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The Margins of William Brownlow's Words:

New Perspectives on the End of Radical Reconstruction in Tennessee

By William E. Hardy*



The support of DeWitt Clinton Senter by Tennessee's Reconstruction Governor William Gannaway "Parson" Brownlow and his son, John Bell Brownlow during the pivotal gubernatorial election of 1869 is a riddle that demands explanation. On February 25, 1869, Tennessee governor William Brownlow turned over the governorship to Senter, the speaker of the state Senate. Brownlow expressed full confidence in Senter, proclaiming, "My regrets, on retiring, would be greater were it not that the gentleman who will succeed me for the remainder of my official term . . . is a loyal man, capable, tried and trusty, who is sound in his principles, and who will steadfastly adhere to them upon the platform of the Union Republican [i.e., Radical] Party of Tennessee."¹

Brownlow expected his successor to adhere to the Radical platform. But Senter, a moderate Republican, soon deviated from Brownlow's Reconstruction program in the hope of achieving the impossible: to inject the essence of democracy—compromise—into Tennessee politics. Senter's policies and inaction in the face of renewed Ku Klux Klan violence, legal challenges to Radical proscriptive decrees, and widespread fraudulent voter registrations of disfranchised ex-rebels following his shocking announcement in support of universal male suffrage, undermined Radical Reconstruction on the eve of the election. At best, unable to bridge the political divide, Senter proved an unwitting Redeemer whose policies hastened the end of Tennessee's Reconstruction. As political alignments shifted, Brownlow and his son John Bell Brownlow found themselves backing the same candidate as

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¹ Resignation of the governor, 10 February 1869, in *Messages of the Governors of Tennessee, 1857-1869*, ed. Robert H. White (Nashville, 1959), 5:652-53.

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Historians have not fully examined why Brownlow and his son stood idly by as Senter thwarted Radical Reconstruction and effectively handed over control of the state to ex-rebel politicians. Thomas B. Alexander's *Political Reconstruction in Tennessee* (1950) is the most authoritative source on the question. Alexander proposed several possible factors explaining why the Brownlows refused to publicly sack Senter especially after he pledged himself to immediate universal male suffrage and promised to ask the next legislature to remove voting restrictions on disfranchised rebels.²

Alexander based his findings on crucial Brownlow documents: two public statements issued during the gubernatorial election published in various newspapers, and a December 1869 speech delivered on the floor of the U.S. Senate.³ He also referenced an additional source, a June 9, 1869 "manuscript page" written by John B. Brownlow. This source consisted of a handwritten note made by the younger Brownlow and attached to the editorial page of the June 9, 1869 *Knoxville Whig* kept by the Brownlow family. The family's office copies of the *Knoxville Whig* were later bound and deposited at the Library of Congress. Alexander did not quote directly from this source and there is no evidence that other scholars have consulted this important and elusive document.⁴

This essay is focused on the important question of why Brownlow and his son made few if any efforts to stop Senter from carrying out the reforms of Reconstruction in Tennessee. In order to understand this question, first the period and the personalities deserve a brief review. The key to understanding the motivations of the Brownlows is to examine their very words made at the time. Instead of analyzing past interpretations and public statements made by Brownlow, this essay focuses on two of the handwritten notes bound with the family's copies of the *Knoxville Whig* housed at the Library of Congress. These notes have remained obscured from scholars and the details of discovery and access are also an important part of the story.

The 1860s were a turbulent decade for Tennessee. The Civil War and its aftermath brought to the forefront men unaccustomed to practicing the art of political compromise. As military governor from 1862-1865, Andrew Johnson wielded unprecedented power. He governed with an iron fist in an effort to reestablish civil government in Tennessee. In March 1865 Johnson departed for Washington, D.C. to assume his new role as Lincoln's vice president. In his place, William G. Brownlow, a newspaper editor and ardent Unionist, took over as governor of a state still divided by war and

² Thomas B. Alexander, *Political Reconstruction in Tennessee* (Nashville, 1950), 222-23.

³ See, *Nashville Union and American*, 27 May 1869; *Knoxville Whig*, 13 June 1869, as quoted in *Nashville Daily Press and Times*, 15 June 1869; *Congressional Globe*, 41st Congress, 2nd Sess., 137-40.

