

The Free State of Jones (2016)

Rated R. Running time: 2 hours 19 min.

Our content ratings: Violence 6; Language 3; Sex/Nudity 3.

Our star rating (1-5): 4.5

*Rise up, O Lord; O God, lift up your hand; do not forget
the oppressed.*

Psalm 10:12

*Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever
you sow.*

Galatians 6:7

Gary Ross, director and co-writer, opens up a little known chapter of the Civil War and Reconstruction in this engaging film. There is even a shorter parallel story set in the 1940s that deals with the legacy of the first one. Just as the real Knight was controversial—a noble supporter of the Union and champion of blacks vs. lawless murderer and manipulator of blacks and white—so is this film. I was especially intrigued by it because when I was a boy I was thrilled by the 1949 film *Tap Roots*. It starred the runner up for Scarlett O'Hara, Susan Hayward, who played the daughter of a Mississippi plantation owner against the Civil War. The film was based on a novel, so I assumed it was a fictional, too good to be true story. Now I learn that the fictional planter was indeed based on a real person.

In 1862 Newton Knight (Matthew McConaughey) is serving as a medic in the Confederate Army. He hauls on a stretcher the broken and bleeding bodies of soldiers struck down by musket

balls to the bloody, overcrowded surgical tent where doctors are sawing off legs and stitching wounds. Off duty he talks with comrades, ruefully noting that plantation owners with 20 slaves are allowed to keep their oldest sons home, and those with 20, their second oldest. Most seem to agree that this is a rich man's war fought for their plantations and cotton, and that the cost is being born by poor men. He sees his society's same stratification in the field hospital when he gives a wounded private an officer's coat, telling him that officers are always tended to first.

When a neighbor's boy whom he knows is shot and dies from the wound, Newton takes the body back home to the mother in Jones County. He rejoins his wife Serena (Keri Russell) and young children. To feed the troops the Confederates send out patrols to seize crops, livestock and other supplies from the local farmers. Knowing this, Newton shows his wife and children how to load, cock, and fire guns, so when the patrol rides up, he, Serena, and all three children are holding guns pointed at the intruders. The officer in charge tries to bluff his way, but when the family refuses to lower its guns, he remounts his horse and says they will be back.

With the help of the female tavern owner and her slave, Will finds refuge in the nearby bayou after escaping from the hounds sent to track him down. Rachel (Gugu Mbatha-Raw) shows up that night to bandage the leg a dog had mauled. The two had met before when she had come to treat with herbs the fever of his son. She leads him to the encampment of a group of runaway slaves, chief of whom was Moses (Mahershala Ali), still wearing a barbarous contraption of four iron spikes joined to a neck collar. Eventually Newton is able to secure the smithy tools so that he can free the man who becomes a close friend. Rachel, a house slave, comes and goes bringing food and supplies.

Other whites, their farms robbed join the runaways. At first there is racial tension. When Moses is called a "nigger,"

Newton points out that they all are. Slowly the whites understand this, seeing that they have been treated in the same way. As the group, called The Knight Company, grows in size and armament, Newton leads them on ambushes and raids of Confederate parties out gathering supplies. They even manage to pick the corn crop at one large plantation, the women shucking the ears as the men bring it in, then load the crop onto wagons for transporting to their bayou..

Lt. Barbour (Bill Tangradi) and his superior Col. Robert Lowry (Wayne P ere) dare not enter the bayou, but they post in the county seat of Ellisville the promise of pardons for any who turn themselves in. When several of the men and boys decide to accept the offer, they are seized as they emerge from the swamp, bound up, taken to a huge tree, and hung from its widespread branches. This rouses the fury of Newton and his men--and women. When the black-clad women escort two of the coffins to the local churchyard for burial, the Colonel and a number of his men are on hand. As the women enter the yard, they pull out pistols and kill the closest Confederates. Men jump out of the caskets and the wagons, also firing at the Rebels. From underneath the church Newton and some of his men open fire, the Confederates overwhelmed by the surprise attacks. Newton stalks the badly wounded Colonel into the church, where he wreaks Old Testament vengeance on him.

Much more happens, including an impending a counter attack by a force of a thousand Confederates, and Newton proclaiming to his forces in Ellisville "The Free State of Jones," where "every man is a man" and "no man ought to stay poor so another man can get rich." When General Sherman, who has successfully invaded the state, refuses to send soldiers and armaments to him, Newton leads his force back into the swamp.

In a series of black and white photos we see that the war is ended, and Congress passes amendments to free the slaves and to give them the right to vote. In a fairly short segment we see the former slaves working their own land, and then when

the whites, still controlling the government, pass a law that in effect continues slavery, Newton joins his black friends in rescuing a young son who has been seized by his former owner and forced to work in the fields. When Congress sends in troops to enforce the Constitutional amendments by protecting blacks, and a Freedman's School is set up, things look up for the blacks. The scene in which Newton and his black friends come to the courthouse to cast their votes is far tenser than the one I witnessed in 1964 at Cleveland, MS when I drove a black woman to the courthouse. Newt and his friends carried loaded and cocked shotguns, and they were met by angry whites, also armed and ready to exchange gunfire if anyone made a misstep. Inside the registrar tried to pretend that they were out of forms. When it became obvious that Newton and company were prepared to stay and wait him out, he relented, and the registrants were allowed to cast their ballots. However, it was the racists who did the counting, with the white candidate winning by over 400 to 2 votes.

There are more sobering scenes with the night-riding KKK burning homes and the church where the pro-Union people meet, and numerous lynchings. Then comes the fateful year of 1876 when the controversial election of President Hayes and his subsequent withdrawal of soldiers from the South allowed the racists whites to continue their oppression of blacks. Newton, withdrawing from politics, settles in with both Serena and Rachel (though the wives were in separate cabins), the film claiming the threesome living in harmony. History tells us that the fertile Newton sired nine children with Serena and five with Rachel, and that he lived until 1922.

That parallel 1948 story about Davis Knight, a descendant of Newton and Rachel, is told in bits and pieces, much of it in a Mississippi courtroom. He had fallen in love with a white woman, and because he and his kin were regarded as Negroes, was prosecuted as a violator of Mississippi's miscegenation laws. This is dropped so suddenly into the more dramatic Civil

War story that to many it seems obtrusive. It probably is, but still I was glad to know of this incident.

More serious objections against the film have been raised by critics attacking the filmmaker's probable glossing over flaws in Newton and the simplistic depiction of racial harmony. It is true that Matthew McConaughey's impassioned performance as the poor farmer turned rebel against the Rebels sweeps us away, so that we accept him as the saintly hero, very much akin to that of the figure in the song that the Knight Company sings, "John Brown's Body." And yet his killing of the Confederate colonel in a church and his liaison with Rachel during his wife's absence, as well as his choosing to live intimately with both women after the war—these and other less than saintly acts show us what a flawed character he was. This is in keeping with the way in which so-called "Bible heroes" are depicted in the Old Testament, figures with plenty of unsavory flaws whom God could nonetheless use in his ever-continuing move to free the downtrodden and oppressed. The film too may be flawed, but it is one that those who care about social justice should feel duty-bound to see.

This review with a set of discussion questions is in the July issue of VP.