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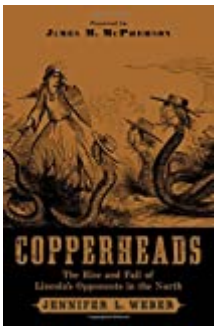

Jennifer L Weber. *Copperheads: The Rise and Fall of Lincoln's Opponents in the North.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. iv + 286 pp. $28.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-530668-2.

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Published on H-CivWar (July, 2007)

Opposing an Unpopular War: Taking Copperheads Seriously

This book is based on Jennifer L. Weber's Hay-Nicolay Prize-winning dissertation completed under James McPherson at Princeton University.[1] It is the first book-length treatment of the Copperheads in almost fifty years, being a chronological narrative of the rise and fall of the Peace Democrats divided into three phases.

In the first phase, beginning with the 1860-61 secession winter crisis, a small core of conservative northern Democrats opposed the Lincoln administration's position that secession was unconstitutional. Holding that secession was legal, (regardless of its desirability), these northern conservatives grew increasingly outspoken as the administration took actions during the first eighteen months of the war–such as suspending the writ of habeas corpus–that they believed threatened the constitutional rights of citizens. War dissenters were a small minority of Democrats during this phase. But these ideologically motivated constitutional conservatives would remain the core of the peace movement throughout the war.

Weber marks the beginning of phase two with Lincoln's announcement of the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation in September 1862 followed by the adoption of the draft in the spring of 1863. Racist reactions to a newly defined emancipationist war and anxiety about an increasingly powerful and intrusive government that was resorting to coercion to fill the ranks of the army pushed previously lukewarm war supporters into the antiwar vanguard. While they insisted their dissent was born of patriotic concern for the nation, Weber repeatedly observes that the swelling Copperhead ranks failed to offer any realistic nation-saving alternatives to Lincoln's war policy of coerced reunion.

Weber describes a third phase that peaked in the bloody summer of 1864 when intense war weariness drove many additional northerners to conclude that the war for the Union was an unwinnable failure. Antiwar leaders leveraged public pessimism that summer into near-control of the Democratic Party. Lincoln himself despaired of reelection until Sherman took Atlanta in early September. This and other events caused the military picture to suddenly brighten–dissipating pessimism to the extent that a majority of northern voters sustained the president in the November elections, leading Weber to conclude that it was war fatigue rather than ideol-

ogy or constitutional concerns that had given impetus to this last, largest–though short-lived–phase of the antiwar movement.

Weber's overall thesis is that Copperhead war dissent was a serious business, concluding that antiwar sentiment was widespread and not a peripheral issue in the North; that war dissent turned neighbors against each other, dividing communities and spawning "surprisingly frequent" outbreaks of violence; and that war dissent hurt the Union army's ability to prosecute the war. She submits that these developments also led to a politicization of Union soldiers who became disgusted with the Peace movement and voted Republican in overwhelming numbers.

Weber reiterates throughout her study that Copperhead strength "generally ran in inverse relation to the success (or failures) of the armies" (p. 9). This observation is not new by any means.[2] But the strength of Weber's narrative approach is that she is able to plainly draw the correlation between successive military and political developments to the ebb and flow of antiwar sentiment. Tying the antiwar movement to a wartime military and political chronology also illuminates her contention that a fundamental failing of the Peace Democrats was their unwillingness to recognize that the Southern leadership was irrevocably for independence and would not accept reunion under any condition.

Weber effectively mined a variety of rich manuscript collections in the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and other repositories uncovering the opinions of worried constituents expressed in anxious letters to Republican governors and other officials–suggestive of widespread concern amongst rank-and-file Republicans about Copperhead influence and activities in their communities. On the other hand, Weber encountered the evidentiary challenges familiar to all who have researched the Copperheads–a paucity of private materials generated by the Copperheads themselves. For as she notes at the outset, "Neither they nor their family members donated much in the way of letters and diaries to archives" (p. 10). The problem is exacerbated by the nature of the various "secret societies" and defense leagues that antiwar dissidents formed over the course of the war, organizations that by their very nature were designed to obfuscate their internal workings. This leaves piecing the story together from the public record, extrapolating from the records of the enemies of the Peace Democrats, and assessing the reliability of investigative reports compiled by government and military agents antagonistic to the Copperheads.

