
BACKGROUND BOOKS

RECONSTRUCTION

"Without the negro there would have been no Civil War. Granting a war fought for any other cause, the task for reconstruction would, without him, have been comparatively simple." So wrote Walter Lynwood Fleming in **THE SEQUEL OF APPOMATTOX: A Chronicle of the Reunion of the States** (Yale, 1919).

"With him, however," Fleming went on, "reconstruction meant more than the restoring of shattered resources; it meant the more or less successful attempt to obtain and secure for the freedman civil and political rights, and to improve his economic and social status. In 1861, the American negro was everywhere an inferior, and most of his race were slaves . . . in 1868 he was in the South the legal equal of the white even in certain social matters."

The historians of Reconstruction have a history of their own. Fleming's view, the classic Southern view, had already been enunciated in William A. Dunning's **RECONSTRUCTION, POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC, 1865-1877** (Harper, 1907), and this scholarly perspective persisted into the 1940s. E. Merton Coulter's **THE SOUTH DURING RECONSTRUCTION** (La. State Univ., 1947, 1970) may be its last, best statement. Earlier, however, with the publication—and selection by the Literary Guild—of Claude G. Bowers' **THE TRAGIC ERA: The Revolution after Lincoln** (Houghton Mifflin, 1929, cloth; 1930, paper), the Southern view reached its widest audience.

To rebut Bowers' popular anti-Negro, antiradical, anticarpetbagger, antiscalawag book, black historian W. E. B. Du Bois six years later published his ground-breaking work, **BLACK RECONSTRUCTION** (Harcourt, 1935; Kraus reprint, 1976).

Du Bois's radically different—some thought alarmingly radical—interpretation garnered favorable reviews in the *New York Times*. Jonathan Daniels, then editor of the Raleigh (N.C.) *News and Observer*, wrote that *Black Reconstruction* had "far less narrative in it than argument" but was "well written throughout, with some passages approximating poetry" and called it "a corrective for much white history about a period in which the negro played a great part." The *New Yorker's* reviewer, in a pithy paragraph, noted that Du Bois "with great earnestness, sometimes rising to moving passion . . . takes the odd view, in distinction to most previous writers, that the Negro is a human being."

Today's reader may want only to know that the above books exist (all are still in print) before turning to more recent treatments of the period. One good survey to start with (its first chapter is a detailed discussion of the changing interpretations over the years) is **THE ERA OF RECONSTRUCTION, 1865-1877** by Kenneth M. Stampp (Knopf, 1965, cloth; Random, 1967, paper).

Another brief, readable account is **RECONSTRUCTION AFTER THE CIVIL WAR** (Univ. of Chicago, 1961, cloth; 1962, paper) by John Hope Franklin, the dean of black historians. Franklin's treatment is thorough and dispassionate.

THE CIVIL WAR AND RECONSTRUCTION by James G. Randall and David Donald (Heath, 1969; Little, Brown, 1973) is a solid textbook, and there are other excellent specialized studies with a narrower focus that help to clarify broad Reconstruction issues.

The story of those dissident Southerners who opposed slavery, supported the Union, and became Republicans during

Reconstruction is vividly told in Carl N. Degler's **THE OTHER SOUTH: Southern Dissenters in the Nineteenth Century** (Harper, 1974, cloth; 1975, paper). Degler's memorable opening line: "This book is about losers."

The blacks of South Carolina's Sea Islands are the subject of **REHEARSAL FOR RECONSTRUCTION: The Port Royal Experiment** by Willie Lee Rose (Bobbs-Merrill, 1964; Oxford, 1976, cloth & paper). Federal forces occupied the Sea Islands in November 1861. Former slaves were recruited as Union soldiers, and the first extensive schools for blacks got under way; abandoned land was confiscated, and freedmen were given temporary title to it. Rose, an award-winning author, takes full advantage of what she calls "a rare opportunity to review the vast spectacle in miniature and see it in its germinal phases."

There were severe limits on the experiment. Congress was unwilling to commit itself to full black equality, and even though Sea Islands blacks fared better than their brothers elsewhere (many were able to retain small patches of land and in time became a kind of yeomanry), they discovered overall that "revolutions may go backward."

In **FROM CONTRABAND TO FREEDMAN: Federal Policy Toward Southern Blacks, 1861-1865** (Greenwood, 1973), Louis S. Gerteis contends that wartime federal policies in the South aimed mostly at mobilizing black laborers and soldiers and preventing violent change; these policies "did not create the necessary conditions for sweeping reforms" during the postwar years.

