

**William G. Brownlow**



*Very Respectfully, &c.*  
*W. F. Brownlow*

**William G. Brownlow**

*Fighting Parson of the  
Southern Highlands*

By E. Merton Coulter

With a New Introduction by Stephen V. Ash

The University of Tennessee Press / Knoxville



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## Foreword

In 1964, historian George B. Tindall suggested mythology might be the new frontier of southern history, since innumerable efforts to identify a central theme regarding the South had frustrated so many previous scholars. By mythology, Tindall simply meant examining the beliefs, aspirations, ideals, and meanings through which a people identify themselves within some historical context and seek by this controlling generalization to give philosophical meaning to the facts of ordinary life, while at the same time defending themselves from outside attack. Under these circumstances, the myth itself becomes one of the realities of history, influencing or shaping the subsequent pattern of behavior for participants in the folk community. Yet in the new field of Appalachian studies that emerged in the 1980s, myth has a particularly pejorative connotation, used most frequently as it has been by past observers of the region to fix an invidious and enduring stereotype on the inhabitants. Appalachian mythmakers are therefore always frankly suspect—hostile, prejudiced outsiders pursuing their own agenda for literary recognition or some well-meaning but grossly distorted reform effort.

Historian David C. Hsiung is one of the few scholars to explore the role of Appalachian natives in creating their own mythology; his *Two Worlds in the Tennessee Mountains: Exploring the Origins of Appalachian Stereotypes* offers the interesting scenario of town dwellers in upper East Tennessee initially caricatured their more backward rural neighbors in the mountains and hollows. Local color writers were quick to seize on this image, but distorted it even further by representing *all* Appalachians as possessing the undesired traits that became an enduring national stereotype.

Yet no single individual within Appalachia self-consciously created a myth both about himself and about his region—East Tennessee—as did William G. Brownlow. “I would as soon be engaged in importing the plague from the East,” Parson Brownlow vehemently declared on February 16, 1861, in the pages of his *Knoxville Whig*, “as in helping to build up a Southern Confederacy upon the ruins of the American Constitution.” Thus the “Parson,” as he was commonly called, with characteristic vituperation and exaggerated rhetoric, lambasted supporters of the

Confederacy even after East Tennessee was occupied by southern troops, and simultaneously demonstrated why he was among Tennessee's most colorful and controversial political leaders of the nineteenth century.

It is perhaps a tribute to the freedom of speech within the Confederacy that Brownlow's paper, and harshly critical editorials, were allowed to continue so long. After he refused allegiance to the Confederate government and fled to the Great Smoky Mountains in November 1861, his press and types were finally destroyed. Found by Confederate scouts, he was returned to Knoxville, where he was briefly placed in jail. Finally allowed to flee to the North in March 1862, Brownlow became an extremely popular lecturer on behalf of the Unionists of East Tennessee throughout the North. His resulting summary of his trials and tribulations, related with characteristic terrible contumacy and abuse, in between scenes of exaggerated pathos, was published in 1862 as *Sketches of the Rise, Progress, and Decline of Secession; With a Narrative of Personal Adventure Among the Rebels* and became an immediate bestseller. Widely known under the briefer title, *Parson Brownlow's Book*, this volume plus his personal speaking engagements fixed an enduring image of both Brownlow and the Appalachian South in the mind of the northern public.

E. Merton Coulter's 1937 biography of Brownlow remains the best scholarly biography of the Parson and his times. Brownlow, a "sometime" Methodist minister, had earlier fought a bitter sectarian battle against the Presbyterians. Ironic in view of his later Unionism, he was a leading defender of slavery, and, in 1858, he debated Abraham Pryne, editor of an antislavery paper, *The Central Reformer*. In this "forensic disputation," held in Philadelphia in the National Guard Hall, Brownlow defended the peculiar institution as ardently as any southern radical and heaped abuse on abolitionists. Coulter's biography is extremely well written and appropriately humorous in relating the exaggerated rhetoric and energy with which Brownlow assaulted all enemies—democrats, abolitionists, Presbyterians, and, finally, Rebels—in his variously titled *Knoxville Whig* between 1849 and 1869.