⁴ John B. Brownlow, manuscript note, *Knoxville Whig*, 9 June 1869, Library of Congress.

political disorder. As governor in the closing days of the Civil War until early 1869, Brownlow exacerbated tensions between Unionists and the former Confederates. Compromise was seldom an option for Brownlow and his style and rhetoric stoked Tennessee's superheated postwar political atmosphere.⁵

Unlike the other regions of the state, East Tennessee supported the Union during the Civil War. At the conclusion of the war, Union supporters known as Radical Republicans took control of the state government. They were determined to establish an electorate that was thoroughly loyal to the Union, and to punish the defeated rebels. At Brownlow's urging, the legislature enacted proscriptive measures to deny the vote to all former Confederates. To further ensure that rebels were barred from the ballot box, Radical Republican lawmakers established a voter registration system. In this system, the governor appointed sympathetic commissioners of registration and had the power to set aside a county's registration if voter fraud, or large numbers of Democratic voters, were suspected.⁶

Brownlow was responsible for bringing Tennessee back into the Union in 1866, but his methods angered politicians on both side of the aisle. On June 19, Brownlow called for a special legislative session to consider ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment, which granted citizenship and safeguarded the civil liberties of the recently freed slaves. Although ratification did not necessarily guarantee a state's re-admission to the Union, congressional Republicans hinted that Tennessee's representatives might likely be seated once ratification was accomplished. Brownlow ensured the approval of the Fourteenth Amendment by arresting legislative opponents seeking to block ratification and counting them as "present but not voting." When Judge Thomas N. Frazier threatened Brownlow's power by ruling the governor's actions in securing political power for the Radical Republicans unconstitutional, Brownlow encouraged the Radicals to impeach and remove Frazier from the bench.⁷

Brownlow's support for black suffrage, a bold and controversial decision to bolster his administration by enrolling approximately 40,000 eligible freedmen into the Radicals' ranks, spawned violent resistance. Local and more organized groups such as the Ku Klux Klan threatened, beat, and murdered black and white Radicals. To counter this threat, Brownlow declared war on the Klan by calling on the legislature to create a state militia (the Tennessee State Guard) and enact vigilant law enforcement measures.⁸

Brownlow's Reconstruction policies and practices alienated not only his political opponents, but those in his own party. The October 1867 U.S. Senatorial election revealed a breach within the ranks of the Radical

⁵ See, Paul H. Bergeron, *Andrew Johnson's Civil War and Reconstruction* (Knoxville, 2011); E. Merton Coulter, *William G. Brownlow: Fighting Parson of the Southern Highlands* (Chapel Hill, 1937).

⁶ Alexander, *Reconstruction*, 1-112.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 110-21.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 122-98.

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Republicans. Because of Brownlow's poor health, few expected Brownlow to enter the race and many Radicals jockeyed for the office. Radical Congressman William B. Stokes believed that he had earned the right to the U.S. Senate seat after speaking on behalf of Brownlow who was too ill to campaign for re-election as governor in the summer of 1867. However, Brownlow wanted the office for himself. Intraparty factional rivalries intensified as embittered Radicals organized themselves in opposition to Brownlow. When Stokes refused to withdraw from the race, he drew the ire of Brownlow and his son. With support from speaker of the state Senate DeWitt Senter and moderate members of the Republican Party, Brownlow defeated Stokes and his Radical supporters.⁹

Two years later, Senter and Stokes were at the center of the race for governor. The son of a prominent East Tennessee Methodist preacher and Whig, Senter quickly scaled the political ladder, winning a seat in the lower house in 1857 at age twenty-seven. When Tennessee seceded in June 1861, Senter retained his seat in the General Assembly professing to represent the state's Unionists. In March 1862, the Confederate legislature adjourned and Senter attempted to return to his home in Grainger County. However, Confederate soldiers captured him and he spent the next six months in Confederate prisons. After posting a \$4,000 bond and taking an oath not to bear arms against the Confederacy, Senter returned to Grainger County. Senter was reelected to the legislature after the restoration of civil government in Tennessee in 1865 and, two years later, he assumed the position of speaker of Senate. He supported the policies of Brownlow and other Radical Republicans, including the disfranchisement of former Confederates and the enfranchisement of African Americans. But as governor, Senter relaxed martial law, disbanded the State Guard, and pushed for compromises on a number of issues.¹⁰

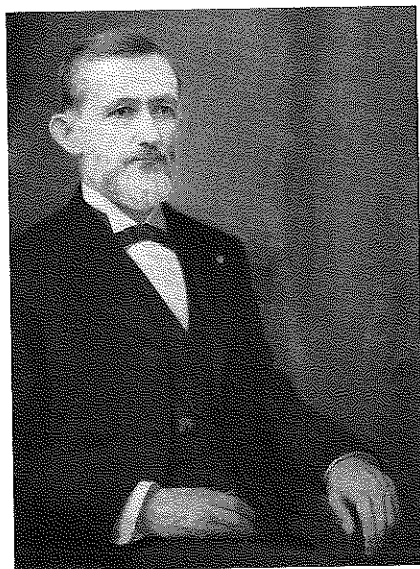


DeWitt Clinton Senter, a crucial figure in the final days of Reconstruction in Tennessee served as speaker of the state Senate, 1867-1869, and as governor of Tennessee, 1869-1871. Although publicly supported by the Brownlows, Senter enacted policies which undercut the Radical initiatives sponsored by Brownlow. Speed Publishing Company, Tennesseans Nineteen Hundred and One and Two (Evansville, 1902), 50.

