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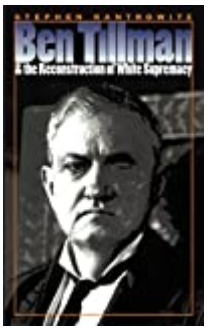

Stephen Kantrowitz. *Ben Tillman and the Reconstruction of White Supremacy.* Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2000. 422 pp. $49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-4839-5.

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THE DESIGN OF WHITE SUPREMACY

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Ben Tillman and the Reconstruction of White Supremacy does exactly what the title promises; it tells the story of the reconstruction of white supremacy following the Civil War, using Ben Tillman as a vehicle. Born on August 11, 1847, and dying on July 3, 1918, Tillman dominated South Carolina politics from the late 1880s until the last years of the twentieth century's first decade. He was born into a wealthy slaveholding family and became a wealthy farmer himself. He served as governor of the state from 1890 to 1894 and as a U.S. Senator from 1894 until his death. Many Democrats considered him the possible party nominee for president in 1896. He maintained a national reputation until his death, speaking widely on many issues, the most popular and influential of which concerned "the race problem."

On the one hand, the book is a political biography of Tillman and, to a certain extent, a discussion of South Carolina politics between Redemption and the early twentieth century, the years of Tillman's political pre-eminence in the state. The book is more than political biography, however. Kantrowitz makes a major contribution with his analysis of the reconstruction of white supremacy. This aspect of the book is less about Tillman than the task he undertook, "to transform the slogan 'white supremacy' into a description of social reality, reconstructing white male authority in every sphere from the individual household to national politics" (2). One of Kantrowitz's most important and telling points is his demonstration that white supremacy was "a social argument and a political program," something constructed rather than a trait embedded in the culture or a social fact, and "consisted of ideas and practices, promises and threats, oratory and murder" (2). Kantrowitz demonstrates that Tillman's task was not simple and that he did not accomplish all of what he wanted. The extent to which Tillman's version of white supremacy spread to the entire country, however, is remarkable.

The heart of the book lies in an analysis of the changing nature of white supremacy in South Carolina during the fifty years following 1865 and its connection to class, gender, and white male honor. The book also demonstrates the importance of violence in the reconstruction and enforcing of white supremacy, a personal and com-

mutarian white violence which had significant impact on class relations and white male honor.

The book's introduction does justice to all these themes, and others. The first chapter, "Mastery and Its Discontents," lays out the prewar tensions of white supremacy, covering ground largely familiar to those acquainted with the history of slavery in the American South. Chapter Two, "Planters and the 'Gentleman from Africa,' " deals with Reconstruction in South Carolina and especially in Edgefield County. Here, too, Kantrowitz's discussion often covers familiar ground in new ways. In particular, he underlines the extent to which throughout Reconstruction the violence and terrorism aimed at the freedpeople, their leaders, and Republicans in general was planned and organized, especially by planters, though they always denied it.

Chapter Three covers the continuing political crisis of the 1880s, marked early by Greenback, Independent, and Republican opposition and late by the Farmers' Alliance programs. The rapid decline of white farmers into tenancy and dependence led to white insurgency and a challenge to white supremacy. The agricultural crisis underlay the violent assertion of white manhood and disfranchisement, which South Carolina elites chose as the only ways to avoid biracial politics, the collapse of white solidarity, and the loss of political and perhaps economic control. So the particular definition of white manhood which succeeded – largely Tillman's, as Kantrowitz demonstrates – in great part flowed from economic crisis which required elite action.

When Tillman moved into formal politics in the mid-1880s, he rode a potential solution to the political problem raised by the agricultural crisis. Combining a producer analysis with attacks on his conservative opposition, he charged that they, and goldbug monopolists, stood between South Carolina's white farmers and their economic independence and patriarchal authority. By tying white supremacy to the rhetoric of reform, Tillman short-circuited the Alliance and Populism in South Carolina.

In Chapter Five Kantrowitz uses a discussion of lynching and the dispensary system to describe the tension between the rule of law and white supremacy's requirement that white men be able to enforce it at all times, which was the inheritance of the 1876 Hamburg Massacre and the Red-shirts. Chapter Six focuses on Tillman's effort to write white supremacy into law as part of an effort to create "state laws and institutions that could nurture and sustain white farming households" (198). The primary thrust of this effort was disfranchisement, and Kantrowitz organizes the chapter around the campaign in 1894 for a constitutional convention, coinciding with Tillman's successful campaign for a U.S. Senate seat, and the convention's activities, including dealing with disfranchisement, women's suffrage, African American education, and raising the age of consent.

The rest of the book – Chapters Seven, Eight, and the Epilogue –concerns Tillman's national role as both a Senator and a popular speaker, and the nature of his legacy in South Carolina, in the South, and in the nation. Kantrowitz outlines Tillman's role in the 1896 capture of the national Democratic party by a coalition of western and southern Democrats organized around a demand for free silver. He evaluates Tillman's senatorial career and gives considerable attention to his national impact as a popular speaker and lecturer, particularly on his most popular subject, "the negro problem."

Because Kantrowitz focuses on one individual in one southern state, some readers may ask how well his conclusions apply to the rest of the South. The question is misdirected. While I think Kantrowitz may overestimate the impact of Tillman's reconstruction of white supremacy on the rest of the South and on the nation as a whole, what he has to say about Tillman and South Carolina has a good deal wider application.