Stephen V. Ash's introduction contextualizes Coulter's biography in light of recent historical scholarship, especially noting Coulter's racism and his reproduction of the tragic myth of Reconstruction so long discarded by modern scholars. Professor Ash astutely notes, however, the discrepancy between Brownlow's personal life and his vituperative rhetoric, a discrepancy which sets the stage for Brownlow's role as an active mythmaker when, as Reconstruction governor of Tennessee, he both wrote the script and played a principal part in a self-conscious political drama that fixed the image of the loyal mountaineers of East Ten-

nessee indelibly upon the national consciousness. Parson Brownlow's vigorous, deliberate, and self-conscious mythmaking thus deserves careful scrutiny by all scholars of the Appalachian region that he helped both to define and delineate.

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## Introduction

Tennessee has had its share of outrageous characters over the years, but none more outrageous than Parson Brownlow. Even today, more than 120 years after his death, merely mentioning his name in the Volunteer State can evoke raucous laughter or bitter curses. The Parson would like that: those are the very responses he loved to evoke in his own day.

William Gannaway Brownlow was not only a colorful and controversial historical figure, but also an important one. Born in southwestern Virginia in 1805 and orphaned at age eleven, he became a circuit-riding Methodist preacher and traveled all over southern Appalachia, settling eventually in East Tennessee. In 1839 he took up journalism and politics as editor of the *Whig*, a newspaper he founded in Elizabethton and later moved to Jonesboro and ultimately Knoxville. By the time of the Civil War, the *Whig* had eleven thousand subscribers and was widely read within and beyond Tennessee's borders. In 1861 Brownlow emerged as a principal leader of the East Tennessee unionists, whose resistance to secession plagued the Confederacy. After the war he served as governor of Tennessee and ruled the state for four years with a Radical fist of iron.

What made the Parson stand out was, more than anything else, his vitriolic tongue and pen. Over the course of his long career he took up many causes. These included not only Methodism, Whiggery, and the Union, but also temperance, Know-Nothingism, and slavery. His favorite method of promoting those causes was to chastise and ridicule his opponents, and few men could do so with as much venomous wit as he. Baptists, Presbyterians, Catholics, Mormons, Democrats, Republicans, secessionists, drunks, immigrants, and abolitionists—all were at one time or another on the receiving end of Brownlow's merciless broadsides. Not surprisingly, he made many enemies. A number of them replied in kind; some tried to kill him.

Parson Brownlow deserves a good biographer. He has had a few, but none better than E. Merton Coulter. First published in 1937 by the University of North Carolina Press, Coulter's *William G. Brownlow: Fighting Parson of the Southern Highlands* was highly praised in its day and it remains the standard account of Brownlow's life. To help the modern generation of readers make the Parson's acquaintance, the University of Tennessee Press, which reprinted Coulter's book in 1971, has now done so again as part of its Appalachian Echoes series.<sup>1</sup>

Coulter's volume has stood the test of time because its scholarship is sound and its prose lively. Coulter was a professionally trained and highly respected historian who earned his Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin in 1917, was a longtime teacher at the University of Georgia, became the first president of the Southern Historical Association, and was the author or editor of literally dozens of books. For this biography he thoroughly mined the relevant sources and drew on his vast knowledge of southern history to provide context. But he also knew how to tell a good story with a dash of humor, and that he also did in this book. He especially enjoyed quoting the highly quotable Parson, and Brownlow's inimitable rhetorical style comes through on practically every page.<sup>2</sup>

The book has thus aged well, but it has definitely aged. As today's readers enjoy Coulter's narrative, they need to keep in mind the flaws and weaknesses of the book (maybe "peculiarities and limitations" is a better way to put it) that have become apparent in the six decades since Coulter wrote it.

For one thing, it is not really a comprehensive biography but rather a history of Brownlow's public career. Coulter has virtually nothing to say about the Parson's family life or other intimate relationships. This is due in part to the dearth of sources (Brownlow left very few revealing personal papers). But it can also undoubtedly be ascribed to a certain gentlemanly unwillingness on Coulter's part to pry into his subject's private affairs. This was typical of biographers of Coulter's generation; a modern biographer would feel obliged at least to speculate about Brownlow's private life, based on whatever hints the existing records contain.

We are all to some extent prisoners not only of our time but also of our place. Merton Coulter was no exception. He was a middle-class southern white male who grew up in the New South era (he was born in North Carolina in 1890), and he had certain biases common among those like himself. In particular, he believed blacks were inherently inferior and undeserving of political equality, and he revered the Lost Cause (both his grandfathers had been Confederate soldiers).

