

Copperhead: What are these people up to?

Joanne Laurier
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Directed by Ron Maxwell; written by Bill Kauffman, based on the novella by Harold Frederic

What is the significance of director Ron Maxwell, who made the generally laudable *Gettysburg* two decades ago, coming out with a favorable treatment of Lincoln's Northern opponents in the year of the battle's sesquicentennial?

The dramatic failings of Maxwell's *Copperhead* are bound up with its falsifying of historical and social reality. With a script by Bill Kauffman, a regular contributor to the *Wall Street Journal* and a columnist for the *American Conservative*, the movie is based on an 1893 novella by Harold Frederic, a Democrat and a retroactive Copperhead sympathizer. It must be said, however, that the novella is more forthright in its treatment of the pro-slavery elements in the North than the filmmakers.

The decision to film Frederic's work *uncritically* is a peculiar and unsavory one, which speaks to a definite political agenda. The novelist wrote his book only thirty years after the fact and was a friend of some of those involved in the wartime controversies. That doesn't excuse some of the choices he made in the book, but it makes them more understandable. Astonishingly, one hundred and fifty years have not given Kauffman and Maxwell any greater insight, just the opposite! Their hindsight amounts to making the case for the "fire in the rear," which, in January 1863, Abraham Lincoln said was kindling the anti-war wing of the Democratic Party.

So-called "Copperheads" (presumably named after the snake) were a faction of the Democratic Party in the North who opposed the all-out prosecution of the Civil War, generally from the perspective of support for or conciliation with slavery and the Southern slavocracy.

In an interview with the *American Conservative*, Maxwell refers to *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* by Drew Gilpin Faust (2008), which revised the Civil War's death toll upward. The implication of Maxwell's remarks is that, in light of Faust's book, the conflict must be revisited from the point of view of those who opposed it at the time. Indeed, in one of his books, Kauffman describes opposition to the Civil War in the North as "honorable and deep-set in the old American grain." It was no such thing. Such opposition was either the mercenary efforts of Southern agents or expressed the sentiments of the most backward, parochial and often prejudiced portions of the population. If their views

had prevailed, slavery would have continued to exist and modern world history would be a very different story.

Copperhead opens in 1862. Farmer Abner Beech (Billy Campbell) is the most solid of citizens in a small town in upstate New York (Frederic came from Utica, New York). Beech is also a Copperhead and regularly locks horns with the local Abolitionist zealot and religious fanatic Jee Hagadorn (Angus Macfadyen). Abner's son Jeff (Casey Thomas Brown), who is in love with Jee's anti-slavery daughter Esther (Lucy Boynton), eventually joins the Union army, both as an act of rebellion against his father and as proof of love for his sweetheart.

News of the bloody Battle of Antietam (September 17, 1862), which produced more than twenty thousand casualties, and of Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation (first announced five days later) further widens the rift between the Copperhead and his mostly Abolitionist neighbors.

Abner campaigns for the Democrats in the November 1862 mid-term elections and celebrates their gains—particularly the re-election of New York governor Horatio Seymour—with a bonfire. Enraged anti-slavery elements strike back and a tragedy ensues, followed by a love-thy-neighbor reconciliation.

It first must be noted that the movie sanitizes the novella by omitting Abner Beech's sentiments. Frederic, a talented realistic novelist (his best known work is *The Damnation of Theron Ware* [1896]), at first makes no bones about Beech's views and, in fact, seems to be satirizing them. The book's narrator describes the farmer as being "so enraged ... over the modern Abolitionists. ... It took me a long time to even approximately grasp the wickedness of these new men, who desired to establish negro sovereignty in the Republic, and to compel each white girl to marry a black man."

One day Beech brings home a pamphlet by the Abolitionist Theodore Parker: "In the evening he read it, or as far into it as his temper would permit, beating the table with his huge fist from time to time, and snorting with wrathful amazement. At last he sprang to his feet, marched over to the wood-stove, kicked the door open with his boot, and thrust the offending print into the blaze."

Frederic doesn't conceal Beech's racial prejudice. Speaking of his son, who has joined the Union army, Beech declares, in rural dialect, "'His mother feels jest as I do ... He sneaked off behind our backs to jine Lincoln's nigger-worshippers, an' levy

war on fellow-countrymen o' his'n who'd done him no harm, an' whatever happens to him it serves him right.”