⁹ Alexander, *Reconstruction*, 207-208; Marsha Young Darrach, "Political Career of Col. William B. Stokes of Tennessee" (M.A. thesis, Tennessee Technological University, 1968), 136-54.

¹⁰ Oliver P. Temple, *Notable Men of Tennessee, from 1833 to 1875: Their Times and Their Contemporaries* (New York, 1912), 182-85; Robert M. McBride and Dan M. Robison, *Biographical Directory of the Tennessee General Assembly* (Nashville, 1975), 1:656-57.

Publicly, Brownlow supported Senter as his successor because the state senator had supported Radical initiatives. Privately, Brownlow questioned whether Senter would maintain the Radical agenda started in 1865. However, Brownlow maintained his support for Senter and officially endorsed him in the April 24, 1869 issue of the *Knoxville Whig*. In the late 1860s, William Brownlow continued to use the *Knoxville Whig* to make various political



John B. Brownlow, the son of William Brownlow, managed and edited the *Knoxville Whig* during much of the 1860s. His editorials reflected the ire of pro-Unionists who favored punishment of former rebel politicians. From the East Tennessee Historical Society.

announcements and endorsements, but in fact his son John B. Brownlow was the manager and editor of the newspaper. As editor, the younger Brownlow supported the politics and policies of the Radical Republicans, at a time when many of Tennessee's newspapers grew critical of governor Brownlow's declining health, his son often wrote the words that were attributed to his father. In fact, Brownlow's biographer E. Merton Coulter argued that "many things the son wrote were as much as his father's as if he had written them."¹¹

Neither Senter nor Stokes emerged from the tumultuous May 1869 Republican convention as the party's gubernatorial nominee. Instead, the chaotic proceedings drove a wedge between the party's hardliners (Stokes Radicals) and the party's moderates (Senter Republicans). The next political shift in the election occurred in June when Senter announced his support of immediate universal male suffrage

following the Tennessee Supreme Court's ruling in *State v. Staten*, a decision that extended the vote to approximately 30,000 Conservatives (Unionists who opposed Brownlow's administration) disfranchised by proscriptive Radical franchise laws. The Brownlows were faced with a critical decision—adopt universal suffrage or distance themselves from Senter's administration, which would ensure a victory for Stokes. The elder Brownlow proclaimed that he too accepted the new doctrine, a position in which he joined his archenemies Andrew Johnson and Isham G. Harris. He defended the franchise laws as necessary to prevent the state from being thrown into anarchy and to protect Unionists from proscription, violence, murder, and exile following

¹¹ *Knoxville Whig*, 24 April 1869; Coulter, *Fighting Parson*, 263-64; Alexander, *Reconstruction*, 223; Robert Tracy McKenzie, *Lincolmites and Rebels: A Divided Town in the American Civil War* (Knoxville, 2006), 208.

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By the summer registrars prevailed the Tennessee Senter removed Republicans but a few of Conservatives but a few of basically entrenched Confederate attorney general be indicted for of 120,303 votes won a decisive Conservative demanded a Senter struggled to keep the a sharp turn toward Confederates mandates in Tennessee

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the war. While nearly all Radical Republican leaders flocked to Stokes as the party's standard bearer, moderate Republicans followed Brownlow's endorsement of Senter. John Brownlow also followed suit and endorsed Senter based on his long service to the legislature, and his support of the Brownlow administration and its Radical policies as speaker of the senate.¹²