These beliefs and predilections shaped Coulter's portrayal of Parson Brownlow. The first third of the book, dealing with Brownlow's pre-1860 career, is a model of scholarly impartiality. Coulter's attitude toward the Parson's fiercely partisan polemics is one of (somewhat amused) detachment—as long as Brownlow is flogging only the enemies of the Methodist Church, the Whig Party, temperance, and slavery. But when Brownlow takes his stand against secession and the Confederacy after 1860, and especially when he allies with the northern Radicals, disfranchises the former Confederates, and enfranchises the blacks during Re-

construction, Coulter turns hostile. Many regard Brownlow as something of a hero for his stalwart defense of the Union, even under threat of death, but in Coulter's eyes, he and his fellow East Tennessee unionists were merely "obstinate" and "blindly patriotic" and in fact "guilty of treason" against the Confederacy. Many applaud Brownlow's enfranchisement of Tennessee's blacks—however impure his motives—as an act of justice, but for Coulter it was an unconscionable betrayal of the good white people of the state. The freed slaves "were letting their animal natures go unrestrained," Coulter tells us, and "they became a menace to peace and property." He justifies the lethal guerrilla warfare of the Ku Klux Klan as a necessary response to the "Black Peril" and the "abuses, debasements, and insults" that the former Confederates had to endure under Brownlow's rule.

In Coulter's defense, it should be pointed out that his portrayal of Reconstruction was not unique. With very few exceptions, the other historians of his generation—northern as well as southern—shared his racial prejudices and endorsed the view that Reconstruction was a "Tragic Era," a time when the worst elements of society ran rampant in the southern states until the noble "Redeemers" overthrew the villainous Radical regimes and restored good government and racial control.

During the 1960s, however, when the Civil Rights movement touched the conscience of the nation, younger historians began to challenge the reigning interpretation of Reconstruction. They pointed to the accomplishments of the Radical state governments in the South, including improved public education, that the older historians had ignored or dismissed. Moreover, they ascribed a good measure of dignity and decency of purpose to the blacks, scalawags, carpetbaggers, Freedmen's Bureau agents, and northern Radicals whom the older historians had demonized. Some of the young revisionists condemned the long-celebrated Redeemers as racist reactionaries and the Klansmen in particular as murderous political terrorists. Under heavy attack, the traditional interpretation soon crumbled. Today the idea of the Tragic Era is unanimously rejected as myth by scholars, though it still has a hold on the popular imagination.<sup>3</sup>

His judgments on Brownlow's wartime unionism and postwar Radicalism aside, Coulter's portrayal of the Parson has held up remarkably well. Coulter basically disliked Brownlow, and so have most of the historians who have written about him since 1937—even those not in sympathy with Coulter's views on blacks and the Confederacy. Most agree with Coulter that Brownlow's zealous partisanship often went beyond the bounds of fairness, propriety, and even reason. ("Fanatical" is Coulter's favorite description of the Parson, and it is echoed by many other writers.) And all join Coulter in condemning Governor Brownlow's Machia-

vellian manipulation of voter registration and election returns. But, at the same time, all second Coulter's point that Brownlow's private persona stood in stark contrast to his public persona (Coulter calls him "a Dr. Jekyll and a Mr. Hyde"): even many of the Parson's opponents admitted that, in private, he was friendly, kind, and generous to a fault.<sup>4</sup>

In fact, historical scholarship since 1937 has not altered the basic outline of Brownlow's life as presented by Coulter—evidence of Coulter's diligent research. Some new details have come to light, however; and a certain amount of reinterpretation, or at least recontextualization, of the Parson's career has been done, particularly since the 1960s. (For a discussion of the studies of Brownlow published between 1937 and 1970, see James W. Patton's introduction to the 1971 edition of Coulter's book.)

Monographs published in recent years by Paul H. Bergeron and Jonathan M. Atkins have shed added light on Brownlow's role in antebellum politics. The Parson's prewar religious and temperance activities have been elucidated in essays by Forrest Conklin and John W. Wittig. Research by Durwood Dunn has turned up Brownlow's signature on an 1834 antislavery petition—a revelation that would have mightily embarrassed the Parson, who later became a prominent proslavery spokesman, and mightily amused Merton Coulter, who loved to point out Brownlow's inconsistencies. Another discovery by Dunn that would have made Brownlow blush and Coulter chuckle is a contemporary report (albeit secondhand) that in 1840, at a political rally, the Parson got roaring drunk.<sup>5</sup>