YANKEE STEPFATHER: General O. O. Howard and the Freedmen by William S. McFeely (Yale, 1968, cloth; Norton, 1970, paper) is one of those biographies that provides a better understanding of events and of institutions under stress through the experience of one individual.

McFeely argues that the flaws of the

newly reunited America—particularly its conservatism and racism—were mirrored in the Freedmen's Bureau itself, and most particularly in its commissioner, General Oliver Otis Howard (for whom Howard University is named). Although the commissioner began with the radical goal of obtaining land for blacks and assisting them in gaining employment and education, his on-the-job record was one of "naivete and misunderstanding, timidity, misplaced faith, disloyalty to subordinates who were loyal to the freedmen, and an attempt to diminish the Negroes' aspirations."

Another biography of the period, Eric McKittrick's **ANDREW JOHNSON AND RECONSTRUCTION** (Univ. of Chicago, 1960), is neither blindly hostile nor overly sympathetic toward the "accidental" President. McKittrick argues that Johnson's good intentions were undercut by the limitations of his own background.

Scholars frequently suggest certain novels as useful background reading on Reconstruction. One of these is Margaret Mitchell's perpetually popular **GONE WITH THE WIND** (Macmillan, 1936; most recent ed., Avon, 1976, paper), later made into a movie that still draws record crowds whenever it is revived. The romantic story of Scarlett O'Hara, says an academic enthusiast, is "probably as effective as any of the formal histories in getting at the essential truths of Reconstruction and its aftermath."

Another novel recommended by scholars is William Faulkner's **LIGHT IN AUGUST** (N.Y.: Smith & Haas, 1932; Random, 1967, cloth; 1972, paper). The Nobel laureate's portrayal of displaced Yoknapatawphans makes painfully real the South's outraged, enduring pride of place.

Out of Reconstruction and the plantation world that preceded it came "the New South"—in several successive guises, vividly described by succeeding generations of writers.

Wilbur J. Cash, a Southern journalist who came to maturity in the 1920s and '30s, saw his South as a place where white people were held together by a "proto-Dorian pride." In **THE MIND OF THE SOUTH** (Knopf, 1941, cloth; Random, 1960, paper), a sweeping interpretation of Southern intellectual history, he pictured Reconstruction as a successful attempt to destroy the old Southern world: "The land was stripped and bled white—made, indeed, a frontier once more, in that its people were once more without mastery of their environment and [had to] begin again from the beginning to build up social and economic order out of social and economic chaos."

C. Vann Woodward, the most widely respected of all contemporary white historians specializing in Reconstruction, has written many books about the political and social consequences of the failure of the Radicals. In **REUNION AND REACTION: The Compromise of 1877 and the End of Reconstruction** (Little, Brown, 1951; rev. 1966, cloth & paper), he sorts out the tangled circumstances under which Rutherford B. Hayes managed to gain the Presidency in the disputed election of 1877. In **ORIGINS OF THE NEW**

SOUTH, 1877-1913 (La. State Univ., 1951; rev. 1972, cloth & paper), he describes in detail the process by which the South was, in effect, reduced to a colony. In a study that has had considerable influence, **THE STRANGE CAREER OF JIM CROW** (Oxford, 1955; 3rd rev. 1974, cloth & paper), he traces the evolution of American racial attitudes and practices from the first through the second Reconstructions.

Finally, in a volume of collected essays, **THE BURDEN OF SOUTHERN HISTORY** (La. State Univ., 1960), Woodward makes this observation: "Once Southern historians have purged their minds of rancor and awakened out of a narrow parochialism they should be in a singularly strategic position to teach their fellow countrymen something of the pitfalls of radical reconstruction: of the disfranchisement of old ruling classes and the indoctrination of liberated peoples. . . . They should at least have a special awareness of the ironic incongruities between moral purpose and pragmatic result, of the way in which laudable aims can be perverted to sordid purposes, and of the readiness with which high-minded ideals can be forgotten."

EDITOR'S NOTE. *The above titles are selected from a considerably larger number recommended by specialists on the Reconstruction period. Our advisers included the authors of the articles that this essay follows: Armstead L. Robinson, James L. Roark, and James M. McPherson, whose own useful books are mentioned in their biographies. Other scholars who furnished advice and comments are Wilson Center Fellow ('77) Harold D. Woodman, Purdue University, author of **KING COTTON AND HIS RETAINERS: Financing and Marketing the Cotton Crop of the South, 1800-1925** (Univ. of Ky., 1968), and Joel Williamson, now at the Center for Advanced Studies, Stanford University, and author of **AFTER SLAVERY: The Negro in South Carolina During Reconstruction** (Univ. of N.C., 1965, 1969, cloth; Norton, 1975, paper).*