

“The records were full of evidence of dissent and insurrections by common people”

An interview with Victoria Bynum, historian and author of *The Free State of Jones*—Part 1

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Free State of Jones, the film directed by Gary Ross, powerfully and movingly recounts a significant episode of the American Civil War, the insurrection against the Confederacy led by Newton Knight, a white, antislavery farmer in Jones County in southern Mississippi from 1863 to 1865.

Audiences have been generally warm and receptive. However, Ross’s film has met with a hostile response from commentators who see society and history in exclusively racial terms, like Charles Blow of the *New York Times* (whose own lead film reviewer, A. O. Scott, to his credit, gave the film positive marks), Vann Newkirk II in the *Atlantic* and countless others. *Free State of Jones* is a blow to the practitioners of identity politics because it presents this revealing episode in American history in terms of class conflict.

Moreover, the fraternity of well-paid, thoroughly self-satisfied film critics, white and black alike, quite rightly perceive in *Free State of Jones* a social and political threat: that the interracial revolt against inequality and aristocratic privilege in the 1860s will find an echo in our day.

Free State of Jones has absurdly been characterized as advancing some sort of “white savior” mythology because it honestly presents the response of common people in Mississippi, inspired by the traditions of the American Revolution, to the reactionary project of Southern secession. This cuts across the effort in particular to paint the white population in America, past and present, as hopelessly backward and racist.

Whatever the immediate commercial fate of Ross’s film, it will have a long shelf life. Those who are serious about American history and contemporary social life will find in it both education and inspiration.

One of the works that influenced Ross to make his film was *The Free State of Jones: Mississippi’s Longest Civil War* (2001), by Victoria Bynum. The book provides a fascinating, well-researched account of the Knight Company, tracing the origins of the ideological outlook of the antislavery, Southern Unionist forces back to the American Revolution, and beyond.

As the *American Historical Review* noted, “Bynum has fashioned frustratingly disparate material into an important book that may cause historians who are skeptical about putting too much stress on an ‘inner’ Civil War to rethink their position.” The same journal commented, “Prodigious research in genealogical material, census files, church records, official documents, and oral histories provides as full a picture of Jones County and its people as we are ever likely to have.”

Victoria Bynum is Distinguished Professor Emeritus of History at Texas State University, San Marcos. A graduate of the University of California, San Diego, an award-winning author and National Endowment for the

Humanities Fellow, her scholarship analyzes class, race and gender relations in the Civil War Era South. Her blog, *Renegade South*, features unruly women, mixed-race families, anti-Confederate guerrillas and political dissenters.

She is the author of the following books:

The Long Shadow of the Civil War: Southern Dissent and Its Legacies. University of North Carolina Press, 2010.

The Free State of Jones: Mississippi’s Longest Civil War. University of North Carolina Press, 2001.

Unruly Women: The Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South. University of North Carolina Press, 1992.

We spoke to Victoria Bynum recently about Southern Unionism, *Free State of Jones* and the historical and political questions raised by her research and interests. It was a lengthy and absorbing conversation. As a personal aside, we will also let the reader know that she was a joy to talk to!

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David Walsh: First, can you tell us something about your background and how you made your way to the study in particular of Southern Unionism and opposition to the Confederacy?

Victoria Bynum: I don’t come from an academic background. Neither of my parents had a high school education. My dad was born in Jones County, Mississippi, but he left the state at age 17 to join the military. That’s how he made his living; he was a master sergeant by the time he retired. In my family, work was valued over education.

I grew up in the fifties and sixties, during the era of the Civil Rights movement. Influenced by my mother, who supported racial equality, I was very affected by this period. Over time, I developed a strong desire to go to college, and at age 26 began taking classes at a community college. To cut to the chase, my early interest in the history of race and social class emerged from my own experiences. When I began college I was a divorced mother on welfare. Pursuing a doctorate in history required a long economic struggle, one that ended after I finally obtained my degree and began teaching at Texas State University.

I began my college research with an interest in “free people of color,” the designation applied to free people before the Civil War. I was initially intrigued by a black friend’s insistence that his Virginia ancestors had never been slaves. That seemed to me unusual, and it piqued my interest in Old South history. Along the way, I became interested in both free black women and white women who lived outside the planter class. Those interests resulted in my dissertation (and first book), *Unruly Women: The Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South*.