Modern scholarship dealing with Brownlow in the secession crisis includes a monograph by Daniel W. Crofts and an essay by Charles F. Bryan Jr. Both underscore the crucial role of Brownlow and a handful of other East Tennessee unionist leaders in encouraging a firm stand against secession by the citizens of the region. More recently, Noel C. Fisher has produced a study of East Tennessee's internal civil war that emphasizes the impact of the Parson's wartime writings and speeches on the northern public and military. A new edition of Brownlow's 1862 book, which was a bestseller in the North, has been published with an introduction by the present author; and Noel Fisher has written an essay comparing that book with others by East Tennessee unionists.<sup>6</sup>

Brownlow's governorship is discussed (within the broader context of postwar Republicanism in southern Appalachia) in Gordon B. McKinney's recently reprinted monograph. McKinney contradicts Coulter's assertion that Brownlow's long-term impact on Tennessee politics was slight; and he makes the point, at least implicitly, that Brownlow played a role in shaping the popular perception of southern Appalachia as a unique, isolated region. Other modern studies of the Parson's gubernatorial years include Wilson D. Miscamble's essay on the 1865 election, Lonnie E. Maness's on the 1867 election, and Kathleen R. Zebley's on

Tennessee legislator Samuel Arnell, one of Brownlow's Radical allies. Brownlow's stumping in the North during the 1866 congressional campaigns is examined in an essay by Forrest Conklin.<sup>7</sup>

In recent decades only two authors have ventured to write comprehensive accounts of Brownlow. Steve Humphrey's book focuses on the Parson as a newspaper editor, though it does touch on the other aspects of his life. (For one thing, Humphrey documents the fact that Brownlow owned slaves for a time, which Coulter was apparently unaware of.) Unlike most other commentators on Brownlow, Humphrey (a journalist himself) actually seems to like the man, admiring especially his editorial prowess, his humor, and his generosity. James C. Kelly's two-part essay on the Parson is not as complimentary nor as detailed, but Kelly is the only historian so far who has reevaluated Brownlow in the light of modern interpretations of Reconstruction. Though he condemns Brownlow's zealotry and his misuse of power as governor, Kelly commends him for perceiving the new political realities that made black enfranchisement desirable and for recognizing that reenfranchising the former Confederates would be disastrous for black rights.<sup>8</sup>

Historians will certainly continue to reappraise Brownlow, but it is unlikely that the basic story of his public career as told by Merton Coulter will ever be substantially revised. And, barring the discovery of some treasure-trove of hitherto unknown personal papers, any future explorations of Brownlow's private life will be mere guesswork. Coulter's study of the "Fighting Parson" will thus have a place on the historian's shelf for a long time to come. Anybody else who enjoys a good book about a remarkable character should save a place for it, too.

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#### Notes

1. E. Merton Coulter, *William G. Brownlow: Fighting Parson of the Southern Highlands* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1937; reprint, Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 1971). For evidence of the scholarly reception of the book, see the reviews by Frank L. Owsley in the *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 24 (1937-38): 403-5, Stanley J. Folmsbee in the *Journal of Southern History* 3 (1937): 374-76, and Thomas Robson Hay in the *American Historical Review* 43 (1937-38): 419-20.

2. For biographical information on Ellis Merton Coulter (1890-1981),

see *Twentieth Century Authors: A Biographical Dictionary of Modern Literature* (1st suppl., New York: H. W. Wilson, 1955), 234–35; *Contemporary Authors: New Revision Series, Volume 3* (Detroit: Gale Research, 1981), 139; and *Contemporary Authors, Volume 104* (Detroit: Gale Research, 1982), 94. Descriptions of Coulter's most important books can be found in Arthur S. Link and Rembert W. Patrick, eds., *Writing Southern History: Essays in Historiography in Honor of Fletcher M. Green* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1965); and John B. Boles and Evelyn Thomas Nolen, eds., *Interpreting Southern History: Historiographical Essays in Honor of Sanford W. Higginbotham* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1987). See also Fred Arthur Bailey, "History in Service to the South: E. Merton Coulter and the Political Culture of Southern Historiography," paper presented at the Southern Historical Association Meeting, Birmingham, Ala., Nov. 1998.

