represented a direct assault on a key instrument used to maintain white political hegemony. Adopted by southern states in the late-nineteenth century, the poll-tax continued to be the most effective disfranchisement measure in the twentieth century South. Most southern blacks, as well as poor whites, were excluded from the political process. By 1939, eight southern states still enforced the poll-tax as a requirement for voter registration. The House of Representatives would eventually pass five anti-poll-tax bills throughout the 1940s. None made it through the Senate. In their determination to maintain white supremacy, southern senators used protracted filibusters to halt legislation that threatened continued white dominance in southern elections.¹⁰⁷

Southern politicians were also agitated with the growing number of blacks entering the Democratic party. A few interpreted the shift as blacks taking over what had always been a 'white man's party.' South Carolina senator Ellison "Cotton Ed" Smith was especially enraged with the influx of blacks within the Democratic Party. Smith demonstrated his displeasure at the 1936 National Democratic Convention in Philadelphia, when he abruptly stormed out of the convention hall after a black delegate

¹⁰⁷ Tindall, *The Emergence of the New South*, 558-641; Cooper and Terrill, *The American South*, 719-727.

stood to give the invocation. Smith told reporters that he refused to support an organization that viewed African Americans as political and social equals.¹⁰⁸

Yet, southern conservatives discovered that the attitudes of southern whites were beginning to change. Twentieth century threats could no longer be dismissed as the work of misguided radical Republicans and unscrupulous carpetbaggers. After the First World War, critiques of the region emanated from within the South, as a new generation of southern liberals began to question inherited assumptions and traditions. Many southern liberals created or joined organizations aimed at ameliorating the unsavory features of southern society. The most prominent southern liberals were labor leaders, relief and welfare workers, organizations led by southern women, writers, journalists, professors, and the Chapel Hill Regionalists.

The Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching, as well as the Commission on Interracial Cooperation, joined the NAACP in denouncing the brutal practice of lynching. Moreover, they campaigned for measures that would protect African Americans from mob violence. The ASWPL's very existence seemed to contradict the recycled argument that lynching was necessary to protect white southern women from intractable blacks. If members of the ASWPL heard rumblings of an upcoming lynching, they would notify local law enforcement and mayors to inform them of the impending crisis, as well as request police assistance to prevent mob violence.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ Walter Edgar, *South Carolina: A History* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998), 501-508; Bruce E. Baker, *What Reconstruction Meant: Historical Memory in the American South* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007), 96-97.

¹⁰⁹ Tindall, *The Emergence of the New South*, 540-642.

The Southern Conference for Human Welfare (SCHW) formed a biracial organization of liberals that lasted for a decade. Established in 1938, their first meeting in Birmingham included prominent southern liberals such as H.C. Nixon, William T. Couch, Virginius Dabney, Ralph McGill, Frank Graham, and more. Gunnar Myrdal claimed that the meeting marked the first time that southern liberals had convened on such a large scale. Although concrete victories were minimal and the organization failed to stimulate a permanent political movement, the SCHW turned the poll-tax voting requirement into a national debate.¹¹⁰

Reactivating the Trope

White southerners combated these challenges to southern customs and traditions by holding Reconstruction up as their primary justification for the need to preserve undemocratic institutions in the South. This was the case especially for southern writers and southern politicians. Provoked by developments which threatened the status quo, white southerners disseminated the traditional tragic era story to cast aspersions on anything which threatened the sustainability of southern traditions. For them, a ‘tragic’ Reconstruction was the authoritative precedent for political and social reform in the South; to see the consequences of reform in the twentieth century, one need to look no further than to the past. When viewed in this context, then, Reconstruction becomes less literal and is instead used more in a metaphorical and figurative sense.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 540-642. For more on southern liberals’ push for egalitarian reforms, see: Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919-1950* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008).

The burst of conservative Reconstruction publications in the interwar years demonstrate how white southerners used the tragic era trope. Three publications authored by conservative white southerners stand out: Henry T. Thompson's *Ousting the Carpetbagger from South Carolina* (1926), Alfred B. Williams' *Hampton and His Red Shirts: The Story of South Carolina's Deliverance in 1876* (1935), and William A. Sheppard's *Red Shirts Remembered: Southern Brigadiers of the Reconstruction Period* (1940). By transcribing and disseminating the tragic era trope, all three authors implicitly argued against egalitarianism, democratic elections, and civil rights reform for the twentieth century South.

Their interest in propagating the traditional pro-southern account can partly be attributed to the personal implications at stake for each author. Henry Thompson's father, Hugh S. Thompson, had been president of the Richland Rifle Club beginning in 1874, and was also on the 1876 Democratic ticket as candidate for South Carolina Superintendent of Education.¹¹¹ William Sheppard had similar connections to the Democratic resistance of 1876. His father Arthur S. Sheppard "as well as many other relatives" belonged to red shirt companies during the 1876 campaign.¹¹² Alfred B. Williams, on the other hand, had covered Hampton's 1876 campaign as a journalist for the Democratic-newspaper the *Charleston Journal of Commerce*, and originally had his

¹¹¹ Hugh S. Thompson was governor of South Carolina in 1882, when the state legislature passed the Eight Box Law. In 1882 Samuel A. Melton, who was then U.S. attorney for South Carolina, filed a federal suit against poll managers for infringing on the voting rights of black southerners. In response, Governor Thompson convinced the legislature to pay the legal fees of poll managers facing federal suits. See, Edgar, *South Carolina: A History*, 413-414.

¹¹² William A. Sheppard, *Red Shirts Remembered: Southern Brigadiers of the Reconstruction Period* (Atlanta, GA: Ruralist Press, Inc., 1940), xi.

account published as a serial in two South Carolina newspapers in 1926; after he died in 1930, friends had *Hampton and His Red Shirts* published as a book in 1935.¹¹³

The three authors, however, had other purposes for writing racist, pro-southern, and, at many times, fabricated accounts of Reconstruction in South Carolina. Henry Thompson's *Ousting the Carpetbagger from South Carolina* was published two years after A.A. Taylor's *The Negro in South Carolina during Reconstruction*. Additionally, both Williams' *Hampton and His Red Shirts* and Sheppard's *Red Shirts Remembered* were published after Simkins' *South Carolina during Reconstruction* came out in 1932; Sheppard's book was also published after Simkins' 1939 article "New Viewpoints of Southern Reconstruction." Thus, there is circumstantial evidence to suggest that *Ousting the Carpetbagger from South Carolina*, *Hampton and His Red Shirts*, and *Red Shirts Remembered* were reactionary in origin.

In their accounts, both Taylor and Simkins presented blacks in a more favorable light than previous historians. From their accounts, blacks emerged not as ignorant, dangerous, or unfit citizens; rather, Taylor and Simkins showed that many blacks were competent citizens during the era when black political activity was at its peak in the

¹¹³ Robert Sobel and John Raimo, Eds., *Biographical Dictionary of the Governors of the United States, 1789-1978*, Vol. IV (Westport, CT: Meckler Books, 1978), 1421-1422; "Hugh Smith Thompson Dead: Was New York Life's Controller and ex-Governor of South Carolina," *New York Times*, November 21, 1904, 7; "Necrology: Hugh Smith Thompson," *The South Carolina Historical and Genealogical Magazine*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (January 1905), 44-46; Alfred B. Williams, *Hampton and His Red Shirts: The Story of South Carolina's Deliverance in 1876* (Toccoa, GA: Confederate Reprint Company, 2015 reprint; originally published: Charleston, SC: Walker, Evans and Cogswell Company, 1935), 15-16. Also see, *Reports and Resolutions of the General Assembly of the State of South Carolina at the Regular Session Commencing January 9, 1900, Volume 1* (Columbia, SC: The Bryan Printing Company, State Printers, 1900), 374.; United States of America, Bureau of the Census, *Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900* (Washington, DC: National Archives and Records Administration, 1900), T623, 1854 rolls. Retrieved from: Ancestry.com, *1900 United States Federal Census* (Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2004).

South. The subtle change in the treatment of blacks in Reconstruction histories takes on added significance when viewed in the context of the 1920s, 1930s, and early-1940s. Campaigns to abolish the poll-tax voting requirement, legal challenges to the all-white primary, and alterations within the Democratic party threatened longstanding barriers to black voting. Moreover, the push for anti-lynching legislation indicated a renewed interest in using federal legislation to protect the civil rights and civil liberties of black southerners.

