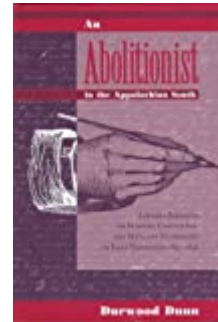


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Durwood Dunn. *An Abolitionist in the Appalachian South: Ezekiel Birdseye on Slavery, Capitalism, and Separate Statehood in East Tennessee, 1841-1846.* Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997. xii + 306 pp. \$36.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87049-964-7.



Reviewed by Stephen Longenecker (Department of History, Bridgewater College)

Published on H-SHEAR (February, 1998)

Durwood Dunn's book considers the slave society of East Tennessee as described by Ezekiel Birdseye, an abolitionist. Dunn builds on the work of John C. Inscoe, who believes that in 1861 East Tennessee remained Unionist because it had a stronger self-identity than other upcountry regions in the South. Dunn argues that this uniqueness stemmed primarily from a mild form of slavery, less severe than elsewhere, and he maintains that Birdseye's correspondence with northern abolitionist Gerrit Smith documents this uniqueness.

Ezekiel Birdseye (1796-1861), a wealthy businessman, was not a typical East Tennessean. Boarding with local families in Tennessee, Birdseye always listed his birthplace, Cornwall, Connecticut, as his permanent residence, and he never appears on a Tennessee census. Both of his wives were also natives of Connecticut, and Birdseye's second wife, Mary, remained at her father's home in Cornwall throughout the marriage. Perhaps the book's subtitle should be "A Connecticut Yankee in Andrew Johnson's Backyard," but Dunn says little about Birdseye's continued commitment to Connecticut, other than noting its existence.

Instead, the heart of the book is Birdseye's transplanted roots in Tennessee and his correspondence with Gerrit Smith, which Smith published in antislavery newspapers. The letters, relating what Birdseye saw on

his travels through the region, dominate Dunn's primary sources, are reprinted at the end of the volume, and occupy more space than Dunn's text, 147 to 88 pages, respectively. (The volume unfortunately has no maps.) Dunn gives Birdseye's correspondence conscientious editing with ample explanation, but he does not discuss whether Birdseye's knowledge that Smith would publish the letters influenced their content. He calls Birdseye "amazing" (p. 34) for conversing candidly with both masters and slaves about bondage, and he writes that "Birdseye possessed an almost novelistic ability to represent simultaneously the vast horrors of the institution of slavery together with the common humanity of particular slaves about whom he wrote" (p. 67). Moreover, according to Dunn, the letters are "strangely modern" due to their absence of racism, and they "often transcend their historical context of time and place and still speak to us compellingly and very directly today" (p. 88). Dunn clearly admires his subject.

Dunn, however, finds little support in East Tennessee for abolition, and as an abolitionist Birdseye remained in a small minority in East Tennessee. Dunn cites William G. Brownlow as a more typical example of the region's drift from antislavery. Relying on new evidence, Dunn has discovered that in 1834 Brownlow signed a strong antislavery petition, although in the next decade he became

a conspicuous defender of bondage. The author suspects that many other East Tennesseans similarly abandoned antislavery during this period, and he adds that economics rather than hostility to slavery motivated East Tennessee's drive for separate statehood. The region's distinctiveness, then, had little to do with opposition to slavery.

Instead, Dunn believes that what made the region different was its treatment of slaves. Bondage in East Tennessee, he writes, "was milder or more humane than anywhere else in the South" (p. 84), and residents here "refused to tolerate alien South Carolina patterns of slave management or discipline in their midst" (p. 24). Dunn gives great weight to the racially blind justice dispensed from the bench of a circuit court by Judge Jacob Peck, and the harsh plantations of South Carolina often serve as a foil for Dunn's more humane masters in the Tennessee mountains.

The book's greatest weakness is its portrayal of slavery in this region as harsh, yet distinctively mild. While Dunn argues that East Tennessee's uniqueness stemmed from a more gentle form of slavery, Birdseye, a passionate abolitionist, stressed slavery's cruelty. After observing the institution in his new home, Birdseye noted that slavery brought out the worst in humans, and Dunn acknowledges that Birdseye shows "much harsher treatment of slaves in East Tennessee than historians have previously assumed" (p. 86). The frequency of runaways and lynchings, for example, indicates that conditions were just as unpalatable for slaves in East Tennessee as elsewhere. Although Dunn is persuasive that slavery in the Tennessee mountains, with a slave population of 12.5 percent, differed from bondage in heavily-enslaved South Carolina, he also needs to show that slaves in East Tennessee lived better than those in other upcountry and border south regions. Frequently, Dunn's subjects seem similar to upper south masters outside of East Tennessee, who agonized over "the wolf by the ears," performed occasional individual acts of mercy, but opposed even the most timid efforts to end bondage. Thus, a distinct re-

gional ethos does not emerge in East Tennessee.

The book's strength is the focus it brings to Birdseye, an engaging figure. Furthermore, Dunn's book should stimulate discussion, which is also a compliment. In this spirit I have several questions.

According to Ronald Walters and Leonard Richards, northern abolitionists were far outside the mainstream, and Walters adds that they developed their own subculture. Surely, then, abolitionists were also outsiders in Eastern Tennessee, and how did Birdseye avoid identification with a small, despised minority?

Daniel Crofts believes that anti-elitist egalitarianism was a driving force in East Tennessee's Unionism in 1861. Although Birdseye's letters stop well before the secession crisis, it nevertheless seems curious that Dunn has no comment on anti-elitism. Did it contribute to the region's distinctiveness?

Dunn also says little about paternalism. If East Tennessee's leaders voiced concern about the severity of slavery and occasionally used their influence to lessen its burdens, does that make this region distinct or were they merely paternalists like those in other parts of the South? How did the East Tennessee paternalists differ from those in other parts of the border south?

Birdseye's letters to Smith end abruptly in 1846, and he died in 1861. Confederates auctioned much of his property at deflated prices to pay taxes and destroyed significant portions of his personal property, including evidence of what he thought of events leading to secession. Had more of Birdseye's observations survived, we would be grateful, but Dunn deserves credit for bringing the letters of this Appalachian abolitionist into print and for his contribution to the study of a fascinating region.

Copyright (c) 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-shear/>

Citation: Stephen Longenecker. Review of Dunn, Durwood, *An Abolitionist in the Appalachian South: Ezekiel Birdseye on Slavery, Capitalism, and Separate Statehood in East Tennessee, 1841-1846*. H-SHEAR, H-Net Reviews. February, 1998.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1667>

Copyright © 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.