

### Reconstruction In Alabama: From Civil War To Redemption In The Cotton South

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## Review

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**Fitzgerald, Michael W.** *Reconstruction in Alabama: From Civil War to Redemption in the Cotton South*. LSU Press, \$49.95 ISBN 9780807166062

### The Rise and Fall of Reconstruction in Alabama

On the first page of *Reconstruction in Alabama: From Civil War to Redemption in the Cotton South*, we learn that 1905 was the last time a scholarly book was published on the Civil War and Reconstruction in Alabama. Surely this topic is in need of an update. And there is no better person to do it than Michael Fitzgerald. For most of his academic career, he has thought deeply about Reconstruction and explored many of its facets in Alabama, first with his groundbreaking *The Union League Movement in the Deep South*, and then in his innovative study on popular politics (*Urban Emancipation*) and also his synthetic work on southern Reconstruction (*Splendid Failure*). Interspersed among these major works, he has published more than a dozen articles and essays on Reconstruction in Alabama. But the value of *Reconstruction in Alabama* is much more than a mere revision of Walter Lynwood Fleming's racist interpretation from 1905. Here we have one of the leading historians of Reconstruction weighing in on many of the most difficult and enduring questions of the era.

Ever attentive to Reconstruction historiography, Fitzgerald has framed his book not on the black experience, as Eric Foner and Steve Hahn did, but on divisions among white Alabamians. Beginning with secession, he notes that most of northern Alabama voted against secession while southern Alabama did the opposite. These divisions over Unionism festered during the war years and blew up into a bitter guerilla war in the north. After Confederate defeat, Unionists hoped for protection from the federal government. Instead, Alabama's white voters embraced former Confederates, although not the most rabid, to guide the state back into the Union. Seeking to postpone a swift return of state authority and to ensure longer access to federal troops, Unionists took up the cause of

freedmen's rights and argued for a more sustained intervention in the state. This, Fitzgerald contends, was the origin of the often troubled Reconstruction alliance between black and white Unionists.

The struggle of these Unionists and rank-and-file Republicans is somewhat obscured by the book's state-level focus, the consequence of which is that state leaders and state policies drive the narrative. At times, Fitzgerald interrupts this traditional history of governors, elections, and laws. In his fifth chapter, "Black Liberation," he examines the struggle for black freedom and the reorganization of the plantation system. The rise of tenant farming, he argues, provided a measure of stability that plantation owners could live with and thus provided a crucial space for black politics to sink roots and begin to grow. Planter tolerance of free labor and a willingness to accept black political empowerment along with northern white Unionism stifled the formation of an all-white, racist campaign to drive black people into subservience. That would come later. But in the late 1860s and early 1870s, "freedpeople [had] real leverage" and pragmatically deployed their power to better their lives (8).

Although military Reconstruction marks a decisive turning point in Alabama's history, important continuities existed between Democrat, military, and Republican administrations that explain the persistence of both radical changes as well as the violent opposition to Reconstruction. Beginning with Democratic Governor Robert M. Patton, all the governors placed a high priority on railroad promotion, often to the detriment of black people's citizenship rights. Republican Governor William Hugh Smith, for instance, did little to counter Klan terrorism for fear of alienating conservative whites and imperiling his efforts to build the Alabama & Chattanooga line. Black voters were never as enamored with railroads as elites were, but they did appreciate the thousands of new railroad construction jobs as well as capital investment in local communities. But the laws crafted by political leaders favored the creditors and did not provide sufficient restraint on using state credit to finance projects. In particular, Gov. Smith ascribed millions of dollars of railroad bonds to the state, an obligation that weighed down and doomed subsequent administrations. Railroad men bribed and cajoled lawmakers to enact these favorable terms, but it was not, contrary to the racist invectives of the Dunning school historians, black voters or black lawmakers that spearheaded railroad corruption.

Despite the modest efforts of state officials in both Democrat and Republican administrations to promote social stability and labor peace, the Klan

rampaged through much of the state. Indeed, it was the very attention to freedpeople's improvement by the state that sparked a backlash by impoverished white men. They rallied to the Ku Klux Klan not merely, Fitzgerald suggests, because of biracial politics and Republican rule but because they had suffered substantial economic losses as a result of emancipation. A close analysis of Klan participants reveals that they suffered a tenfold loss of wealth owing to war and the liberation of black people. The Klan suppressed enough black votes and participated in enough electoral fraud in 1870 to ensure the election of a Democratic governor, Robert Lindsay. But freedpeople found other ways to maximize their leverage.

Republican delegates produced a progressive constitution in 1868 that radically restructured state government by providing for a more equal justice system, establishing free, public schools, and providing state credit for private development projects. High cotton stabilized the plantation belt, which led to more negotiations instead of coercion between planters and tenants, and planters learned to tolerate black political power. Elite white acceptance of Reconstruction gave black people a space to press for higher political offices and new civil rights legislation. But what is most interesting about the growing sophistication of black politics, Fitzgerald argues, was their flexibility and dexterity in the face of white hostility. Indeed, what scholars have not fully appreciated is "how widely freedpeople deterred violence" and "how normal life appeared" in the black belt, at least before 1874 (9).

The relative progress and stability produced by Reconstruction began to quickly unravel after the economic crash of 1873. While historians usually emphasize the spike in urban employment and the turn of northern public opinion against Republicans, Fitzgerald argues that the Panic had a direct impact on Alabama agriculture. The depression caused cotton prices to plummet, plunging plantations into chaos and prompting planters to align with the White League and other reactionary forces. The collapse of the cotton economy brought Alabama's white Democratic factions together in a united racist campaign that ultimately overthrew Reconstruction in the state. Efforts in Congress to pass a new civil rights law further tainted Alabama Republicans in the eyes of most white Alabamians. "Focusing on the [federal] civil rights bill," explains Fitzgerald, "allowed Democrats to channel all other white social grievances" (309). The backlash from railroad debt also hurt Republican chances, as they were identified with the state support of economic development. Although the generous railroad policies had originated from former Whigs, the debt issue

prompted most Democrats to embrace a Jacksonian perspective on state aid, ruling out the use of state credit for future private development.

Democratic election victories in 1874 ushered in a Redemption era that began to push black people out of formal politics and allowed landowners to more easily control workers. These changes were enshrined in a new constitution that repealed guaranteed educational funding and ended black jury service. After 1880, black officeholding and positive government faded away and were replaced by white elites who then spread a fraudulent story of corrupt carpetbaggers and freedmen to justify their rule.

*Reconstruction in Alabama* is not a major departure from existing scholarship. It is more traditional in its conceptualization of Reconstruction than much of the recent work, yet the book demonstrates a masterful synthesis of the era. Students of the Civil War Era will appreciate its admirable attention to detail and its judicious conclusions. It's a book not to be missed.

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