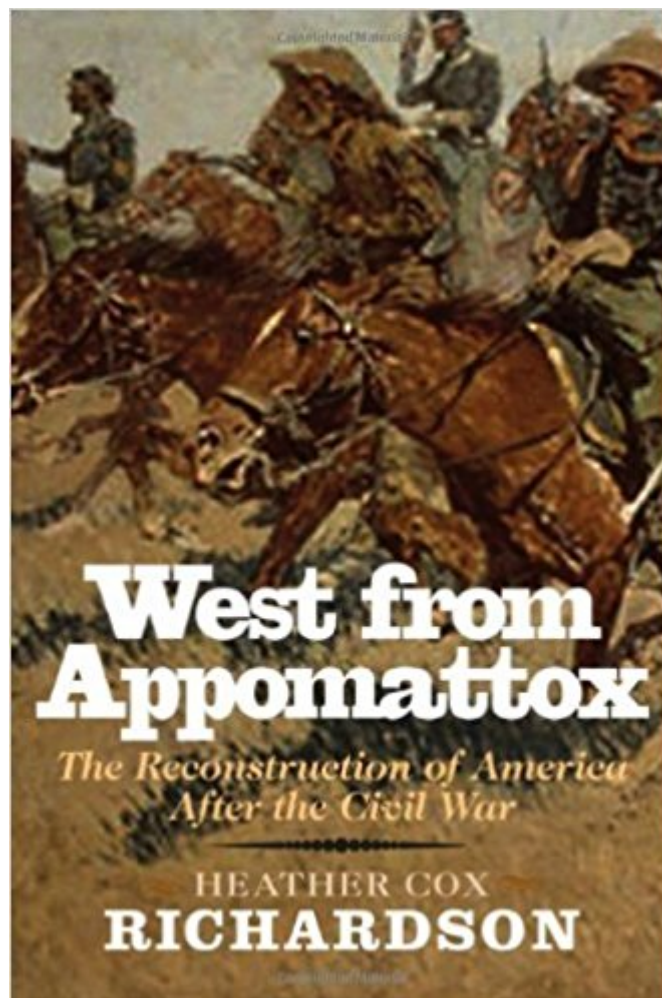




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West From Appomattox: The Reconstruction Of America After The Civil War



Synopsis

The story of Reconstruction is not simply about the rebuilding of the South after the Civil War. Instead, the late nineteenth century defined modern America, as Southerners, Northerners, and Westerners gradually hammered out a national identity that united three regions into a country that could become a world power. Ultimately, the story of Reconstruction is about how a middle class formed in America and how its members defined what the nation would stand for, both at home and abroad, for the next century and beyond. A sweeping history of the United States from the era of Abraham Lincoln to the presidency of Theodore Roosevelt, this engaging book stretches the boundaries of our understanding of Reconstruction. Historian Heather Cox Richardson ties the North and West into the post-Civil War story that usually focuses narrowly on the South, encompassing the significant people and events of this profoundly important era. By weaving together the experiences of real individuals; from a plantation mistress, a Native American warrior, and a labor organizer to Andrew Carnegie, Julia Ward Howe, Booker T. Washington, and Sitting Bull; who lived during the decades following the Civil War and who left records in their own words, Richardson tells a story about the creation of modern America.

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Customer Reviews

Heather Cox Richardson's *West of Appomattox* is a work that puts forth the idea that between Reconstruction and 1901 Americans struggled, yet eventually redefined a vision of their nation. Perhaps the most interesting component of Richardson's work, is that in her research, which included "newspapers, novels, memoirs...histories...paintings...[and] music" she discovered the dominant force for creating American's vision of individualism, which was the American west. Along the way, Richardson's work reveals the roots of Frederick Jackson Turner's vision of America based on a culturally created imagery of individualism. Richardson's work is organized chronologically, starting with the chapter "Spring 1865: The View From The Civil War" and ending with "1898-1901: Reunion." Two themes emerge early on in the work. First, there was a unifying force between North and South, and that was the West, and a desire to exterminate Indians. Regardless of the philosophical struggle between free-labor and slave-labor, it is clear that the Native Americans were an inconvenience that fit in neither camp's vision of a post-war America. More central to Richardson's work however, is the vision of a political struggle that would accompany reconstruction. It was government that would have to make a harmonious free-labor society work after the war, and how this was going to happen was the "most important question of the day." Richardson does an admirable job of illustrating the Northerner's cognitive dissonance. On the one hand they believed in government reconstruction, but on the other, they were nervous about the cost of the continued military occupation in the South. While reconstruction was grinding forward, other northern distractions would begin to shift attention away from reconstruction. The "perceived political danger" posed by immigrant labor, the rising issues of gender, and the plight of urbanization would begin to overtake the issues in the South. Strikers and "lazy African-Americans in southern governments" were incongruent to the hard-working American middle class vision defined by Richardson as free-labor. By the mid-1870s, Republicans were losing their political grip. Democrats pushed free-labor hot spots with rhetoric that demanded civil-service reform and lower tariffs while the Republicans had "little to offer voters other than their destruction of slavery." When the democrat Wade Hampton won the contentious governorship in South Carolina, and the Republican's had to be removed from their statehouse occupation by force, the end of reconstruction became a foregone conclusion. Hayes's election to the presidency, predicated on his bowing to the will of the South, shifted the attention of the middle-class permanently away from the South. By the mid-1880s, it was clear that Richardson's mainstream Americans had rejected a government that "responded to