It was a careful study of the latter–reports of government informants and agents in the papers and official records of such investigators as Henry B. Carrington, Samuel P. Heintzelman, Joseph Holt, John P. Sanderson, and others–that led historian Frank L. Klement to conclude a generation ago that the evidence was insufficient to sustain charges of significant Copperhead conspiracies capable of seriously disrupting the northern war effort. Beginning with his seminal work in 1960, *The Copperheads of the Middle West*, and in follow up studies such as *Dark Lanterns: Secret Political Societies, Conspiracies, and Treason Trials in the Civil War*, Klement contended that the dangers of Copperheadism had been exaggerated by overly anxious and opportunistic Republicans.[3] In the intervening years Klement's interpretation has generally held sway.[4]

Still, the persistence of Copperhead activity in descriptive wartime sources has insured that the door has never been completely closed on the question of the degree and seriousness of the northern antiwar movement. As memories of the wartime generation congealed over the last quarter of the nineteenth century into wartime memoirs, county histories, and popular culture retrospectives, unsavory Copperheads were ever present and ever active in the reminiscent accounts. Early twentieth-century historical interpretation tended to follow suit, perhaps most famously in Wood Gray's 1942 classic *The Hidden Civil War: The Story of the Copperheads*.[5] For some years now–pre-dating 9/11–there has seemed to be a yearning to return to the pre-Klement storyline as epitomized in Wood Gray's descriptions of dangerous and widespread Copperhead perfidies. Weber's book captures this current mood.

Weber states categorically, "I wholly disagree with Klement's interpretation and conclusions about the danger [Copperhead] organizations posed to the government" (p. 243, note 35). Yet the basis on which she disagrees with Klement seems often to be simply the conclusions drawn in decades-old secondary works rather than on any analysis of new evidence or new analysis of old evidence.[6] For example, regarding the reputed conspiracy to use the 1864 Chicago Democratic convention as a rallying point for 50,000 Copperheads who planned to meet with Confederate infiltrators from Canada and free Confederate prisoners at Camp Douglas, Weber declares: "Such fears were not as fantastic as Klement and later historians have portrayed them" (p. 166). In support, Weber cites not primary evidence, but rather two

secondary sources–Wood Gray's 1942 study and Oscar Kinchen's 1970 study.[7] If students of the Copperheads are looking for an item-by-item refutation of Klement's analysis of the evidence regarding the Chicago conspiracy that shows which pieces he ignored or how he misread other pieces, they will be disappointed, for generally Weber–who apparently was aiming for a general synthetic overview–does not engage the debate at that level in this instance or others.

There are other areas where students of the Peace Democrats may feel disappointed if they are looking for analytical development much beyond the positions staked out by Gray or Klement. Michael F. Holt observed almost a decade ago that historians had neglected to adequately study Democratic war opposition at *local* political levels, noting that the few studies that had been conducted suggested that Democrats were more aggressively antiwar in their opposition to necessary war measures at the state level, and indications were that communities with Democratic majorities had lower military participation rates and higher resistance to war-financing measures.[8] Weber presents nothing new along these lines–no analysis of voting patterns in select state legislatures or other attempts to measure and assess the attitudes and actions of Democrats in wartime northern state legislatures. Even some of the standard oft-told stories that one might expect to find in a narrative overview–such as the proroguing of the Copperhead-dominated Illinois state legislature by Republican Governor Richard Yates–escape mention.

Except for a cursory observation that Copperheads generally were of southern pedigrees, Weber makes no attempt at cultural or socioeconomic profiling to bring Copperheads into clearer focus. In a footnote Weber observes, "There is no broad scholarship on a link between class identity and the propensity to become a Peace Democrat" (p. 237, note 7); she makes no attempt to fill this gap. In the same footnote she acknowledges that there are studies that "link ethnic and religious background to Copperhead beliefs," yet she fails to cite these studies and does not provide their conclusions in her narrative. Indeed, the entire religious dimension to the Copperhead movement, alluded to by Harry S. Stout and others, is virtually absent from Weber's analysis.[9] Weber makes a solitary reference to a church broken apart by conflict between antiwar congregants and war supporters (p. 212). Yet Copperhead Christian sentiments were widespread and incorporating their stories into her narrative could have substantially bolstered her thesis that the war was a "neighbors' war," since the violent passions and extreme emotions of the war were played out among the closest of friends and neighbors within the confines of the central institutions of their communities–the churches. And the rise of new wartime Democratic churches in networks that crossed state boundaries suggests a widely based grassroots-level coordination amongst antiwar dissidents that is often hard to document in other contexts.