In some ways, the early revisionism in Reconstruction historiography appeared to be actuating the more immediate threats to white political hegemony in the South. The implications of the altered portrayal of blacks, though subtle, were not lost on white southerners. If blacks started to appear as competent and responsible voters in Reconstruction histories, then it would be more difficult to justify their diminished political participation in the present. It became urgent, therefore, for white supremacists to stem the tide of revisionism in Reconstruction histories by reactivating the tragic era trope.

Thompson, Williams, and Sheppard, I argue, used their Reconstruction publications as a retort to the early revisionists and the egalitarian ideals of the 1930s. They attempted to stall the early traces of revisionism by invoking the traditional tragic era Reconstruction trope. Each author situated their beliefs within an entrenched and widely accepted narrative and, as a result, used Reconstruction as a literary device for a specific purpose. The tragic era trope was successfully used in the 1890s to disfranchise most black southerners because the story was compatible with white southerners'

expectations, but also because it connected with white southerners' fears. Between the world wars, these three southerners reactivated an old story to remind white southerners of what happened the last time blacks had a foothold in politics.

Each account disparaged the era that featured the highest levels of black voting, black officeholding, and federal protection for African Americans' civil rights. Despite minor differences, all three accounts depict Reconstruction as a disaster and exaggerate the degree of white suffering. Thompson, for instance, asserted that the horrors of Reconstruction "were even worse than those of the war."¹¹⁴ Williams also compared Reconstruction to the Civil War to exaggerate the suffering of South Carolinians. "The powers that ruled South Carolina from 1868 until they were overthrown," he claimed, "caused more destruction than the four years of the Civil War."¹¹⁵ Sheppard, on the other hand, equated Reconstruction with white enslavement, believing that whites were held in "bondage" from 1868-1876.¹¹⁶

Giving African Americans the right to vote, each author agreed, was the primary blunder of Reconstruction. All three accounts of Reconstruction present black southerners as irresponsible voters, and implied that denying them to vote was necessary for 'good' and 'honest' government. Henry Thompson concluded that "the lesson which the white people of the South learned at such bitter cost, and which they should take to their hearts forever, is that the negro must never again be allowed to gain an ascendancy

¹¹⁴ Henry T. Thompson, *Ousting the Carpetbagger from South Carolina* (1969 reprint; originally published: Columbia, SC: R.L. Bryan Company, 1926), 13.

¹¹⁵ Alfred B. Williams, *Hampton and his Red Shirts: The Story of South Carolina's Deliverance in 1876* (Toccoa, GA: The Confederate Reprint Company, 2015 reprint; originally published Charleston, SC: Walker, Evans and Cogswell Company, 1935), 19.

¹¹⁶ Sheppard, *Red Shirts Remembered*, 199.

in politics.”¹¹⁷ William A. Sheppard echoed similar views, insisting that universal suffrage was “the Iliad of all of South Carolina’s woes.”¹¹⁸

Blacks were unfit for politics, each author argued, because they were innately inferior humans. Alfred B. Williams, for example, asserted that African Americans possessed “slow and undeveloped” minds and were incapable of making rational decisions.¹¹⁹ Thompson, on the other hand, maintained that whites were “of the superior race” and the natural leaders of society.¹²⁰ Even when blacks were not directly involved with the systemic corruption, each author believed, they were the ones who voted for the unscrupulous carpetbaggers and traitorous scalawags.

Therefore, it is no surprise that each author uses James Pike’s observations when discussing the South Carolina state government from 1868 to 1876. Each author emphasized and exaggerated the level of corruption within the state government from 1868 to 1876. Thompson, for example, claimed that the Reconstruction governments practiced “an orgy of corruption and crime,” while Sheppard referred to the era as a “period of pillage.”¹²¹ Williams asserted that while carpetbaggers, scalawags, and ex-slaves were running the state government “the law was constructed to make fraud easy and safe.”¹²²

All three, predictably, presented the 1876 Democratic campaign in a favorable light. Each author treats the overthrow of Reconstruction—when white Carolinians

¹¹⁷ Thompson, *Ousting the Carpetbagger from South Carolina*, 166.

¹¹⁸ Sheppard, *Red Shirts Remembered*, 15.

¹¹⁹ Williams, *Hampton and his Red Shirts*, 68.

¹²⁰ Thompson, *Ousting the Carpetbagger from South Carolina*, 166.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 32 (first quote); Sheppard, *Red Shirts Remembered*, 6 (second quote).

¹²² Williams, *Hampton and His Red Shirts*, 20.

united to overthrow the Republican government and regain control of the state government—as the most important event in the state’s history. Henry Thompson, for example, claimed that the overthrow of Reconstruction in South Carolina was “a most momentous event in the history of the state.”¹²³ Williams believed that the Democrats’ victory in 1876 was “one of the most vitally important episodes of the history of the state and country,” while Sheppard considered it a “social and economic revolution without counterpart in the annals of the Nation.”¹²⁴

Having already exposed Thompson’s biased judgments in his 1932 book, Francis Butler Simkins was even more critical of both Williams and Sheppard. In his reviews of *Hampton and His Red Shirts* and *Red Shirts Remembered*, Simkins reminded readers that neither Williams nor Sheppard were historians by profession, and argued that both accounts exemplified what the “patriotic South Carolinian” believed about Reconstruction. Sheppard, according to Simkins, did “not attempt to be critical” in *Red Shirts Remembered* and labeled his work “a folk narrative of race prejudice.”¹²⁵ Sheppard’s account of Reconstruction, wrote Simkins, was “designed to adorn a moral: a warning to young South Carolinians that the infamy of Negro rule should never be allowed to return.”¹²⁶ *Hampton and His Red Shirts* received similar criticisms, as Simkins

¹²³ Thompson, *Ousting the Carpetbagger from South Carolina*, 1.

¹²⁴ Sheppard, *Red Shirts Remembered*, 205.

¹²⁵ Francis Butler Simkins, review of *Red Shirts Remembered: Southern Brigadiers of the Reconstruction Period*, by William Arthur Sheppard, *The Journal of Southern History*, vol. 6, no. 4 (November 1940), 563-564.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 563.

denounced it as a “violently partisan” account written by an author whose “judgments and attitudes are glaringly unrealistic.”¹²⁷

Neither Thompson, Williams, or Sheppard were professional historians.¹²⁸ They were less interested in applying the standards of academic scholarship and more in transcribing a narrative that would resonate with white southerners during the interwar years. Alfred Williams, for example, stated that his story was “presented with the hope that it will be interesting and informing to people of the present and valuable to those of the future seeking to know how the state was rescued from ruin.”¹²⁹ Williams, in a sense, was offering contemporary southerners a blue print for redemption should blacks continue to gain more of a foothold in politics. The story of Reconstruction and its eventual overthrow was sure to resonate with most white southerners.

For Thompson, Williams, and Sheppard, the *story* was more important than histories filled with facts, statistics, or extensive bibliographies. Thompson intimated as much, stating that “the younger generation are in ignorance of the story, and only know

¹²⁷ Francis Butler Simkins, review of *Hampton and His Red Shirts: South Carolina's Deliverance in 1876*, by Alfred B. Williams, *The Journal of Southern History*, vol. 2, no. 2 (May 1936), 281-283.

¹²⁸ Before publishing *Ousting the Carpetbagger*, Henry Thompson had been a principal at a military academy, held a position at the Citadel, and was a member of the National Guard. In 1894 Tillman ordered his unit to Darlington to help restore order. Four years later, Thompson's Darlington Guards volunteered their services for the Spanish-American War, though Thompson did not engage in combat. The bulk of Thompson's duties involved recruiting inexperienced men to meet the quota requested by the War Department. See: J.W. Floyd, comp., *Historical Roster and Itinerary of South Carolina Volunteer Troops who Served in the Late War Between the United States and Spain, 1898* (Columbia, SC: The R.L. Bryan Company, 1901), 148. Also see, Harris Moore Bailey, Jr., “The Splendid Little Forgotten War: The Mobilization of South Carolina for the War with Spain,” *The South Carolina Historical Magazine*, Vol. 92, No. 3 (July 1991), 189-214. William Arthur Sheppard was a linotype operator in Spartanburg, South Carolina, see: United States of America, Bureau of the Census, *Sixteenth Census of the United States, 1940* (Washington, DC: National Archives and Records Administration, 1940). Source citation: Year: 1940, *Spartanburg, South Carolina*; Roll: T627_3839; Page: 15B; Enumeration District: 42-49. Retrieved from: Ancestry.com, *1940 United States Federal Census* (Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2012).

