



Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

Kenneth and John B. Rayner and the Limits of Southern Dissent by Gregg Cantrell
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GREGG CANTRELL. *Kenneth and John B. Rayner and the Limits of Southern Dissent*. (Blacks in the New World.) Urbana: University of Illinois Press. 1993. Pp. xiii, 361. \$47.50.

This well-crafted dual biography examines the lives of Kenneth Rayner, a notable North Carolina Whig, and his mulatto son, John B. Rayner, a leading Texas Populist. Gregg Cantrell depicts both father and son as dissenters who tried but failed to liberate southern politics from the grip of North-South and black-white polarization.

Kenneth Rayner (1808–84) burst onto the national stage just as the Whig Party took shape. He gained prominence during his six years in Congress between 1839 and 1845, even winning John Quincy Adams's grudging admiration for his speaking abilities. Rayner opposed Texas annexation and warned that sectional agitation might lead to civil war.

Rayner never regained the political stature he enjoyed during the 1840s. Increasingly disaffected from the Whigs, he seized on the American Party as a promising vehicle to purify national politics and arrest North-South rancor. In 1856 he attempted to arrange a fusion between Americans and Republicans, prompted by a far-from-unreasonable calculation that the American candidate, former President Millard Fillmore, would likely emerge the winner if the House decided the presidential election. North Carolina Democrats predictably denounced Rayner as a traitor to the South.

Political prominence enabled Rayner, whose own background was among the plain folk, to marry into an elite family. His wife, Susan Polk, was a younger sister of the future Confederate general, Leonidas Polk. Rayner used the Polk family's wealth to acquire an Arkansas plantation that yielded spectacular cotton crops for its absentee landlord. By 1860 he owned at least 200 slaves. One of them was his illegitimate son.

John B. Rayner (1850–1918), who was raised in Kenneth Rayner's household, inherited his famous father's talent and ambition. After achieving local office during Reconstruction, he migrated to Texas, where he enjoyed his own moment in the political sun. A skilled organizer and spellbinding orator, he campaigned tirelessly across East Texas for the Populist ticket during the tumultuous campaigns of 1894 and 1896. Rayner and his allies reached out both to white Democrats and black Republicans. They were thwarted by the pseudo-Populist selection of William Jennings Bryan as the Democratic standard-bearer in 1896, as well as by Democratic fraud, intimidation, and violence.

Both Rayners became erratic mavericks in their declining years. Kenneth Rayner, in 1861 and 1862 an enthusiastic supporter of the southern war effort, secretly schemed in 1863 and 1864 to withdraw North Carolina from the Confederacy. When the war ended he first ingratiated himself with Andrew John-

son—going so far as to write a laudatory biography of Abraham Lincoln's successor—but by the 1870s he was an avowed Republican who shamelessly sought and received federal patronage jobs.

John Rayner, the erstwhile Populist, became an outspoken accommodationist. Although still privately critical of the way whites mistreated blacks, Rayner publicly endorsed the poll tax and even made flattering comments about the racist novelist Thomas Dixon. A supporter of the Prohibition Party during the 1880s, Rayner campaigned for the Texas Brewers Association between 1905 and 1912.

Cantrell contends that the two Rayners were ideologically consistent and ideologically similar. He suggests that both shared a Madisonian outlook, one that feared corrupting power, deprecated southern sectionalism, and opposed racially based tests of citizens' rights. Although Cantrell's search for ideological consistency and affinity is not entirely persuasive, he vividly demonstrates the obstacles confronting those who challenged the southern based Democratic Party.

Cantrell brings a judicious sensitivity to his complex task. He refuses to depict his subjects in a heroic mold. No comparable study of a white father and a black son has ever before appeared. Shame on the publisher for pricing the book so outrageously as to diminish its circulation and impact.

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ROBERT WOOSTER. *Nelson A. Miles and the Twilight of the Frontier Army*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press. 1993. Pp. xv, 391. \$35.00.

Robert Wooster has written what surely will be the definitive biography of Nelson A. Miles, an important and controversial figure in the army of the late nineteenth century. Born in 1839 in western Massachusetts, Miles worked as a store clerk before obtaining a lieutenant's commission in the Union volunteers at the start of the Civil War. Aggressive to an extreme, he fought in most of the major battles of the eastern theater, suffered several wounds, and finished the war as a twenty-six-year-old brevet major general. As commander of Fort Monroe, Virginia, in 1865–66, Miles supervised the imprisonment of Jefferson Davis, and his decision to keep the former Confederate leader in close confinement embroiled him in a bitter controversy with Davis and his sympathizers. Forced to accept a demotion to colonel in the postwar reduction of the army, Miles directed reconstruction in North Carolina, then embarked on a western military career that included some of the most dramatic events of the closing stages of the Indian wars: the subjugation of the Sioux in the aftermath of George Custer's defeat; the capture of Chief Joseph's band of Nez Percés after its anabasis of 1877; the surrender of Geronimo; and the suppression of the Ghost Dance uprising in 1890. Miles