One of the serious weaknesses of the novella is that, by its end, Frederic has transformed Beech into a sort of all-knowing, benevolent patriarch, who brings together the various contending parties. Moreover, Frederic, followed by the filmmakers, turns reality upside down. Absurdly, the novella and film make the pro-Southern Beech the victim of anti-slavery mob violence. No record exists of any such attack in New York State. On the other hand, the Abolitionists were persecuted for decades, physically attacked and beaten, threatened with lynching, and in the case of Elijah P. Lovejoy in Illinois in 1837, murdered.

Maxwell's film stacks the deck with its principled, reasonable Copperhead who stands head-and-shoulders above his crazed, fiery-eyed Abolitionist nemesis, Hagadorn.

The film's reactionary, parochial core displays itself when Avery—the more level-headed Abolitionist played in a cameo by Peter Fonda—asks Abner if the Union means anything to him. Abner answers: “It means something. It means more than something. But it doesn't mean everything. My family means more to me, my farm, the corners means more. New York State means more to me. Though we disagree Avery, you mean more to me than the Union.”

Abner also claims that it was Lincoln and the Republicans who have torn the country apart, “Closing down newspapers, putting critics in prison, enlisting your boys to fight in his unconstitutional war. ... [Lincoln] should have let the South go, as they would not have harmed us. ... I am not a slaver. I've never even seen a slave. But the Constitution says it's none of New York State's business what Dixie does.” This is filthy backward stuff.

The film is also dishonest in its suggestion that the Copperheads only acted out of the highest motives, concern for the Constitution and civil liberties. There may have been such individuals, but crass economic interests motivated the leading Peace Democrats and explained their hostility to Lincoln (the film does show Abner's pathological hatred of the president).

Although slavery ended in New York City in 1827, business interests in the city and region profited enormously from slave-grown cotton, serving as the middlemen between the plantations and the cloth-making mills in Britain and France. These economic benefits meant that politics and even public opinion in New York were slanted toward the South. The Democratic Party in New York City was a hotbed of pro-slavery sentiment. Leading Democrats were on the slavocracy's payroll and at the same time attempted to terrify the large immigrant population of the city about the potential dangers of competition from thousands of freed black slaves.

Figures like Seymour, a friend of Frederic's, and Fernando Wood, mayor of New York City, both Democrats, fanned racist sentiment and helped create the atmosphere in which the July 1863 draft riots in New York City broke out, which resulted in

at least 120 civilian deaths and eleven black men being lynched.

That this regressive tendency attracted the filmmakers is spelled out in Kauffman's comment that “[T]he eulogists of Father Abraham [Lincoln] ... gloss over the extent to which the Civil War enshrined industrial capitalism, the subordination of the states to the federal behemoth, and such odiously statist innovations as conscription, the jailing of war critics, and the income tax.”

In his foreword to Jennifer L. Weber's *Copperheads: The Rise and Fall of Lincoln's Opponents in the North* (2006), noted Civil War historian James McPherson writes: “A speech in the House of Representatives by Congressman Clement Vallandigham [a leading Copperhead] in January 1863 laid out the themes that provoked Lincoln's concern about ‘the fire in the rear.’ ‘I see more of barbarism and sin, a thousand times, in the continuance of this war ... and the enslavement of the white race by debt and taxes and arbitrary power’ than in African American slavery. ‘In considering the terms of settlement we [should] look only to the welfare, peace and safety of the white race, without reference to the effect that settlement may have on the African.’”

Weber also quotes the remarks of Seymour, described generally as a “moderate” Democrat, who denounced the Emancipation Proclamation as “a proposal for the butchery of women and children, for scenes of lust and rapine, and of arson and murder, which would invoke the interference of civilized Europe.” Weber's book successfully argues that Copperhead political activities did pose a danger to the Northern war effort.

Copperhead's makers are wading in murky waters indeed. At best, they attempt to justify their wooden, flat creation as an anti-war tract. But there are wars and there are wars. What are the political implications of “rethinking” the Civil War? Far from representing a form of dissent, the filmmakers are flowing with the foulest, most anti-democratic currents. It seems reasonable to ask: what are Maxwell and Kauffman really up to?



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