Ideological profiling is yet another area where Weber might have extended her analysis. For example, Robert Churchill has argued that Midwestern Copperheadism was an "intermingling of different constituencies ... with different agendas" that consisted of (1) cells of hardcore revolutionaries intent on establishing a northwestern confederation independent of the rest of the Union, (2) rural yeoman whose main interest was not political independence but libertarian concerns bred of revolutionary-era republicanism and a culture of localism, and (3) more moderate Democratic leaders who sought to confine revolutionary ardor to protecting the processes of popular sovereignty in preparing for revolution if Republicans interfered with the process of free and open elections.[10] Weber cites Churchill to support the contention that Copperhead societies such as the Sons of Liberty posed real danger to northern governments (p. 128), but does not delineate his argument or evaluate it either in the text or a note. Analysis of this kind would have added to the historiographical value of her book.

A historical account must end somewhere, and Weber chooses to close hers abruptly at war's end in 1865. But an epilogue alluding to the postwar fate of Copperheads and their possible lingering influence in such things as the early Grange movement (another Klement theme) might have provided a more satisfying close for those interested in long-term historical connections.

Maps would have been helpful showing the geographic distribution of Copperhead influence and activity–such as highlighting counties that voted for Peace Democrats in wartime local elections, or locating where attacks were made on draft enrollment officers or where major Peace movement rallies were held, or where antiwar newspapers were suppressed and printing offices vandalized, or the location and nature of other civil disturbances, particularly those that required a military response that tied up soldiers and material that could have been used elsewhere. Such graphic representations would have helped to drive home Weber's contentions that disaffection was widespread, that it was indeed a "neighbor's war," and that dissent negatively impacted

the army.

Still, on the whole Weber's is a good book. It is logically structured and eminently readable. Its narrative format has the virtue of drawing connections. It reflects current sentiments that there is more substance to the Copperhead story than has been generally allowed in Civil War historiography since the impact of Klement's studies decades ago. It is a competent and serviceable retelling of the Copperhead story. But in many ways it is just that–a retelling. The opportunity was missed to advance the historical discussion in ways that could have made it a definitive rebuttal to Klement and a historiographical milestone.

Notes

[1]. Jennifer L. Weber, "The Divided States of America: Dissent in the North during the Civil War," (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 2003). Her dissertation won the 2005 Hay-Nicolay Dissertation Prize, an award presented in alternate years by the Abraham Lincoln Association and the Abraham Lincoln Institute.

[2]. For one, Weber's mentor James E. McPherson identified the inverse correlation of Copperhead strength to Union military fortunes a long time ago. See, e.g., McPherson, *Ordeal by Fire: The Civil War and Reconstruction*, second ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1992), 272.

[3]. Frank L. Klement, *The Copperheads in the Middle West* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960); Klement, *Dark Lanterns: Secret Political Societies, Conspiracies, and Treason Trials in the Civil War* (Baton Rogue: Louisiana State University Press, 1984).

[4]. This is reflected, for instance, in studies of the wartime Democratic party by Jean H. Baker, *Affairs of Party: The Political Culture of Northern Democrats in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1983) and Joel H. Silbey, *A Respectable Minority: The Democratic Party in the Civil War Era, 1860-1868* (New York: Norton, 1977).

[5]. Wood Gray, *The Hidden Civil War: The Story of the Copperheads* (New York: Viking Press, 1942).

[6]. Reference to widespread fear of Copperheads, which Weber has done an excellent job of documenting, does not translate into a refutation of Klement's argument that such fears, though understandable, were largely unfounded.

[7]. At notes 21-23 on page 246, Weber cites Gray, *The Hidden Civil War*, 181-82, and Oscar A. Kinchen, *Confederate Operations in Canada and the North* (North Quincy, MA.: Christopher, 1970), 67-70.

[8]. Michael F. Holt, "An Elusive Synthesis: Northern Politics during the Civil War," in James M. McPherson and William J. Cooper, Jr., *Writing the Civil War: The Quest to Understand* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998), 112-13.

[9]. Harry S. Stout, *Upon the Alter of the Nation: A Moral History of the Civil War* (New York: Viking, 2006), 284. Stout's book came out too late to impact Weber's book, but the studies he relies on are several years old.

[10]. Robert Churchill, "Liberty, Conscription, and a Party Divided: The Sons of Liberty Conspiracy, 1863-1864," *Prologue* 30 (1998): 295-303. This article is a version of ideas presented in Churchill's dissertation, " 'The Highest and Holiest Duty of Freemen': Revolutionary Libertarianism in American History," (Ph.D. diss., Rutgers University, 2001), chapter 3.

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Citation: Bryon Andreasen. Review of Weber, Jennifer L, *Copperheads: The Rise and Fall of Lincoln's Opponents in the North.* H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. July, 2007.

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