

### The Assault on Elisha Green: Race and Religion in a Kentucky Community

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## Review

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**Runyon, Randolph Paul.** *The Assault on Elisha Green: Race and Religion in a Kentucky Community.* University Press of Kentucky, 2021. HARDCOVER. \$32.95 ISBN 9780813152387 pp. 200.

In some respects, this modest book works. The author, a retired French professor with connections to northern Kentucky, has written on historical topics before. He knows how to tell a story. *The Assault on Elisha Green* examines one episode of racial violence, illuminating the lives of the people surrounding it. The author's judgement on what happened looks reliable, and it is inherently interesting material. The episode occurs on a railroad, which lends it special significance given the importance of transportation in Jim Crow and the emergence of the Civil Rights Movement. Also, Elisha Green was a Baptist minister whose behavior indicated a pattern of assertion of racial dignity, so the work intersects with the topic of the church as a seedbed of resistance. And this assault has the satisfying plotline of the racist perpetrators receiving a comeuppance of sorts. All that is to the good.

Since this book does a deep dive into one episode, discussion of specifics is necessary. In June 1883, the formerly enslaved minister Elisha Green sat in a railroad coach surrounded mostly by whites. Prior to Jim Crow in Kentucky, this was entirely legal and normal, and he did nothing to draw attention. His background as a preacher freed for his religious devotion gave him an unusual community profile. Several of the passengers were from Green's hometown of Maysville, on the northern border of the state. Despite all this, he ran into trouble. Two Southern Methodist ministers entered the car escorting a group of teenagers, students at their Millersburg Female College. Two of the students were left standing, and the college president, George T. Gould, asked that Reverend Green give up his seat. The only vacant seat in the car was the one next to him. Gould's request included the threat of a disturbance if not complied with. Green had broken his leg badly the previous year, and for that or whatever reason he refused to relinquish his seat. Clearly he was offended with "this educated dude of a white man" (116). The

passengers summoned the conductor, who backed Green's right to sit unmolested. Several men in the car then tried to defuse the situation by offering their seats.

None of this helped. College President Gould, egged on by at least one of the students, bridled at this perceived violation of racial protocol. As he later wrote, "If any man has fallen so low as to think white women should stand while negro men keep their seats him then I have insulted, and really do not care if I have" (116). He grabbed Reverend Green by the arm, trying to drag him out, and Green then reportedly pushed back or hit him. At that, Gould's colleague Frank Bristow intervened, revealing a gun and striking Reverend Green with a brass-bound valise. For good measure, Bristow threatened one of the white bystanders upon arrival at the next station. Reverend Green swore out a warrant for assault and battery, but he soon decided that his chances were better in civil court. He won his case, being awarded fifteen dollars damages from each man and court costs. In modern currency, that would amount to perhaps eight hundred dollars in all.

The nominal award might seem an injustice, but Green did not view it that way in his autobiography. It was a dramatic highlight of his life. The two assailants stood exposed to reputational damage, bolstered by testimony against them by the conductor and white men in the car. Despite his prominence in the Southern Methodist hierarchy, Gould had a spicy past. It seems that Gould and Bristow were romantically linked to their students, as Gould's church trials made clear. Mrs. Gould called her husband "a whore-monger, a seducer of young girls, a drunkard, hypocrite and a house-burner" (124). Gould also had a serious drinking problem, which had subjected him to a damaging investigation by his denomination. All this proved catnip for the press, much of which piled on Gould. As one newspaper observed, Gould and company placed themselves "in an ugly attitude before the public" (120). Paying the small judgement proved troublesome for Gould, who was already in financial difficulties. He lost his college position and headed west to New Mexico to divorce his wife and marry one of his students. After brief success as a non-denominational preacher, he encountered fresh humiliations there, winding up as a journalist. His second wife eventually left him on account of his drinking.

The story has other curious features which the author puts to sardonic use. The school promoted itself as an upholder of traditional southern values. The second assailant, Bristow, preened as a defender of southern white womanhood. It turns out he was a northern veteran who turned a new leaf after long residence in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, which the author could have

pointed out as a Klan stronghold. Surprisingly, Bristow was the brother of Benjamin Bristow, the Republican attorney general under President Grant, with a record as an anti-corruption crusader. The author follows this and similar narrative threads with diligence, taking several of the descendants' stories to the late twentieth century. The author knows the locality well, having connections to one of the families that enslaved Reverend Green.

Runyon's book describes a vivid episode engagingly. He clearly has full command of all the genealogical tools of the digital age, and his interpretation of events looks accurate. Still, historians will probably find fault. There is little engagement with the historiography, in a book published by a university press. The "so what" issue is left largely unexamined. Also, at least two scholarly articles dealt with aspects of the assault in recent decades. The author generously commends his predecessor, but without telling readers exactly how the works compare interpretively or how this book changes the narrative. Furthermore, the book seems disengaged with current events. Given the prominence of young students in the narrative, the Me Too discussion of recent years might be worth addressing, somehow. One other thought occurs in this era of racial reckoning, that the author pushes back after a fashion on the prevailing discourse. However harsh the setting, there were limits to what even influential racists could get away with when confronted by people like Reverend Green. As the author concluded the book, Gould and Bristow descended into "irrelevance," but through "hard work, perseverance, and personal courage [Green] rose from obscurity and passed his final moments in the loving embrace of his community" (198). In this border South community in the 1880s, bolstered by his favorable repute among those who knew him, Green could strike a blow for justice with some effect. That's a point worth remembering now.

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