¹²⁹ Williams, *Hampton and His Red Shirts*, 17.

of the general results which are to be gathered from histories.”¹³⁰ Williams had similar designs for *Hampton and His Red Shirts*. He said his purpose was to “tell a wonderful story” and “to perpetuate in plain narrative the successive events, circumstances and incidents of a great episode, now more or less confused tradition to the new generations.”¹³¹

Sheppard’s narrative tendencies were slightly different than those of Thompson or Williams. In the preface he told readers that what follows is “an amazing story of brilliant statesmanship.”¹³² How he concludes the book, however, is more significant. Sheppard continued his narrative up to 1895, when Martin W. Gary’s work of eliminating blacks from politics was enacted through his protégé Ben Tillman. After mentioning the disfranchisement of blacks in 1895, Sheppard concludes the book with “THE END” at the bottom of the last page. The implication of this statement in 1940 is clear: blacks were eliminated from politics in 1895 and, so far as Sheppard was concerned, their exclusion should be everlasting.¹³³

Sheppard completed his manuscript one month after another form of Reconstruction symbolism became visible in South Carolina: the Ku Klux Klan. By 1939, African Americans living in Greenville, South Carolina had grown frustrated with the city government for habitually refusing to fund projects that would benefit African Americans. The NAACP, as a response, embarked upon a voter registration drive hoping to elect a mayor more sympathetic to the plight of blacks. Beginning in September,

¹³⁰ Thompson, *Ousting the Carpetbagger from South Carolina*, 6.

¹³¹ Williams, *Hampton and His Red Shirts*, 20.

¹³² Sheppard, *Red Shirts Remembered*, xi.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 322.

however, the KKK carried out a campaign of terror and intimidation against African Americans attempting to register. In late September, dozens of Klansmen arrived in Greenville County, beat numerous black men and women, and in some instances, destroyed buildings that were home to black businesses. The Grand Dragon of the South Carolina KKK, Fred V. Johnson, claimed that his hooded men were acting in the spirit of the Reconstruction-era Klan by protecting the state from ‘negro rule’ and northern intervention.¹³⁴

Reactivating the Trope for a New Fight

The 1920s and 1930s featured fierce Senate debates over anti-lynching legislation. “For no legislation in recent years,” a 1937 *New York Times* article read, “has stirred up such determined sectional hostility in Congress as the lynch bill.”¹³⁵ After hearing southern senators’ hostility in 1938, one newspaperman became convinced that “the bill goes deeper than logic and stirs Southern emotions that have never slumbered since reconstruction days.”¹³⁶ Many southerners in 1937 displayed support for federal anti-lynching legislation. A November 1937 Gallup poll showed that 72% of the nation favored federal anti-lynch law, and that 57% of the southerners polled favored federal action. The fight for anti-lynching legislation, however, was a fight that would have to be won in the Senate.

¹³⁴ Baker, *What Reconstruction Meant*, 102-106.

¹³⁵ George Gallup, “Nation Favors Anti-Lynching Law in Survey,” *New York Times*, November, 15, 1937, 1.

¹³⁶ Robert C. Albright, “Bitterness of Row Over Anti-lynching Bill Threatens Sectional Split,” *The Washington Post*, January 23, 1938, B4; George B. Tindall, *The Emergence of the New South, 1913-1945* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967), 540-553.

A Senate filibuster had prevented the passage of a federal anti-lynching bill in 1922, but an increase in lynching and published academic studies exposing the brutal details of the practice reinvigorated the crusade for federal legislation. In 1935 southern senators—led by Hugo Black of Alabama—thwarted the passage of the Costigan-Wagner anti-lynching bill. Senators opposed to the bill argued that it was another attempt to reform the South through federal civil rights legislation. Many opponents denounced anti-lynching legislation as a ‘force bill,’ a calculated reference to Reconstruction. South Carolina senator Ellison D. “Cotton Ed” Smith joined the 1935 filibuster and argued that lynching in the South could be attributed to the perpetual negative influence first introduced by carpetbaggers and scalawags during the Reconstruction era.¹³⁷

Author and journalist Ben Robertson—born 1903 in Clemson, South Carolina—found little value or validity in Smith’s manipulation of southern history. Lacy Ford explores Robertson’s views of Reconstruction in his introduction to the 1991 edition of *Red Hills and Cotton: An Upcountry Memory*.¹³⁸ Robertson believed that one of the region’s most injurious shortcomings was its penchant for blaming twentieth century problems on “Northern occupation’ during Reconstruction.”¹³⁹ According to Ford, Robertson perceived southerners’ invocations of the Lost Cause “as an excuse for failure and inaction” during the interwar years; as a result, Ford argues that Robertson perceived

¹³⁷ George B. Tindall, *The Emergence of the New South, 1913-1945* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967), 540-553.

¹³⁸ Lacy K. Ford, Jr., introduction to *Red Hills and Cotton: An Upcountry Memory*, by Ben Robertson (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991 edition; originally published by Alfred A. Knopf in 1942), ix-xlv. Cited in footnote as, Ben Robertson to B.O. Williams, December 6, 1937, Ben Robertson Papers, Special Collections, Robert Muldrow Cooper Library, Clemson University, Clemson, South Carolina.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, xi.

the Lost Cause less a “comforting myth” and more “an ideology of paralysis and irresponsibility.”¹⁴⁰

One month after Robertson’s private lamentations, southern Democrats demonstrated their committed opposition to federal legislation with a six-week filibuster in the Senate. The Wagner-Van Nuys anti-lynching bill would have made lynching a federal crime. Under the legislation, state officials who failed to protect prisoners from mob violence would have to pay thousands of dollars in fines, as well as serve a maximum of five years in jail. Beginning January 1938, southern senators read aloud irrelevant documents to prevent action on the legislation. What the filibuster ultimately revealed, however, was southern senators’ steadfast determination to maintain white supremacy below the Mason-Dixon Line. As Keith M. Finley maintains, many southern senators feared that passage of anti-lynching legislation would open the floodgates for more sweeping civil rights bills down the road. For Tom Connally, Josiah Bailey, and southern senators who participated in the filibuster, anti-lynching legislation, according to Finley, “represented the vanguard of a much larger movement aimed at dismantling southern society.”¹⁴¹ To combat the bill, southern senators disseminated tragic era rhetoric to remind congressmen of what happened the last time southern society was reformed through civil rights.

As one of the bill’s most outspoken critics, “Cotton Ed” Smith was eager to participate in the filibuster. Just as Ben Tillman had done in 1895, Smith offered the

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Keith M. Finley, *Delaying the Dream: Southern Senators and the Fight against Civil Rights, 1938-1965* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008), 30.

example of Reconstruction as a justification for preserving white supremacy in the South, politically and socially. Although Smith's interpretation of Reconstruction mirrored Tillman's, the circumstances surrounding the two speeches were different. In 1895 Tillman told the tragic Reconstruction story to mobilize support for his policies, which were designed to eliminate blacks from the political process. Smith, on the other hand, retold the sordid story of Reconstruction as a defensive measure or rebuke. Instead of trying to implement policy through tragic era rhetoric, Smith retold the familiar story to persuade his fellow senators to join him in resisting federally-enforced civil rights. A 'tragic' Reconstruction was at the heart of Smith's argument.

Smith invoked Reconstruction to discredit the bill and its supporters. In the anti-lynching bill, Smith found "being injected the same element of strife and contention that ran rife during that dark period subsequent to the war known as the period of reconstruction."¹⁴² Although ostensibly about social justice, Smith attempted to connect the lynching bill with black voting. According to Smith, the bill was introduced not to eradicate lynching in the South, but "for the sole purpose of getting the vote" of African Americans.¹⁴³ Smith lamented that in the effort to gain votes, "the sponsors of this bill...are willing to draw the sectional line once again and to humiliate a whole section of our common country."¹⁴⁴

Smith was especially critical of Democratic senators who supported the bill, and expressed his general displeasure with the direction of the national party. The Democratic

¹⁴² *Congressional Record*, vol. 83, pt. 1, 75th Congress, 3rd session, 8 January 1938, 228.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 228.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

party of 1938, Smith believed, was an insult to the heroic ‘redeemer’ generation, who in 1876 rescued the South from the iniquities of Republican misrule. Smith professed that Democrats in those years “stood for white supremacy. They knew the danger of submitting social and governmental affairs to those who were so unprepared and unqualified to discharge those duties.”¹⁴⁵ To Smith and other southern Democrats, it appeared that the Democratic party of the interwar years had forgotten its principles.