While working on my dissertation, “Unruly Women,” I expanded my

research into the Civil War, and that's where I discovered Southern Unionism. The records were full of evidence of dissent and insurrections by common people, and it fascinated me. Here were white non-slaveholding men, women who allied with them, free people of color and slaves—all engaged in acts of subversion against the Confederacy. I had never known that actions like these occurred on the Civil War home front.

I was only studying North Carolina at the time. But, in the back of my mind, I remembered the story of Jones County, Mississippi, because my father was from there. I remembered reading years earlier in a footnote the legend of how the county supposedly seceded from the Confederacy. I didn't really know what it meant for a county to "secede" from the Confederacy, but it got my attention. So after I completed *Unruly Women*, which included two chapters on Southern Unionism, I decided to make my second book about the county in which my father was born.

It was a hard history to write because there were not nearly the court records documenting the Jones County insurrection as I'd found for Civil War North Carolina. The North Carolina governors' papers, court and legislative papers, are filled with information on insurrections and inner civil wars for several parts of the state, not just one. The Mississippi archives offered less evidence, but, in many ways, offered the most interesting guerrilla leader of all, Newton Knight.

In writing *The Free State of Jones*, I decided to draw a broader picture of the region's insurrection by tracing the historical roots of its peoples' ideas about authority, power and legitimate government. That's why the book begins with the American Revolution—and even before. After finishing that book, I expanded my research on Southern Unionism into Texas.

So I've now published works that trace both the roots of Southern Unionism and the eruption of Civil War guerrilla warfare in three different states. As the stories of Unionism became ever more interesting, it also became evident to me that they are an important and largely unknown part of American history. Even though there have been numerous studies by various historians—I'm not the only one by any stretch—the stories never seem to move far beyond academia and into the popular mainstream and consciousness. That's what I find so exciting about *Free State of Jones*, the movie.

DW: I would like to know your opinion about the responsibility and job of the historian. We have lived through 30 to 40 years in which the very ability of human beings to determine the truth about the past has been seriously called into question, by postmodernism and other trends. And yet there remain historians like yourself and others who are very committed to historical truth. Our own view is that postmodernism and identity politics are closely related. The conception that there is no such thing as objective truth, that everyone merely has his or her "narrative" has had pernicious consequences. But I will ask your view on the matter.

VB: My attraction to historical research began before I entered college, and I have always shied away from adhering to any particular theoretical approach that might dictate my response to evidence. Of course, I have been influenced by any number of theories, and those influences show throughout my books. Obviously, Marxist theory influences my analysis of class, whereas postmodernism influences my deconstructionist approach to racial identity. A good deal of feminist theory—which is anything but monolithic—informs much of my discussion of the place of gender in conflicts that appear on the surface to be centered exclusively on males.

While my overarching thesis statements reflect theoretical influences, my commitment is to historical truth as I perceive it through my own careful analysis of evidence. Within this process, I have little patience for "identity politics." As much as I hate the phrase "political correctness" when applied to liberals and leftists by racists and right-wing extremists, I have come to recognize identity politics—as recently demonstrated by Charles Blow of the *New York Times*—as another pernicious form of

political correctness that uses hot-button phrases connected to discrete historical victims (in this case, slaves) to shut down any discourse that threatens that particular victim with a shared stage (say, poor whites).

For example, Blow's expressed indignation in a *New York Times* op-ed over contents in both the movie, *Free State of Jones*, and my own book not only denies the importance of class to relations between non-slaveholders and slaves, it is thoroughly male-centered, leaving enslaved women with no agency whatsoever in regard to their sexual choices. It is fine to label as potentially "rape" all sexual advances made by slavemasters toward slaves; clearly, slaves had no ability to say "no" to such advances. It is not accurate, however, to label all sexual activity between white men and enslaved women as rape, as Blow also does. His rhetorical point does violence to history.

Joanne Laurier: Gary Ross's film has come under what we consider to be politically motivated attacks. What is your opinion of the film?

VB: I've read every review of *Free State of Jones* I could get hold of and have thought carefully about the film myself. My husband and I previewed it on June 2 and we liked it very much. (So, I might add, have the people who have since seen the movie and expressed their opinions to us directly.)

Frankly, I was relieved by what I didn't see in the movie as well as what I saw. There were so many things that Gary Ross could have done with that story—things one might expect a Hollywood director or screenwriter to do—that he didn't do. He did not, for example, graphically exploit the relationship between Newt and Rachel. He understated it if anything, which caused a number of reviewers to complain that the relationship did not come to life for them. One can only imagine, however, what other reviewers would have said—particularly Charles Blow—if Gary Ross had enlivened the screen with hot sex scenes based on mutual lust.