The issue is not really one of applicability but rather similarities and differences, and even these are not bipolar. The important questions are "how different" and "how similar." South Carolina, as Kantrowitz points out, had a very high proportion of blacks to whites, like Louisiana and Mississippi and unlike Texas and North Carolina. South Carolina had a smaller upcountry and fewer heavily white areas than other southern states. Since these two factors apparently played an important role in state politics in the South, especially after the Civil War, the political experiences of South Carolina might well be different from those of North Carolina or Texas, for example. Other differences may be important. The extent that his opposition facilitated Tillman's political success seems greater in South Carolina than elsewhere, but it certainly was not unique. Hogg in Texas and Vardaman in Mississippi, for example, had similar luck with some of their conservative opposition.

Nor do the differences between South Carolina and other southern states detract from Kantrowitz's identification of forces involved in the crusade for white supremacy that triumphed so universally in the South between 1890 and the beginning of World War One.

His analysis of Tillman's coordination of producer with white supremacy rhetoric, especially around the issue of manly independence and honor, has great analytic strength and should be applied elsewhere in the South, if only because it ties together in new and very convincing ways the agricultural crisis, reform rhetoric, white supremacy, and white male commitment to patriarchal authority. Kantrowitz's discussion of patriarchal power fills out what Nell Irvin Painter suggested in her essay, " 'Social Equality,' Miscegenation, Labor, and Power: that white solidarity rested on the authority every white man theoretically held over the women in his household [1].

I might consider class a greater element in Tillman's thinking than Kantrowitz acknowledges, though he certainly gives it considerable weight. I suspect Tillman's emphasis on white supremacy was more importantly related to his commitment to the continued dominance of the landowning elite than to his obvious belief in white superiority and the dangers African Americans posed to white civilization. On the other hand, Tillman's career as a lecturer and speaker could support Kantrowitz's position. His national campaign for white supremacy would have affected the position of the South Carolina elite only indirectly, though this is not true for some of the national changes Tillman recommended, especially revoking the fifteenth amendment and instituting a national pass system.

His position on the disfranchisement of white voters suggests the importance of class in Tillman's advocacy of white supremacy. He was willing to disfranchise some whites in 1895 as the lesser of two evils. He also supported elimination of the understanding clause in two years, something which would disfranchise only white voters. His continued doubts about the capacity of many common white men for self-government and his willingness late in his career to consider a much wider disfranchisement of white men suggests Tillman followed his class interests at some expense to his commitment to white solidarity.

Kantrowitz's work also raises two questions common to southern history in general, especially the post-1865 period. One of them is why poorer white men remained so devoted to white solidarity based on white supremacy. It did not serve them well, as Greenbackers and Populists and opponents of disfranchisement – both black and white – pointed out to them. Nor did preservation of patriarchal authority necessarily require white supremacy; patriarchal authority was possible without white prejudice or racism. The answer may lie partially with the notion of white male honor, the personal right of every white man to assert his independence and protect his household by any means available, including violence. There is some suggestion in the book that the connection of honor to white racism, especially that of poorer whites, may have been related to honor's requirement for an inferior. White solidarity meant that the inferior could not formally be white, though informally it often was. The definition of white male honor might thus require a black inferior, helping to explain why poor whites might be so attached to white supremacy that they could overlook clear disadvantages to their self-interest in other areas.

The second question of post-Civil War southern history that Kantrowitz's book calls up is the tendency of the opponents of the Democrats – Republicans, Independents, Greenbackers, and Populists – to play by democratic rules far more often than the Democrats. The reasons why the Democrats used fraud and violence and formal and informal disfranchisement have been discussed often enough. Without these techniques they would have lost, and the economic power of the elites who controlled the Democratic Party depended heavily on their political control of state and local government. The lien system, a seasonal labor supply, the favorable tax structure, stock laws, and a number of other sources of economic power lay in state legislation. Why the other groups did not indulge more often in the behavior of the Democratic elites remains more of a mystery. They had a great deal to lose as well. Far more often than the Democrats, Republicans and Populists tried to honor formal democratic rules. Their commitment often left them vulnerable at polling places when Democrats were more than willing to intimidate voters and engage in almost any kind of fraud, all in the name of a higher purpose, the survival of the Democratic party and white supremacy.

The only thing I missed in Kantrowitz's outstanding work is a discussion of the place of religion. The gap is, however, not unique to this book. Southern political and economic history often seems written completely separately from the history of southern religion. Many of the white men for whom Tillman spoke and on whom Tillman's effort to reconstruct white supremacy depended belonged to and attended church. Even if they did not, they shared evangelical Protestantism as a significant intellectual tradition. The Bible provided them with many of the common metaphors they used to understand the world around them. In one way or another, religion was an important part of their lives. As such, it must have played a role in their understanding of their patriarchal

mastery over their households, their relation to other white men and women and to African Americans, and their commitment to white supremacy and the personal and communal violence so often used to enforce it. Likely these things in turn also had an effect on what they understood being an evangelical Protestant meant.

I cannot do justice to this book in the space I have available. While Kantrowitz's book can be identified with the work of those historians who are reshaping the southern history of this period by considering gender along with class and race, it is not simply that. It is an important integration of these three elements. It also draws attention, as other recent works have, to how important violence was in the maintenance of the southern social and political order. Like all outstanding books, this one should inspire years of debate and reach beyond its field and subject to influence a much wider audience.

Note

[1] Nell Irvin Painter, " 'Social Equality,' Miscegenation, Labor, and Power," in Numan V. Bartley, ed., *The Evolution of Southern Culture,* Athens and London, England: University of Georgia Press, 1988, pp. 47-67.

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