The Democratic party of the 1930s resembled radical Republicans from the Reconstruction era more than the white conservatives who dislodged them from power. The power of such a comparison was not lost on Smith. “Here we are,” Smith lamented, “subjected more violently and determinedly to having this humiliation thrust upon us than was ever attempted by a Republican Senate.”¹⁴⁶ In this statement, Smith implied that Democrats who supported the anti-lynching bill were worse than the unscrupulous carpetbaggers who forced political and social equality on the South after the Civil War. Attempts to court the black vote were expected to come from Republicans; for it to come from Democrats, Smith told Congress, is “something that I never could have believed would come about.”¹⁴⁷

It was not enough to invoke Reconstruction memories or to suggest comparisons between Reconstruction and current affairs. It had been over sixty years since the overthrow of Reconstruction, and Smith could not expect every senator to be familiar with his Reconstruction analogies. “I wonder,” Smith stated aloud, “how many Members

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 229.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

of the Senate realize what transpired in the South during the era known as the period of reconstruction?”¹⁴⁸ The South Carolinian, therefore, told a brief story of Reconstruction to remind his audience of the hardships endured by white southerners the last time Congress attempted to reform the South through civil rights—or as Smith put it, when his home state “received the vials of the wrath of those then in power in Washington.”¹⁴⁹

In the Reconstruction era white southerners, who Smith believed to be the natural leaders of society, were forced to live under an incompetent and corrupt state government. The statehouse, according to Smith, was “filled with legislators who could not write their names, her people ruled by carpetbaggers and scalawags, backed up by the military forces of the Federal Government. During that time it was almost worth the life of an individual who would protest, and women were afraid to walk the streets, and certainly were afraid to be about country districts.”¹⁵⁰ Women’s fear, he suggested, stemmed from the unpredictability and intractability of African Americans. He said that the recently freed slaves were “composed of those who but a few short years previously had been imported from the jungles of Africa, with human passion but with undeveloped human reason;” they were then “turned loose in a defenseless community.”¹⁵¹ Blacks were reckless and dangerous during that period, Smith asserted, because they believed they had the unwavering support of the federal government.

An ardent white supremacist, Smith adhered to the belief that allowing blacks to vote was the primary mistake of the period. Believing that African Americans “are

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 228.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

racially different,” Smith declared that the “ex-slaves were totally unprepared for citizenship,” and argued that “they can never be so prepared” for citizenship.¹⁵² Smith was disgusted knowing that blacks had held government positions in Reconstruction years. Although he lamented that he did not have more time to describe the improprieties of the Republican state government, he told his fellow senators where they could find a more detailed account of the Reconstruction government: “I desire to get and read to the Senate a book called *The Prostrate State*, written by a man named Pike, in which he particularizes the orgies of extravagance and wastefulness that went on under that regime.”¹⁵³

Like most southerners, Smith perceived the men who overthrew Reconstruction as saviors of southern society. In fact, he suggested that the heroic actions of South Carolina Democrats in 1876 is what made the party so revered and celebrated in the South. Smith disclosed that the Democratic party appealed to white southerners “because the Democratic Party had saved us ultimately from the submergence and the destruction of white civilization in the South.”¹⁵⁴ But now it appeared to Smith that the party had lost its way, as the national party was becoming more and more of a biracial organization.

Smith concluded the speech by arguing against the Gavagan-Wagner-Van Nuys anti-lynching bill. Smith suggested that his speech—which had featured his gloomy account of Reconstruction—should be enough to persuade fellow senators to abandon the bill. More than that, he insisted that his summation was an unassailable justification for

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 229.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

the need to halt federal lynching legislation. He declared to the Senate, “I think we are justified in holding out against the enactment of the pending measure,” and, shortly after, argued that “we are warranted in blocking every form of legislation until this iniquitous thing is forever abandoned.”¹⁵⁵

“Cotton Ed” Smith’s oration in the January filibuster inspired a new generation of South Carolinians to replicate the heroes of 1876. The 1938 senatorial race between “Cotton Ed” Smith and Olin D. Johnston revealed just how relevant Reconstruction was in South Carolina culture. Smith’s campaign featured poignant Reconstruction symbolism. As Jason Morgan Ward notes, Smith “turned his sixth senatorial campaign into a Lost Cause extravaganza.”¹⁵⁶ The race also symbolized the broader conflict between anti-New Deal politicians and New Deal supporters.

Bruce Baker maintains that Smith’s campaign strategy was “to turn the debate away from economics and toward white supremacy.”¹⁵⁷ Smith successfully executed this strategy by comparing his 1938 campaign to the Democratic campaign of 1876. On election day in Orangeburg, bands of red shirts patrolled voting areas and took it upon themselves to carry ballot boxes to the courthouse. Later that night, Smith gave his victory speech on the statehouse grounds with the statue of Wade Hampton overlooking him and two hundred red shirt supporters.¹⁵⁸ That such symbolism could resonate with

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 230.

¹⁵⁶ Jason Morgan Ward, “Causes Lost and Found: Remembering and Refighting Reconstruction in the Roosevelt Era,” in *Remembering Reconstruction: The Struggle over the Meaning of America’s Most Turbulent Era*, ed. Carole Emberton and Bruce Baker (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2017), 40.

¹⁵⁷ Baker, *What Reconstruction Meant*, 100.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 40-41; Also see Bruce E. Baker, *What Reconstruction Meant: Historical Memory in the American South* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007), 99-102.

southerners in 1938 suggests the entrenched cultural significance of Reconstruction in southern society.

“Cotton Ed” Smith’s summation of Reconstruction in January of 1938 was clearly a biased, racist, and pro-southern account of Reconstruction. It also came six years after Francis Butler Simkins’ *South Carolina during Reconstruction* was published. Co-authored with fellow southerner Robert Hilliard Woody, *South Carolina during Reconstruction* was a fresh account of Reconstruction that went beyond the recycled themes of black inferiority, Republican corruption, subjugated whites, and political turmoil. Yet, Smith fell back on the culturally-entrenched tragic era trope to preserve white supremacy, politically and socially. He was not alone. Between the world wars, many white southerners continued to place more emphasis on ‘what was believed to have happened’ instead of ‘what actually happened.’

CHAPTER THREE

CARPETBAGGERS, REDEEMERS, AND THE 'MISSISSIPPI PLAN' IN SOUTHERN LITERATURE

Some of us still remember what we were told of those times, and what we were told inclines us to guard the ballot as something precious, something to be withheld unless the fitness of the recipient be patent.

--William Alexander Percy, *Lanterns on the Levee* (1941)

Southerners' attempts to come to terms with the inherited beliefs of Reconstruction extended beyond political rhetoric and historical inquiry. As an important, though understudied, component of the Southern Literary Renaissance, Reconstruction was an important theme explored by southern writers between the world wars. In this chapter, I examine southerners' struggle over the cultural assumptions of Reconstruction by analyzing the contrasting views of Mississippi authors William Faulkner and William Alexander Percy. Ultimately, I argue that Faulkner's modernist tendencies led him to contradict entrenched assumptions of Reconstruction as opposed to Will Percy, who was unable to break with the traditions he inherited as a young boy.

In the first section, I analyze the portrayal of the 'carpetbagger' in turn-of-the-century Reconstruction novels, as well as discuss the origins of the term itself. In the second section, I explain how William Faulkner challenged the traditional assumptions about carpetbaggers. Here, I explore the developing Reconstruction storyline as it appears in three of Faulkner's novels: *Sartoris* (1929), *Light in August* (1932), and *The Unvanquished* (1938). In the third section, I contrast William Alexander Percy's views on Reconstruction with the Reconstruction presented in Faulkner's novels.

The Carpetbagger as Villain

In the first chapter, I discussed the racial implications of Thomas Nelson Page's *Red Rock* and Thomas Dixon's *The Clansman*. Yet, while racism clearly influenced both Page and Dixon, the mode of literature in which they presented their Reconstruction stories is of equal importance. At the end of the nineteenth century, melodrama emerged as a popular literary mode in historical fiction and played a considerable role in fortifying the cultural trope of Reconstruction. In his study of Reconstruction memory in the South, Bruce Baker analyzes the characteristics and consequences of the melodramatic mode as seen in turn-of-the-century Reconstruction novels, including *Red Rock* and *The Clansman*. Baker, who draws on the work of literary critic Peter Brooks, suggests that melodrama expresses an anxiety engendered by a collapse of traditional moral patterns. The collapse of these traditional moral patterns results in a volatile, unordered, and often dangerous society. Another characteristic of the melodrama literary style, as Baker points out, "was the use of excess to clarify the conflict between good and evil."¹⁵⁹ Through exaggeration and embellishment, authors made the distinctions between good characters and evil characters clear and unambiguous.