the special interests" and began to accept the idea of a Progressive government that would benefit the "general interest" of the people. Government intervention was okay, as long as it was intervention that ran parallel to mainstream America's free-labor ideals. This was an ominous sign for labor, Indians, and African-Americans who did not fit into the middle class's vision of America. While the Indians never would fit into the mainstream American vision, African-Americans with the help of Booker T. Washington would at least placate the middle class. The vision of how society and technology should be was well represented in 1893 at the World's Fair in Chicago, a harbinger in the belief of American progress. While Populists and organized labor seemed to some to be a hedge against big government, the contemporaneous spin machines viewed them as a threat to "place government into the hands of a mob." McKinley's victory began to define what the mainstream's vision was. Meanwhile, gold in Bonanza Creek, John Muir's promotion of nature, and Theodore Roosevelt's Rough Riders would begin to coalesce the ideal that the true individualist was found in the West. With the blending of Progressivism and Manifest Destiny, the Cuban crisis was a timely event. Appealing to both the humanitarian and expansionist American emotion, America was "primed for a struggle." Richardson begins to round out her Western thesis by bringing "impatient Westerners" into the Cuban fold. Frank James, Buffalo Bill, and Roosevelt's cowboys were itching for a fight in Cuba--the real individualists, the real Americans. While Frederick Jackson Turner may have closed the frontier, Teddy Roosevelt reopened it, and for Richardson, it was that opening that redefined America. Richardson's thesis, that Americans "hammered out a national identity" between 1865 and 1901 that united around an image of rugged American West individualism is on its surface a Turnerian view of America, but Turner based his thesis on the tangible--land. Richardson's frontier is a vision, emotionally constructed by Americans searching for redefinition after 1865. Her research, based on primary cultural sources, goes far to back her argument and she brings her thesis forward to today, with Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush's Western persona as proof of the enduring nature of the cowboy imagery. Today's candidates such as the maverick and the rogue along with Texas Rick Perry continue to attest to the popularity of the Western image in both politics and American popular culture.

If you're into serious American history, this is quite the book about a period of American history after the civil war that is still in controversy. It's quite reflective about many of the political attitudes that are in play today. It's also quite informative about the timeline and motivations involved in development of the West. I enjoyed the book and keep it as a permanent volume for reference on my bookshelf.

Heather Cox Richardson's *West from Appomattox* covers a period of history that has been seemingly rather ignored by contemporary historians, namely the Reconstruction period and westward expansion in the mid to late 1800s. Cox synthesizes much history and puts it into its broader context quite well. Much of her writing is academic in nature and not of the narrative form many readers of recent historical accounts have come to expect. Specifically, Richardson studied under the master of this period, David Herbert Donald. While the breadth of her research and knowledge is as impressive as any, her ability to convey the information in a way that brings in any person with even a passing interest in the topic is not her strength. I think she has much to say and, should she want to write history in a form other than a graduate text level, she would be well served to read how David Kennedy, David Herbert Donald, James McPherson or even Doris Kearns Goodwin actually write. That said, those who would like to really bone up on what changes the United States went through from 1865 to 1900, predominately politically and somewhat economically, would be well advised to read this book.

and the profound changes after the civil war up to the end of the 19th century. The occupied South, how the west was won, the rise of an industrial giant, the changes in society, in technology, sometimes it relates us to the challenges we face today (economic and Financial crisis). History never repeats itself, well...unless it does!

I love everything she writes, including this. She tells a great story, even when it's all true. "Wounded Knee" and "To Make Men Free" are must reads also.

A great look at the post Gettysburg era, on time and perfect

Used for school, history major.

Excellent history of the reconstruction era.

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