By the summer of 1869, Senter had a clear lead over Stokes. When registrars previously appointed by Brownlow refused to abide by the ruling of the Tennessee Supreme Court and grant voter certificates to Conservatives, Senter removed those registrars. In their place he appointed not only moderate Republicans but also Conservatives—a move to improve his standing among Conservatives. Throughout the gubernatorial campaign Senter replaced all but a few of Brownlow's registrars with commissioners who, in most cases, basically enrolled any native white male of the requisite age—including former Confederate soldiers. Radicals challenged these certificates but the state attorney general concluded that anyone granted a voter certificate could not be indicted for illegal voting. That August, Senter received a statewide total of 120,303 votes to Stokes's 55,066. In the legislative races, the Conservatives won a decisive victory and placed both houses of the General Assembly under Conservative control. Although defeated, Tennessee's Radical Republicans demanded an investigation of the election, which Senter quickly dismissed. Senter struggled to work with the Conservative dominated legislature and to keep the Democrats at bay. The results of the 1869 election represented a sharp turn in policy. Governor Senter adopted a conciliatory attitude toward Conservative lawmakers who, in turn, worked quickly to remove the mandates established by Brownlow, and thus ended Radical Reconstruction in Tennessee.¹³

Support from William Brownlow and his son John was crucial to the election of DeWitt Senter to the governorship in 1869. Their public statements gave Senter, a somewhat moderate Republican, the edge over other more Radical politicians in the Republican Party. But, their support of Senter resulted in the end of Radical Reconstruction in Tennessee—a period defined by William Brownlow's policies, rhetoric, and poison pen. Before the election of 1869, Senter gave strong indications that he would temper efforts at Reconstruction through compromise, inclusion, and reconciliation. These approaches were antithetical to William Brownlow's leadership style and methods, but for political reasons Brownlow supported Senter, at least publicly.

Privately, the Brownlows had serious reservations with Senter and recently discovered evidence demonstrates their objections prior to the election. The evidence was literally relegated to the margins of personal copies of the *Knoxville Whig* that were deposited at the Library of Congress.

¹² *Nashville Daily Press and Times*, 15 June 1869; Alexander, *Reconstruction*, 214-23.

¹³ Anne H. Hopkins and William Lyons, *Tennessee Votes: 1799-1976* (Knoxville, 1978), 50; Alexander, *Reconstruction*, 217-38.

For preservation and access purposes, these newspapers, bound into several volumes, were microfilmed in the late 1930s and researchers have relied on the microfilm copies ever since.

A close review of the microfilm of the Knoxville Whig for June 9, 1869, the date cited by Thomas B. Alexander in his notes, revealed the edge of a handwritten note attached to the editorial page. Most likely, during the microfilm process the note was peeled back in order to allow the printed pages to be filmed. Such a practice is common since many librarians and archivists would not consider handwritten notes and additional material added to printed collections, like newspapers, as part of the published and official record. But by doing so, a significant note made by John B. Brownlow was omitted from the microfilm copy of the Knoxville Whig. Further examinations of the microfilm revealed other potential omitted notes that have not been consulted by researchers. A second note, attached to the front page of the September 15, 1869 issue of the Knoxville Whig also provides important insights on the Brownlows' private opinions on Senter and his candidacy for governor in 1869.

The June 9, 1869 manuscript note attached to the Knoxville Whig, was a four-page document discussing Senter and the election. The note revealed that Senter was not the Brownlows' first choice for governor. Moreover, the younger Brownlow condemned Senter's wholesale removal of Governor

Brownlow's appointment of the gubernatorial candidate in the election. In closing, the note supported Senter over Brownlow as follows:

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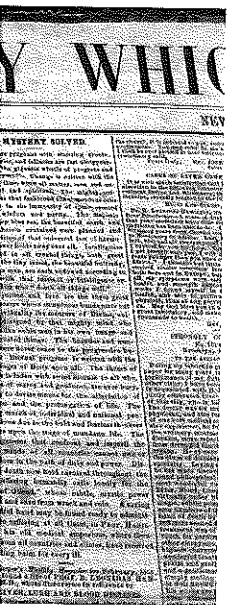
A second manuscript note attached to the front page of the Knoxville Whig, dated September 15, 1869, contained a harsh criticism of Senter's removal of Governor Brownlow. The brief note is as follows:



The front page of the Brownlow family's September 15, 1869 issue of the Knoxville Whig which is at the Library of Congress. Note the top of a handwritten document at the bottom left. From the Serial and Government Publications Division of the Library of Congress.