In Page's *Red Rock*, the carpetbagger Jonadab Leech is the principal villain followed by the scalawag Hiram Still. Leech is presented as the unscrupulous northerner who came South after the war looking to exploit the defeated South for personal gain.

¹⁵⁹ Bruce E. Baker, *What Reconstruction Meant: Historical Memory in the American South* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007), 46.

Additionally, Page ascribed to the carpetbagger a name that, even when read without context, harbors negative and invidious connotations. Similarly, the main antagonist of *The Clansman* is the radical republican Austin Stoneman, a fictionalized version of Thaddeus Stevens, who was “the mysterious power threatening the policy of the President and planning a reign of terror for the South.”¹⁶⁰

In dealing with the defeated South, Stoneman is motivated by a misguided idealism and a keen hatred of the South. Moreover, Dixon portrays blacks as predatory and threatening especially to white southern women. The most extreme example of this involves Gus, the Camerons’ former slave, raping a white woman; the woman subsequently commits suicide out of shame. Former Confederate officer Ben Cameron emerges as the hero in Dixon’s Reconstruction. Cameron forms the Ku Klux Klan to protect southern white women and expel the nefarious Reconstruction government. Dixon concludes the novel with Austin Stoneman extolling the Ku Klux Klan for saving his son, who had been mistakenly captured by an uncontrollable black militia: “The Klan!—The Klan! No? Yes! It’s true—glory to God, they’ve saved my boy—Phil—Phil!”¹⁶¹

Yet, Page and Dixon did not create the image of the villainous, corrupt carpetbagger. They merely built upon the efforts of previous white southerners. As Ted Tunnell demonstrates, the origins of “carpetbagger” and the stigma attached to it first emerged when Presidential Reconstruction was giving way to Radical Reconstruction.

¹⁶⁰ Thomas Dixon, *The Clansman* (2016 reprint; originally published in 1905), 8.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 162.

Southern editors writing for Democratic newspapers in 1867 invented, cultivated, and promoted a negative ‘carpetbagger’ image to discredit Republican policies in the postwar South. By denouncing the newly arrived northern migrants as greedy, corrupt, selfish, despotic, and nefarious, southern editors made “carpetbagger” an effective tool of political propaganda that, as Tunnell argues, formed “an ideology of resistance, an ideology essential to the overthrow of Reconstruction.”¹⁶²

The carpetbagger came to symbolize the futility of northern intervention in southern affairs.¹⁶³ Page, Dixon, and other southern novelists recognized that the carpetbagger as villain was compatible with their concerted efforts to polarize the heroes and villains. In addition, the image of the villainous carpetbagger conformed to their audience’s expectations. The unfavorable perception of the carpetbagger endured in southern culture and became an indispensable component of the southern Reconstruction trope. William Faulkner would confront the ‘carpetbagger as villain’ throughout his novels in the 1920s and 1930s.

Reconstruction in Yoknapatawpha County

In the middle of Jefferson, Mississippi—the county seat of William Faulkner’s mythical Yoknapatawpha County—a statue of Colonel John Sartoris (1823-1876) overlooks the town square. Running through the town is the railroad Colonel Sartoris built after the Civil War; the tracks lead to Memphis in one direction and Mottstown in

¹⁶² Ted Tunnell, “Creating ‘The Propaganda of History’: Southern Editors and the Origins of ‘Carpetbagger and Scalawag,’” *The Journal of Southern History*, vol. 72, no. 4 (Nov., 2006), 792.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 789-822.

the opposite direction. In twentieth century Jefferson, the statue and railroad are the most tangible vestiges of Colonel John Sartoris' impact on Yoknapatawpha County. Less tangible but perhaps more significant are the legendary tales of the Colonel's violent exploits during the Civil War and Reconstruction, the region's most important historical events. After his death, the Colonel's ghost was kept alive in Yoknapatawpha County as old-timers told stories to the younger generations. The cultural persistence of these tales made Colonel Sartoris a "palpable presence" well into the twentieth century.¹⁶⁴

Faulkner's inspiration for the fictional Colonel John Sartoris was his own great-grandfather Colonel William Clark Falkner. Faulkner once wrote that his "great-grandfather, whose name I bear, was a considerable figure in his time and provincial milieu. He was prototype of John Sartoris."¹⁶⁵ Colonel Falkner was born in 1825 and migrated from North Carolina to Ripley, Mississippi in the early 1840s. After settling in Mississippi, he became a successful lawyer, businessman, farmer, as well as served in the Mexican War. During the Civil War he raised a volunteer company known as the Magnolia Rifles and was soon elected colonel of the 2nd Mississippi Infantry. Like the fictional John Sartoris, Colonel Falkner had a penchant for reckless bravery during wartime, which ultimately played a role in his failure to win reelection as colonel in 1862. The disappointment led Falkner back to Mississippi where he raised an irregular cavalry and carried out raids on federal lines before retiring from the army in 1863.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁴ William Faulkner, *Sartoris* (New York: The New American Library, Inc., 1983 reprint), 19.

¹⁶⁵ Quote found in Cleanth Brooks, "William Faulkner," in *The History of Southern Literature*, ed. Louis D. Rubin, Jr. et al. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), 333.

¹⁶⁶ Joel Williamson, *William Faulkner and Southern History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 41-76.

During Reconstruction Colonel Falkner, as Richard King notes, “played an active role in defying scalawags and carpetbaggers and in intimidating blacks” attempting to vote.¹⁶⁷

After white supremacy was reestablished in Mississippi, Colonel Falkner experienced success as a railroad developer and banker before he was killed by a business rival in 1889. A fourteen-foot statue was erected in Ripley, Mississippi to honor Colonel William C. Falkner.¹⁶⁸ In 1938 William Faulkner told Robert Cantwell that people in Ripley still talked about his great-grandfather “as if he were still alive, up in the hills someplace, and might come in at any time.”¹⁶⁹ Likewise, people in twentieth century Yoknapatawpha County kept Colonel Sartoris relevant long after his death to the point that he became something “to be evoked like a genie or a deity by an illiterate old man’s tedious reminiscing.”¹⁷⁰

Faulkner makes his first allusions to Jefferson’s Reconstruction era in *Sartoris* (1929), the first of his Yoknapatawpha County novels. Here, Faulkner introduces the John Sartoris character and reveals his leading role in the resistance against the Reconstruction government in Jefferson, Mississippi. The events are told not by a narrator, but instead recounted by the 93-year-old Will Falls. Falls was a former Confederate soldier who had fought alongside Colonel Sartoris in the Civil War.

¹⁶⁷ Richard H. King, *A Southern Renaissance: The Cultural Awakening of the American South, 1930-1955* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 77.

¹⁶⁸ Williamson, *William Faulkner and Southern History*, 41-76.

¹⁶⁹ Donald P. Duclos, “Damned Sartorises! Damned Falkners!” in *Critical Essays on William Faulkner: The Sartoris Family*, ed. Arthur F. Kinney (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1985), 251.

¹⁷⁰ William Faulkner, *Sartoris* (New York: New American Library, 1983 reprint; originally published in 1929), 35.

Although over forty years have passed since the Colonel's death, Falls and the Colonel's son Bayard still reminisce about the legendary exploits of John Sartoris. During a conversation between the two, the old man tells Bayard about his father's successful penetration of Yankee lines in 1863. The ingenious attack resulted in Sartoris' cavalry seizing Union Army supplies in addition to the capture of Yankee troops.

Falls then recounts the fateful day in 1872 when Colonel Sartoris shot and killed two carpetbaggers on election day. Falls' allegiance to Colonel Sartoris extended beyond the Civil War. During Reconstruction, Falls and many ex-Confederates in Yoknapatawpha County joined Colonel Sartoris' paramilitary company to fight against the biracial politics of Reconstruction. Although Falls' account of the deadly Reconstruction event is brief and vague at times, Colonel Sartoris' motive for the killings is unambiguous: to prevent African Americans from exercising their right to vote. Sartoris and his men perceived the two carpetbaggers as "herding" African Americans to the building where the voting was taking place. Infuriated, Sartoris "stood right in the middle of the do' while them two cyarpetbaggers begun backin' off with their hands in their pockets."¹⁷¹ Sartoris then entered the building, seized the ballot box, and fired his pistol into the sky to intimidate the potential African American voters. After deterring the African Americans from voting, Sartoris reloaded his pistol and walked the short distance to the hotel where the two carpetbaggers were staying. According to Falls, Sartoris "walked right into the room whar they was a-settin' behind a table facin' the do', with

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 194.

their pistols layin' on the table."¹⁷² It was not long before the assembled crowd outside the hotel—Falls included—heard gunshots and learned that Sartoris had killed the two men.

