

Forever Free: The Story of Emancipation and Reconstruction

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Review

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Foner, Eric and Brown, Joshua. *Forever Free: The Story of Emancipation and Reconstruction*. Alfred A. Knopf, \$27.50 ISBN 375402594

Providing Accessible Insights

An Assessable Guide to Reconstruction

When the preeminent historian of one of the most important periods in American history writes yet another book on the same topic, one might ask the question why? At the same time, when the preeminent historian is Eric Foner writing on Reconstruction, one knows there are compelling reasons; several are obvious. Like so many who toil in a critically significant field, Foner recognizes that Reconstruction is still woefully misunderstood. He recounts, in the first few pages, his dismay that the vast majority of high school seniors do not even know what Reconstruction was. Probably even more disappointing to Dr. Foner is that a best selling book on cultural literacy did not even rank Reconstruction on its list of 1,000 things a literate American needs to know. [did he include this or did you add as part of the review? and what is the convention about titles? you call him Dr. Foner once, and otherwise just Foner.]

Forever Free, with its clear and cogent writing, offers an accessible means for the literate American to learn about and understand Reconstruction. The book is made even more enticing with over 130 illustrations and photographs enhanced by the commentary by Joshua Brown.

In addition, **Forever Free** is more than a work on Reconstruction. It begins, not with the end of the Civil War, but with The Peculiar Institution of slavery; it continues up to the Civil Rights Movement and concludes with Foner's Epilogue entitled The Unfinished Revolution. The early material on slavery is especially strong and clarifies much about the justifications offered by white America for slavery. Foner is quite even-handed in his treatment of northern as compared with southern complicity in this evil institution by showing the role of northern

capital in extending the life of slave trade, by describing the slow progress of Emancipation in the North, and of course by noting with irony that the great document of freedom, the U.S. Constitution, enshrined slavery not by its words but by the infamous 3/5's clause. Foner suggests that this document strengthened slavery in the South and as a result by 1860 had created the largest, most powerful slave society the modern world had known. Foner is powerful in his treatment of the undying desire for freedom among the slaves and their never-ending struggle to undermine their bondage and the institutions that enforced its existence. He is most insightful in his treatment of the Civil War and Abraham Lincoln. Foner calls the Civil War the midwife of the black revolution. The book moves through the war, the Emancipation Proclamation, and Presidential Reconstruction, always with the constant narrative of the black response. By covering so much material, he impresses the reader not only with the efficiency and accuracy of his work but also by a depth of sensitivity that few other historians can bring to their work. Foner clearly demonstrates the differences between black and white perceptions of the meaning of emancipation, differences which explain why Reconstruction had such a brief life. Naturally the sections on Reconstruction also are swiftly and precisely covered. Possibly because of my familiarity with Foner's work on Reconstruction I expected more detail. The chapter entitled The Facts of Reconstruction is only 22 pages long. Brown's visual essay entitled On the Offensive and the accompanying illustrations and photographs do add much to the depth of coverage on the short period of Radical Reconstruction. It is important to note that visual images are not confined to just Brown's essays. The book is enhanced throughout with many images that are new to my eye as well as many that certainly need to be seen again and again. Foner's final chapter The Abandonment of Reconstruction is also brief but again it eloquently describes the white Southern military- like assault as well as the Northern economic and underlying racist views that doomed what Foner calls the stunning experiment. This chapter is also enhanced by the bookend visual essays by Brown entitled Countersigns and Jim Crow. The images included in Brown's essays help greatly in enhancing the textual descriptions of the white racist reaction to radical Reconstruction.

In conclusion, *Forever Free* is a book of worth to scholars who need a quick read to refresh their student's understanding of the subject, but Foner's chief aim was the general public. If the public were to read it, their general education would certainly be enhanced. This book was also part of the Forever Free Project

which was intended to be a collaboration of scholars, film and television producers, and writers to make a film on Emancipation and Reconstruction. With their words and illustrations, Foner and Brown have done the scholarly work necessary to lay a foundation for a film or television project. But apparently no Hollywood money has come forward. Reconstruction, the first great experiment in freedom for African Americans, was brief, but like this book, deserving of much more than a few reviews. One hopes that **Forever Free** will be read by many, and that ultimately a film will be made that properly records the story so eloquently told and illustrated by Foner and Brown.

*W. Lewis Burke is a law professor at the University of South Carolina School of Law. His legal history books include *At Freedom's Door: African American Founding Fathers in Reconstruction South Carolina* (with James L. Underwood, 2000) and *Matthew J. Perry* (with Belinda Gergel, 2004). His latest works include *The Dawn Of Religious Freedom in South Carolina* (with James L. Underwood, 2006) and *Killing, Cheating, Legislating, and Lying: A History of Voting Rights in South Carolina after the Civil War*, 57 S.C.L.Rev. 891 (2006). He is currently writing a book on the Pink Franklin Case: The NAACP's First Case.*