And then there are charges by critics that this is just another "white savior" movie. Such charges reflect a lack of knowledge about the role of class in stimulating white disaffection with the Confederacy. To such critics, I would ask: how should one portray these events and remain true to history? This is the true story of a man who actually collaborated with slaves during the Civil War to defeat the Confederacy. During Reconstruction, he worked to achieve rights of citizenship for freed people.

Are we to pretend that blacks could have achieved such rights without white assistance in the post-Civil War period, a period in which black people were murdered by whites with impunity, not just by the Ku Klux Klan, but by whites who didn't even bother to put the hoods on? If we're going to make historically based movies, we must present the past with factual realism or the endeavor will be worthless.

Likewise, when I hear some critics argue that Newt Knight should not have been the central character in a movie that includes slaves, I remind them that his remarkable story has never been told to a mass audience. Are we forbidden to tell the story of an ordinary white man who acted in extraordinary ways, simply because too many movies have not presented the history of blacks accurately? We need movies that tell the history of both blacks and whites accurately. Let's tell the story of Newt Knight *as well* as those of Nat Turner and Harriet Tubman, remembering that together, these stories reveal the intersection of class, race and gender in history. Of course there have been "white savior" movies, just as there have been a host of movies that exploit the brutality of slavery by including as much gratuitous sex and violence as possible.

But Ross's movie is not one of those exploitative films. And that is what I find perplexing about many reviews of it. It's as though some critics haven't paid close attention to the fact that—as several counter-reviewers have pointed out—Newt Knight doesn't save anybody. He can't save Moses. He can't relieve the hopelessness that Rachel expresses when she begs him to consider their moving north. The counterrevolution against Reconstruction is still with us today. Where's the "white savior"?

That's why, as you pointed out in your own review of the movie, Joanne, that we still abide by a counter-version of the Civil War that is based on lies: the lie that the Civil War was not caused by slavery, the lie that slavery was a benign institution. The other big lie of this "Lost Cause" version is that Southern whites were all solidly behind the Confederacy.

And so, when I read a review that dismisses the movie as just a "white savior" fantasy, it's as though the reviewer is saying, "Oh, no, we don't want to hear that the white South wasn't solid. We know all those white guys were united, fighting to save slavery, raping black women and putting hoods on their heads after the war. That's the only South we know, or ever will know." In the end, such critics echo the reactionary white supremacist version of history that prevailed by the early twentieth century. They, too, claimed that the white South was "solid." And well they could, for they had won their counterrevolution against Reconstruction.

Despite being dismayed by many of the reviews, I must say that academic historians—many of whom I've never met; others who I know personally—love this movie. It's not that they think it's perfect; they love it because for the first time we're seeing a Hollywood film that takes on the "Lost Cause" myth and accurately presents the long-neglected history of Reconstruction.

DW: You've already referred to it. You responded strongly to Charles Blow's comment in the *New York Times*. Could you perhaps go over your objections to his op-ed column and, more generally, your attitude toward racialist politics?

VB: The manner in which Blow attacked my work was dishonest. Specifically, he presented a certain passage from my book that, if read outside its context, appeared to be a deliberate effort on my part to avoid using the word "rape." In fact, I was referring to actual laws passed within Southern states that forbade interracial contact between whites and blacks. Those laws existed precisely because such contact was common. They were passed piecemeal from the colonial years forward to forbid just the sort of cross-race alliance that occurred between Newt and Rachel Knight during the war.

Blow's comments reveal his ignorance of this history. During the past several decades, historians have uncovered a wealth of evidence about sexual and nonsexual consensual relationships between the races in the colonial and 19th century South. As dehumanizing and brutal as slavery was, the institution was not a giant concentration camp. Resistance to slavery was far more subtle than studying slave revolts will ever reveal.

Some 75 percent of whites did not own slaves; small populations of free people of color lived in the slaveholding states. Slaves interacted regularly with these groups. Though interracial contact was frequently exploitative, it also contributed to everyday resistance to the totality of slavery. Rachel Knight may well have initiated her relationship with Newt Knight, and it appears likely to have been in her interest to do so. Only she can say for certain.

To be continued



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