In the account, Falls presents the carpetbaggers as unwanted interlopers. The carpetbaggers' backgrounds are not disclosed and details of their experience during Reconstruction are noticeably absent in Falls' reminiscing. John Sartoris, on the other hand, is portrayed as a polite citizen who had no choice but to eradicate the outsiders who encouraged African American's participation in politics. After Sartoris emerges from the room, he apologizes to the hotel owner, offers to pay for the damage, and defends his act on the grounds of necessity: "My apologies again, madam, fer havin' been put to the necessity of exterminatin' vermin on yo' premises."¹⁷³ By referring to his victims as "vermin," Sartoris dehumanizes the carpetbaggers and absolves himself of moral responsibility. And reminiscent of turn-of-the-century novels, pejoratives were ascribed to carpetbaggers for their involvement in postwar southern politics.

Falls' account, biased and abridged, serves as an introduction to the deadly Reconstruction event that Faulkner would elaborate on in subsequent novels. Faulkner first introduced the Reconstruction story by way of a participant-observer. The selection of narrator mirrored what was happening in southern culture more broadly in the decades before the First World War—the 1890s, 1900s, and 1910s. White southerners who participated in the overthrow of Reconstruction had control of the narrative and used it

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

for a specific purpose. That story was perpetuated in southern society and became the prevailing interpretation for, roughly, the first half of the twentieth century.

The vague Reconstruction event alluded to in *Sartoris* begins to take shape and becomes more coherent in Faulkner's 1932 classic *Light in August*. The Sartoris-carpetbagger incident presented in *Light in August* departs from the one presented in *Sartoris* in a multitude of ways. Instead of presenting the deadly event from the perspective of an ex-Confederate and former Sartoris comrade, Faulkner approaches the subject with a modernist drive to explore all varieties of experience.¹⁷⁴ The account presented in *Light in August* is told largely from the perspective of the carpetbaggers and their descendants. The exploration of experience also evinces a quest to understand the reality of Reconstruction, no matter how ugly or deplorable that reality might be to southerners. By approaching Reconstruction from different perspectives with additional detail, Faulkner illuminates the persistence of social hatreds that were originally forged during Reconstruction.

Near the beginning of *Light in August* Faulkner reveals that Joanna Burden—a main character of the novel—is the granddaughter and sister of the two deceased carpetbaggers. Sixty years have passed since Joanna's grandfather and brother were killed by John Sartoris "over a question of negro votes in a state election."¹⁷⁵ Yet, as Faulkner suggests in the passage below, the fatal Reconstruction event was perpetual in significance, casting an injurious cloud over succeeding generations.

¹⁷⁴ For more on Modernism and southern literature, see: Daniel Joseph Singal, *The War Within: From Victorian to Modernist Thought in the South, 1919-1945* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1982).

¹⁷⁵ William Faulkner, *Light in August: The Corrected Text* (New York: Vintage Books/Random House, Inc., 1985 reprint; originally published in 1932), 47.

*But it still lingers about her and about the place: something dark and outlandish and threatful, even though she is but a woman and but the descendant of them whom the ancestors of the town had reason (or thought that they had) to hate and dread. But it is there: the descendants of both in their relationship to one another's ghosts, with between them the phantom of the old spilled blood and the old horror and anger and fear.*¹⁷⁶

Here, Faulkner suggests that the townspeople's animosity towards the carpetbaggers was not completely justified or rational. The animosity was so great that Joanna's father hid the graves of the two deceased family members as well as other Burdens out of fear that local whites would remember the Burden name and excavate and mutilate the bodies. Despite the passage of time, "he couldn't take the risk, even if it was all over and past and done then."¹⁷⁷ The enduring hatred, however, suggests that the fundamental issues of the Reconstruction era were in fact not 'past' or 'done' at all.

Faulkner later proposes that Sartoris and his company's actions during Reconstruction were misguided when Joanna Burden tells Joe Christmas that she and her family were considered "worse than foreigners: enemies. Carpetbaggers. And it—the War—still too close for even the ones that got whipped to be very sensible. Stirring up the negroes to murder and rape, they called it. Threatening white supremacy."¹⁷⁸ Later in

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 250.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 249.

the conversation she debunked the charges that white southerners habitually levied against carpetbaggers, particularly the charge of inciting freed blacks to riotous, violent behavior. Joanna insisted that freed blacks “hadn’t raped or murdered anybody to speak of” during Jefferson’s Reconstruction era.¹⁷⁹ Will Falls’ version of events and other pro-southern accounts, however, helped to sustain, reinforce, and perpetuate the belief that Reconstruction was oppressive and sordid.

The enmity that local whites feel toward Joanna Burden is a pervasive theme in *Light in August*. Despite being born fourteen years after the murders and living her entire life in Jefferson, to local whites Joanna “is still a stranger, a foreigner whose people moved in from the North during Reconstruction.”¹⁸⁰ As the Burden house is set on fire and becomes engulfed in flames, Byron Bunch tells the itinerant Lena Grove “I reckon there are folks in this town will call it a judgment on her, even now. She is a Yankee. Her folks come down here in the Reconstruction.”¹⁸¹ To local whites, Joanna closely resembles her deceased family members in more than name. She, like her abolitionist ancestors, dedicated her life to assisting southern blacks in a society committed to white supremacy. She would write letters to young African American girls at schools and colleges in the South, giving them advice on educational and personal matters. On many occasions she traveled to all-black schools and gave in-person talks to both the teachers and students. Joanna’s involvement with southern blacks drew the ire of local whites. By working for the improvement of southern blacks, Joanna threatened the racial status quo

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 250.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 46.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 53.

and, as a result, exacerbated the tension between her and the town's ardent defenders of white supremacy.

In *Light in August*, Faulkner provides additional detail about the murdered carpetbaggers. In Will Falls' account of the Sartoris-carpetbagger incident, the victims are given no individual identities, no backgrounds (other than being carpetbaggers from Missouri), and even referred to as 'vermin.' In *Light in August*, however, we learn that the victims are Joanna's grandfather and brother—both named Calvin. In addition, Faulkner shows that the Burden family history indicates a sustained commitment to helping African Americans, before and after the Civil War.

The image of John Sartoris undergoes a transformation after Faulkner discloses additional detail about the victims. For example, we learn that Calvin, Joanna's grandfather, had only one arm, and that the youngest Calvin was just twenty years old when Sartoris shot him dead. When seen in this light, Sartoris appears less a hero and more a ruthless white supremacist. Faulkner uses irony—a popular technique of modernist writers—to express the altered image of John Sartoris when Joanna says, “So I suppose that Colonel Sartoris was a town hero because he killed with two shots from the same pistol an old onearmed man and a boy who had never even cast his first vote.”¹⁸²

Faulkner would confront the heroic image of John Sartoris more directly in his 1938 novel *The Unvanquished*. Though not considered a Faulkner classic, *The Unvanquished* has immense value to Faulkner's evolving Reconstruction story. Here, Faulkner confronts the heroic image of the 'Redeemers' in Mississippi. The novel

¹⁸² Ibid., 249.

consists of seven short stories held together by Bayard Sartoris (Old Bayard from *Sartoris*), the novel's sole narrator. In the first story, "Ambuscade," Bayard is introduced as a twelve-year-old boy and the succeeding chapters trace his transition into adulthood. In the novel's concluding story, "An Odor of Verbena," Bayard has matured from a young boy into a twenty-four-year-old man. As Bayard matures, he begins to feel increasingly ambivalent towards the course taken by Colonel Sartoris and local whites in overthrowing Reconstruction in Jefferson. Having developed the Reconstruction story through multiple novels, Faulkner's *The Unvanquished* exhibits a profound ambivalence that was so prevalent in southern modernist writing after the First World War. It eventually culminates in a direct questioning of the traditional justification given for the violent overthrow of Reconstruction. In *The Unvanquished*, then, Faulkner's subtle deviation from the hero-villain dichotomy matures into verbal rejection.