3. On the evolution of Reconstruction historiography, see Larry Kincaid, "Victims of Circumstance: An Interpretation of Changing Attitudes Toward Republican Policy Makers and Reconstruction," *Journal of American History* 57 (1970): 48–66; Richard O. Curry, "The Civil War and Reconstruction, 1861–1877: A Critical Overview of Recent Trends and Interpretations," *Civil War History* 20 (1974): 215–38; John Hope Franklin, "Mirror for Americans: A Century of Reconstruction History," *American Historical Review* 85 (1) (1980): 1–14; Eric Foner, "Reconstruction Revisited," *Reviews in American History* 10 (1982): 82–100; and Joe Gray Taylor, "The White South from Secession to Redemption," in Boles and Nolen, *Interpreting Southern History*, 162–98.

4. In a 1981 poll of Tennessee historians, Brownlow was ranked dead last among the state's governors, scoring a 1.63 average on a 10-point scale. See *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 41 (1982): 100.

5. Paul H. Bergeron, *Antebellum Politics in Tennessee* (Lexington: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 1982); Jonathan M. Atkins, *Parties, Politics, and the Sectional Conflict in Tennessee, 1832–1861* (Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 1997); Forrest Conklin and John W. Wittig, "Religious Warfare in the Southern Highlands: Brownlow versus Ross," *Journal of East Tennessee History* 63 (1991): 33–50; Forrest Conklin, "Parson Brownlow Joins the Sons of Temperance," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 39 (1980): 178–94, 292–309; Durwood Dunn, *An Abolitionist in the Appalachian South: Ezekiel Birdseye on Slavery, Capitalism, and Separate Statehood in East Tennessee, 1841–1846* (Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 1997), 14–16, 19–20, 38, 97n., 104–5n., 145. Aside from Dunn's discoveries, little additional primary material bearing directly on Brownlow has turned up since Coulter did his research. A sizable batch of Brownlow's papers unknown to Coulter has been unearthed recently, but it includes very few items written by the Parson

himself; see W. Todd Groce, "With 'All the Malice and Venom Requisite for the Times': The Papers of Parson Brownlow," Univ. of Tennessee, Knoxville, *Library Development Review* (1992–93): 8–11. The editors of Andrew Johnson's papers have published many Brownlow letters, very helpfully annotated, but few or none that Coulter had not seen in manuscript; see LeRoy P. Graf, Ralph W. Haskins, and Paul H. Bergeron, eds., *The Papers of Andrew Johnson* (14 vols. to date, Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 1967–).

6. Daniel W. Crofts, *Reluctant Confederates: Upper South Unionists in the Secession Crisis* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1989); Charles F. Bryan Jr., "A Gathering of Tories: The East Tennessee Convention of 1861," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 39 (1980): 27–48; Noel C. Fisher, *War at Every Door: Partisan Politics and Guerrilla Violence in East Tennessee, 1860–1869* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1997); Stephen V. Ash, ed., *Secessionists and Other Scoundrels: Selections from Parson Brownlow's Book* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1999); Noel Fisher, "Definitions of Loyalty: Unionist Histories of the Civil War in East Tennessee," *Journal of East Tennessee History* 67 (1995): 58–88. See also Forrest Conklin, ed., "'Parson' Brownlow on the Impeachment of Judge Humphreys and Other Matters in Washington, D.C.—June, 1862," *East Tennessee Historical Society's Publications* 56/57 (1984/1985): 120–31.

7. Gordon B. McKinney, *Southern Mountain Republicans, 1865–1900: Politics and the Appalachian Community* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1978; reprint, Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 1998); Wilson D. Miscamble, "Andrew Johnson and the Election of William G. ('Parson') Brownlow as Governor of Tennessee," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 37 (1978): 308–20; Lonnie E. Maness, "Henry Emerson Etheridge and the Gubernatorial Election of 1867: A Study in Futility," *West Tennessee Historical Society Papers* 47 (1993): 37–49; Kathleen R. Zebley, "Unconditional Unionist: Samuel Mayes Arnell and Reconstruction in Tennessee," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 53 (1994): 246–59; Forrest Conklin, "Wiping Out 'Andy' Johnson's Moccasin Tracks: The Canvass of Northern States by Southern Radicals, 1866," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 52 (1993): 122–33.

8. Steve Humphrey, *"That D—d Brownlow": Being a Saucy and Malicious Description of William Gannaway Brownlow . . .* (Boone, N.C.: Appalachian Consortium Press, 1978); James C. Kelly, "William Gannaway Brownlow," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 43 (1984): 25–43, 155–72. See also Stephen F. Humphrey, "The Man Brownlow from a Newspaper Man's Point of View," *East Tennessee Historical Society's Publications* 43 (1971): 59–70.