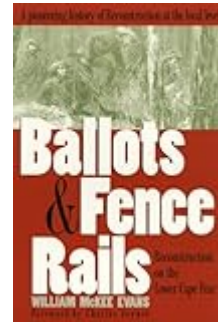


H-Net Reviews

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William McKee Evans. *Ballots and Fence Rails: Reconstruction on the Lower Cape Fear.* Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1995. xx + 314 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8203-1731-1.



Reviewed by Douglas Deal (SUNY-Oswego)

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Thirty years after it was first published by the University of North Carolina Press (1965), the University of Georgia Press has reprinted William McKee Evans' classic local history of Reconstruction on North Carolina's Lower Cape Fear, *Ballots and Fence Rails*. The new edition includes a brief "Foreword" by historian Charles Joyner. He notes the impact of Evans' book and of the nearly contemporaneous *Rehearsal for Reconstruction* by Willie Lee Rose, but spends much of his time reflecting on historical changes generally over the past few decades. Readers can only speculate how Evans himself might view the changed landscapes of Southern and African-American history in the era of the Civil War and Reconstruction.

In the early 1960s, revisionist scholars were battling the interpretations and myths erected by the Dunning school and its hangers-on. Evans' last chapter, "Summary and Conclusions," illuminates this historiographic context. He challenges the notion that Reconstruction in North Carolina was marked by "Negro domination"; and he observes that carpetbaggers were hardly the malevolent alien masters of misrule and chaos they were depicted to be in earlier accounts. He terms them "generally a stimulating influence in the area," but goes on to note that the democratization of politics left in place serious limits on the possibilities for change after the war. In particular, the persistence of "serious cultural and eco-

nomic inequalities" and the absence of a "politically reliable mechanism of force" left the door open to the return of Conservative rule in the region (pp. 257-58).

These are all themes that would be taken up later by other historians of Reconstruction. Evans was even more pioneering, though, in his pursuit of large questions in a small place, as Joyner puts it (p. xvi). The rich texture of local history, anchored in Evans' acute knowledge of this particular place (where some of his own ancestors lived), occupies center stage in the book. Students today can still learn much from it about the step-by-step progression of the human drama of Reconstruction in one part of the postbellum South. Evans is a lively writer and good storyteller. He understands the strengths and foibles of human nature and misses few of the nuances of social relations, including relations between the races.

Evans' depiction of race relations and of African-American experiences in this complex section of southeastern North Carolina reveals (not intentionally, of course) the distance we have traveled in our understanding of such matters since the early 1960s. Some passages and interpretations in the book do not hold up well and grate somewhat on today's sensibilities. A few examples should suffice. Evans notes that whites had difficulty predicting the reactions of Wilmington's blacks as Union forces took control in early 1865: "Who could say

what lay behind the grinning mask that concealed Negro thoughts? Behind which fossilized smile was to be found the angry face of a Nat Turner; terrible eyes that seemed to ask if there could be blood enough in one city to wash away the wrongs of the ages?" (p. 20). In speculating about the meaning Lincoln's assassination might have had for the region's black population, he writes: "Theirs was a world as narrow as bondage could fashion. Its horizons extended as far as the eye could see, beyond which lay the half-believed realm of hearsay. It was a world with more room for magical charms than for books" (p. 50). The slave family is described in this fashion: "Under slavery the entire family unit had been weak. One ordinarily knew who his mother was, though frequently it had not been his mother but some elderly slave who had cared for him as a child. The maternal tie was not necessarily strong and may have been broken entirely by a sale, rental, or assignment to separate duties. The paternal tie was even weaker, a slave frequently not knowing who his father was" (p. 74).

A final example of what has changed since Evans wrote can be pondered by any reader who compares his account (pp. 23-25) of what transpired in Wilmington's mostly black Front Street Methodist Church early in 1865 after the Yankees arrived with Leon Litwack's account of the same episode in his 1979 *Been In the Storm So Long* (pp. 465-66). Although the political activism and full humanity of blacks are acknowledged by Evans, he writes as if these same blacks had little social or cultural history of their own worth recording. Economic forces, too, are recognized as potent realities, never far from Evans' field of vision, but the everyday travails of black laborers are barely described here. A quick mention of the "time mer-

chant" (pp. 252-53) is as close as he gets to the subject of sharecropping, now so central to our understanding of the postbellum Southern economy.

The instructor who assigns *Ballots and Fence Rails* in her course on Reconstruction will therefore have to help students understand the various ways in which the history of the era has been transformed. Little coaching will be necessary, though, as students encounter Evans' deft descriptions of numerous other topics, such as the terrorization of black families and the theft of their property by armed bands of whites during Presidential Reconstruction (pp. 70-73) or the blatant legislative gerrymandering by which the state's Conservatives turned Wilmington's Republican (numerical) majority into a political minority (pp. 168-9). Though not cast by Evans as a morality tale, the political history of Reconstruction on the Lower Cape Fear carries important lessons still for anyone interested in the limits and failures, as well as the partial successes, of democratization in that era.

Hailed as an exemplary classic of Reconstruction history by Barbara J. Fields (back cover), Evans' book is well worth rereading. It remains one of only a handful of case studies of Reconstruction at the local level, and instructors seeking that perspective in their course readings should consider using it.

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