As a young boy Bayard idolizes his father for his bravery, courage, and shrewdness in fighting against Yankee troops in 1863. He views the Colonel as a larger-than-life soldier fighting against an enemy force: "He was not big; it was just the things he did, that we knew he was doing, had been doing in Virginia and Tennessee, that made him seem big to us."¹⁸³

At twenty-four, however, Bayard views his father in a different light. With the passage of time, Bayard recognizes his father's "violent and ruthless dictatorialness and will to dominate."¹⁸⁴

¹⁸³ William Faulkner, *The Unvanquished* (New York: Vintage Books, 1966 reprint; originally published in 1938), 10.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 258.

One reason for Bayard's modified sentiment and heightened ambivalence derives from his father's violent behavior during Reconstruction. In the sixth chapter, aptly titled "Skirmish at Sartoris," a fifteen-year-old Bayard recounts Jefferson's Reconstruction era and his father's extreme political methods. Ringo, a recently freed Sartoris slave, recognizes that the Burden's—with a patent from Washington—will provoke a vigorous response from local whites. Of Reconstruction, he presciently asserts, "this war ain't over. Hit just started good."¹⁸⁵

The Republicans have put up black candidates for the upcoming elections, which infuriates Colonel Sartoris and other local whites. The possibility of Cassius Benbow, a former slave, being elected town marshal prompts Colonel Sartoris into taking violent measures to prevent his election. Accompanied by his wife Drusilla and soon joined by a bevy of ex-Confederates, Colonel Sartoris arrives at the building where the voting is taking place. He enters the hotel room, shoots and kills the two 'carpetbaggers' from Missouri, and names his wife new voting commissioner. The ballot box is taken to the Sartoris plantation, where the assembled voters—all white—ensure the election of a local white citizen of their choosing.

The actions of John Sartoris parallel the tactics used by Mississippi Democrats in 1874-1875 to overthrow Reconstruction. The plan adopted by white Mississippians for the redemption of the state soon came to be known as the 'Mississippi Plan.' Briefly stated, this plan called for the use of violence, bribery, fraud, and intimidation to keep African Americans and their Republican allies away from the polls. With rifle clubs

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 229.

patrolling voting precincts and intimidating blacks, violent confrontations characterized the campaign for redemption. In December 1874, the surrounding countryside of Vicksburg saw members of the White League murder around 300 blacks. In Yazoo County in September 1875, a rifle club broke up a Republican rally, forced carpetbagger Sheriff Albert T. Morgan to flee, and murdered numerous African Americans, one of which was a state legislator. On election day, rifle clubs equipped with guns—and, in one instance, a cannon—patrolled voting precincts and threatened to kill any African American intending to vote for a Republican.¹⁸⁶

Election returns indicated that the ‘Mississippi Plan’ had worked: Republican turnout plummeted while Democratic totals increased significantly. Democrats’ showing in Yazoo County demonstrates the effectiveness to which whites controlled the election. Although the carpetbagger governor Adelbert Ames had won Yazoo County in 1873 with a majority of 1,800, the 1875 elections saw the Democrats win by a vote of 4,044 to 7. After gaining a majority in the state legislature, Democrats completed the task of redemption when governor Ames was forced to resign after being threatened with impeachment. Ultimately, the 1875 Democratic campaign in Mississippi taught conservative South Carolinians that the use of force could secure Democratic victory and the subsequent overthrow of Reconstruction. The campaign in Mississippi also revealed that Reconstruction had become a political liability, and that President Grant was

¹⁸⁶ Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 2014 edition), 558-563; Nicholas Lemann, *Redemption: The Last Battle of the Civil War* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006), 135-170.

reluctant to send federal troops to quell political violence in the South.¹⁸⁷ John Sartoris and his men were equally successful in using violence, intimidation, and fraud to reestablish white supremacy in Jefferson.

At fifteen years old Bayard does not contemplate the immorality of his father's actions, nor does he second guess the justifications given for such an act. To the fifteen-year-old boy, Jefferson during Reconstruction was just "strange times then."¹⁸⁸ In the last chapter, "An Odor of Verbena," Bayard recounts a conversation between him and Drusilla when he was twenty years old. Four years had passed since Colonel Sartoris killed the two Burdens and seized the ballot box. In the conversation, Drusilla emerges as a representation of the Reconstruction trope by justifying her husband's behavior. She proceeds to explain to Bayard why it had to be done, insisting that he was fighting for good government. She presents Colonel Sartoris as the quintessential 'Redeemer' and a natural leader of men: "He is thinking of this whole country which he is trying to raise by its bootstraps."¹⁸⁹ Drusilla is resolute in defending John Sartoris: "those two carpet baggers he had to kill to hold that first election."¹⁹⁰ Moreover, she implies that the two 'carpetbaggers' deserved their fate because, "they were Northerners, foreigners who had no business here. They were pirates."¹⁹¹

Bayard's ambivalence regarding the behavior of his father, and white southerners more broadly, engenders a direct questioning of the traditional justification. Bayard

¹⁸⁷ James C. Cobb, *The Most Southern Place on Earth: The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 65-66; Foner, *Reconstruction*, 558-563.

¹⁸⁸ Faulkner, *The Unvanquished*, 227.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 256.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 257.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*

rejects Drusilla's argument that the murders were necessary to reestablish good government, and acknowledges the humanity of the deceased carpetbaggers. After hearing Drusilla's claims that it was necessary and that the Burdens deserved their fate, Bayard quickly retorts: "They were men. Human beings."¹⁹² Through this response Bayard not only acknowledges the murders as immoral atrocities, he also rejects the cultural assumption that the violent overthrow of Reconstruction was a noble and righteous cause.

In developing Yoknapatawpha's Reconstruction story, Faulkner confronted fundamental assumptions inherent in the southern Reconstruction trope. Perhaps most significant was Faulkner's evolving portrayal of the Burdens as seen in *Sartoris*, *Light in August*, and *The Unvanquished*. The carpetbaggers from Missouri—denigrated for encouraging black voting in *Sartoris*—begin to appear less malevolent in *Light in August*. From the opposite perspective emerge details about the two murdered carpetbaggers as well as the Burdens' family history. Moreover, Faulkner suggested that the heroic image of those who overthrew Reconstruction had another side to it. Equally significant is Bayard's response to Drusilla in *The Unvanquished*—the questioning and rejection of the traditional justification given for the violent measures employed by whites to reestablish white supremacy.

The portrayal of carpetbaggers as philanthropic instead of self-aggrandizing, combined with a willingness to explore the more malicious side of white southerners' response to Reconstruction, differentiated Faulkner from most white southerners during

¹⁹² Ibid.

the interwar years. Many southerners remained committed to the hero-villain dichotomy, believing that heroic whites triumphed over evil carpetbaggers, vengeful blacks, and traitorous scalawags. In Stark Young's 1934 novel *So Red the Rose*, for example, carpetbaggers brought to Mississippi "a spirit of assertion, ruthless methods and greedy purposes that was new, strange, and ominous."¹⁹³

Will Percy's Heroes

Fellow Mississippian William Alexander Percy belonged to the portion of southerners unwilling—or perhaps unable—to break with the inherited traditions of the Reconstruction trope. William Alexander Percy's views of Reconstruction in Mississippi are found in his 1941 autobiography *Lanterns on the Levee: Recollections of a Planter's Son*.¹⁹⁴ Percy posited an unambiguous polarization of competing factions in Mississippi's Reconstruction era. "Those days," Percy wrote in 1941, "you had to be a hero or a villain or a weakling—you couldn't be just middling ordinary."¹⁹⁵ To Will Percy, the hero of Reconstruction was his grandfather Colonel William Alexander Percy. Known as "Old Colonel Percy" or "The Gray Eagle," Colonel Percy was a larger-than-life figure; Will Percy always considered him a "demanding ancestor" for his conduct during the Civil War and Reconstruction.¹⁹⁶ Will Percy believed that his grandfather belonged to the

¹⁹³ Stark Young, *So Red the Rose* (Nashville, TN: J.S. Sanders & Company, 1992 reprint; originally published in 1934), 383.

¹⁹⁴ William Alexander Percy, *Lanterns on the Levee: Recollections of a Planter's Son* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984 reprint; originally published by Alfred A. Knopf, 1941).

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 273.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 271.

heroic generation: those southerners who fought for the Confederacy and defied the Reconstruction governments after the war.