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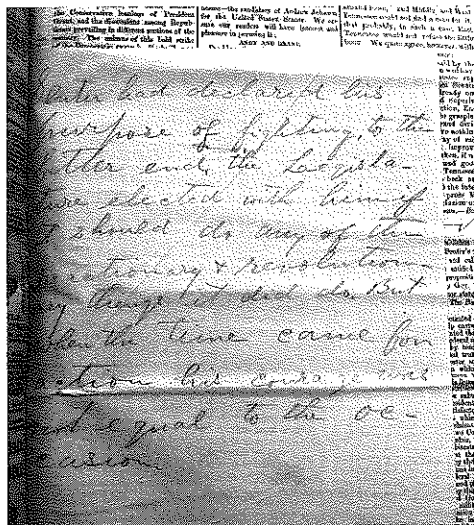
Brownlow's appointed county commissioners of registration throughout the gubernatorial canvass, which suggests that he wrote this note following the election. In closing, John B. Brownlow listed several reasons for having supported Senter over Stokes, a Radical rival to his father. The document is as follows:

Knoxville Whig, June 9, 1869—If we could have prevailed upon Mr. [Horace] Maynard to go to Nashville to the State Convention, as we tried to do, it is possible the split in the party might have been prevented by his nomination. He would not go to Convention & left the State soon after it was over & stayed away till after the election. As a candidate for [U.S. Senator Joseph] Fowler's seat he thought, I suppose, it prudent to keep out of the State & out of any participation in the unfortunate dispute. Neither Senter or Stokes were worthy of the nomination, because both showed a willingness to subordinate the party to their individual interests. There is much of unpublished information in this matter which would elucidate it if it were to be written up for book form as a chapter in the History of Tennessee. I repeat neither Senter or Stokes ought to have been nominated. There is no excuse or justification of Senter's course in remooving [sic] Comm's of Registration, though I doubt not Stokes would have done the same if he had been in Senter's place. But Senter for four years had been a most useful member of the Legislature & as he had been Gov. only 6 months & Stokes had been twice elected to Congress, with a certainty of re-election, he ought not to have pressed his claims. Senter had been 8 months in rebel prisons & for the very efficient work he had done as a member of the Legislature voting for the Franchise law & Frazier's impeachment his pittance as a member (\$4 per day) had hardly paid his board in Nashville. True, Stokes had been in the Union army but when he commanded his regt. it was so worthless that the East Tennessee Union troops were ashamed of it as a Tenn. regiment. It would have been better for the service if he never been in it for his regt. was of good material & would fight when its Lt. Col. Robert Galbraith, had command of it.¹⁴

A second manuscript note, attached to the September 15, 1869 issue of the Knoxville Whig, which was the last issue to be published prior to the elder Brownlow's decision to sell the family's interest in the paper, contained harsh criticism of Governor Senter. John B. Brownlow blamed Senter for the collapse of Radicalism and the return of the ex-rebels to power in Tennessee. The brief note is as follows:

¹⁴ John B. Brownlow, manuscript note, Knoxville Whig, 9 June 1869, Library of Congress.

Knoxville Whig, September 15, 1869—Senter had declared his purpose of fighting, to the bitter end, the Legislature elected with him if it should do any of the reactionary & revolutionary things it did do. But when the time came for action his courage was not equal to the occasion.¹⁵



Manuscript from John B. Brownlow attached to the front page of the Brownlow family's September 15, 1869 issue of the Knoxville Whig which is at the Library of Congress. From the Serial and Government Publications Division of the Library of Congress.

By the spring of 1870, the Brownlows more openly expressed their frustrations with Governor Senter, a moderate Republican who they had helped elect. Writing from Washington, D.C. where he remained by his father's side, who was so weakened by his chronic health that he could no longer give his own speeches on the Senate floor, John B. Brownlow expressed his disappointment with Senter. In a March 30, 1870 letter to Judge Leonidas C. Houk, the younger Brownlow reflected on the time and energy he spent stumping across the state on Senter's behalf during the election. He wrote: "Last summer, like yourself, I expended my surplus change in the glorious! work of aiding to restore 'our disfranchised fellow citizens to the rights, privileges and immunities of citizenship' which I now understand to be the right of a rebel

to kick a Union man's ass & Ku Klux him wherever found."¹⁶ These harsh sentiments fit well with Brownlow's comments from the previous year.

John Brownlow's handwritten notes attached to the 1869 Knoxville Whig shed new light on the private thoughts and political realities of the final moments of Radical Reconstruction in Tennessee. Senter's election was a key moment in understanding this era and the personal insights of the Brownlows add significant new context. These and potentially other documents relegated to the margins of the Knoxville Whig provide an even fuller picture of such a complicated and tumultuous period in Tennessee's history.

¹⁵ John B. Brownlow, manuscript note, Knoxville Whig, 15 September 1869, Library of Congress.

¹⁶ John B. Brownlow to Leonidas C. Houk, 30 March 1870, Leonidas C. Houk Papers, Calvin M. McClung Historical Collection, East Tennessee History Center, Knoxville.