Colonel Percy closely resembles Faulkner's John Sartoris character from *Sartoris*, *Light in August*, and *The Unvanquished*. At the start of the Civil War, Colonel Percy raised a local militia unit known as the "Swamp Rangers" and fought in Mississippi until 1863. For the remainder of the war Percy fought under Robert E. Lee in the Army of Northern Virginia, fought in the Shenandoah Valley, and was given the moniker "The Gray Eagle of the Valley" for his wartime bravery. Yet, it was Colonel Percy's leading role in overthrowing Reconstruction that Will Percy revered most.¹⁹⁷

Will Percy first heard about Reconstruction early in his childhood. His father, LeRoy Percy, frequently had friends over for discussions which took place on the family's front gallery. Young Will was present for many of these conversations and considered his father and his associates—General T. C. Catchings, Captain J. S. McNeilly, and Captain W. W. Stone "a small boy's heroes."¹⁹⁸ Percy was especially enthralled with their stories of Reconstruction. He heard tales of how his father and other white Democrats had righteously fought "against scalawaggery and Negro domination during reconstruction," and sent his grandfather to the legislature to expel the carpetbagger governor Adelbert Ames in 1875.¹⁹⁹

What these men said of Reconstruction had an indelible influence on Will Percy's understanding of southern history and shaped his political convictions for the rest of his

¹⁹⁷ Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *The House of Percy: Honor, Melancholy, and Imagination in a Southern Family* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 175-180.

¹⁹⁸ Percy, *Lanterns on the Levee*, 65.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 68.

life. The sentiment expressed by his father and associates, wrote Percy, “seeped into me, colored my outlook, prescribed for me loyalties and responsibilities that I may not disclaim.”²⁰⁰ Their views of Reconstruction undoubtedly ‘seeped’ into him. “Some of us still remember what we were told of those times,” Percy wrote in *Lanterns on the Levee*, “and what we were told inclines us to guard the ballot as something precious, something to be withheld unless the fitness of the recipient be patent.”²⁰¹ Will Percy believed that politics was for the enlightened gentlemen and that blacks, poor whites, and women should defer to the natural leaders of society. Men like his grandfather and father were “destined” to lead “because of their superior intellect, training, character, and opportunity.”²⁰²

During Reconstruction, the white Democrats that had traditionally dominated Mississippi politics saw their political influence diminish considerably. Former slaves exercised their newly granted political rights with many voting for Republican candidates and black candidates at the state and local level. Delta planters were also displeased with their lack of control over black laborers, who for the first time were experiencing a degree of economic freedom.²⁰³ The result, according to Will Percy, “was one glorious orgy of graft, lawlessness, and terrorism” perpetrated by carpetbaggers, scalawags, and

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 73-74.

²⁰¹ Ibid., 274.

²⁰² Ibid., 69.

²⁰³ James C. Cobb, *The Most Southern Place on Earth: The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 47-68.

black officials.²⁰⁴ As Will Percy wrote in his autobiography, his grandfather’s “life work became the re-establishment of white supremacy.”²⁰⁵

As Reconstruction continued into the 1870s, Colonel William Alexander Percy and other white landowners grew vexed with the tax obligations and with the Republican government in general. In 1873 Percy assembled a taxpayer’s convention to devise a strategy that would defeat the Republicans in the upcoming 1874 elections. The original plan called for white landowners to convince blacks, who comprised a majority in the Mississippi Delta, to vote for the Democratic ticket. Shortly after, many whites abandoned this approach and turned to more corrupt and violent methods to secure Democratic victory. The Democrats’ 1874 electoral triumph in Washington County—William Alexander Percy organized the ticket, which also featured himself as a candidate for state senator—was part of a statewide campaign that resulted in Democrats gaining a majority in the state legislature. In March of 1875 the ‘carpetbagger’ governor Adelbert Ames resigned after Colonel William Alexander Percy read twenty-one articles of impeachment to the senate.²⁰⁶

Percy’s treatment of the men who overthrew Reconstruction differs from that of Faulkner. First, Percy believed in the widespread assumption of white suffering during Reconstruction, before “the desperate whites though negligible in number banded together to overthrow this regime,” and chose his grandfather as their leader.²⁰⁷ It is also

²⁰⁴ Percy, *Lanterns on the Levee*, 274.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁶ Benjamin E. Wise, *William Alexander Percy: The Curious Life of a Mississippi Planter and Sexual Freethinker* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 14-29.

²⁰⁷ Percy, *Lanterns on the Levee*, 274.

interesting to note that Percy provides little detail regarding the violent tactics of the Redeemer Democrats. The overthrow of Reconstruction, wrote Percy, “required courage, tact, intelligence, patience; it also required vote-buying, the stuffing of ballot boxes, chicanery, intimidation.”²⁰⁸ To Will Percy, the end justified the means: “Heart-breaking business and degrading, but in the end successful. At terrific cost white supremacy was re-established.”²⁰⁹

While Faulkner suggested an ambivalence toward white southerners’ violent overthrow of Reconstruction, Percy maintained a firm belief that white southerners—led by his grandfather—were heroes courageously fighting against an oppressive and nefarious regime. As the egalitarian ideals gathered steam in the 1930s and early-1940s, Will Percy and many other southerners continued to believe in the righteousness of reestablishing white supremacy in the South.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has attempted to demonstrate how individuals constructed a certain narrative for a specific purpose. Moreover, this study reveals how many white southerners perpetuated a story of Reconstruction that would convey a specific message. For many white southerners, Reconstruction had less to do with the past and more with reacting to present-day developments. In the late nineteenth century, the negative perception of Reconstruction was instrumental in arguing against federal election bills and in justifying the systematic exclusion of blacks from the political process. Those advocating for disfranchisement were aided and abetted by developments in southern culture. Reconstruction-themed novels at the turn of the twentieth century vividly described the tragic story, which was recounted in constitutional conventions across the South, and popular films about Reconstruction buttressed those descriptions with poignant visuals and imagery. Reunions celebrated the white southerners who reestablished white supremacy, while public monuments guaranteed their permanent visibility in southern culture. Professional historians also contributed to the cultural entrenchment of the tragic Reconstruction story.

Despite the culturally entrenched position of the tragic era trope, as this thesis demonstrates, no single narrative is impregnable or immune to reevaluation. Between the First and Second World Wars, southerners grappled with the story of Reconstruction that they had heard growing up. Southerners like Francis Butler Simkins questioned and contradicted the prevailing views of Reconstruction and disapproved of southern politicians' political use of the sordid Reconstruction story. Conservatives responded to

these divergent viewpoints by reasserting the traditional tragic story as an instrument of defense and resistance. Yet their reassertion of the traditional story pointed to its contestation. Southern politicians like “Cotton Ed” Smith also fell back on the traditional narrative to respond to contemporary developments. Feeling threatened with federal civil rights legislation and increased black political activity, Smith recited the tragic story to repel threats against southern customs.

Historians were not the only southerners to question inherited assumptions about Reconstruction. Between the First and Second World Wars southern writers explored Reconstruction in various forms of southern literature. William Faulkner’s exploration of Reconstruction in his novels exemplifies the broader reassessment of Reconstruction that southerners were engaged in during the interwar years. Faulkner’s treatment of Reconstruction in his novels contradicted fundamental assumptions that had originally been fortified in Reconstruction-themed novels around the turn of the twentieth century. Throughout Faulkner’s novels, carpetbaggers appear less sinister and self-aggrandizing and more philanthropic and misunderstood. Moreover, Faulkner contradicted the assumed heroic image of the white southerners who overthrew Reconstruction through violence and fraud. His exploration of white southerners’ violent and reckless behavior contradicted the traditional narrative of noble, heroic white southerners expelling an oppressive and malicious government.

Thinking about the future of this thesis provides numerous possibilities. Further exploring how South Carolina and Mississippi writers conceptualized Reconstruction would provide an intriguing comparative analysis, especially considering the similarities

and connections between the two states. Both states passed Black Codes under Presidential Reconstruction, adopted the 'Mississippi Plan' to overthrow Reconstruction, and had leading politicians invoke a tragic Reconstruction to mobilize support for disfranchisement.

Another future possibility for this thesis is to study how the trope functions in history in addition to how it functions in literature and rhetoric. Moreover, I aim to study the cultural trope of Reconstruction on a more intellectual level. More specifically, I am interested in the ways that intellectual perspectives and techniques shape and define the cultural trope. For example, I would like to further study how the intellectual perspectives of modernism gave shape and meaning to the trope during the interwar years. Expanding this study beyond the Second World War would allow me to study how the intellectual perspectives of postmodernism helped to give shape and substance to the cultural trope of Reconstruction. Expanding the study beyond the Second World War would also allow me to analyze how southerners conceptualized and used Reconstruction during the modern civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s.

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