A Brief Moment in the Sun: Francis Cardozo and Reconstruction in South Carolina

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Neil Kinghan offers an intriguing biography of Francis Cardozo, the first African American to hold statewide office after the Civil War. As secretary of state, and later treasurer of South Carolina, Kinghan reevaluates Cardozo’s historical significance as an instrumental figure in the postwar reconstruction of the state. The primary aim of this book is to “give [Cardozo] the recognition he deserves and restore his place in African American history of the nineteenth century.” (2) In so doing, Kinghan addresses the “still inadequate recognition of the achievements of the period and almost none of the contribution of Francis Cardozo.” (5) The author uses Cardozo’s achievements as minister, educator, and politician to critique the understanding – popularized after Redemption – of Reconstruction as a “tragic era.” Far from a period of failure, he emphasizes Cardozo’s tangible contributions to the enduring successes that African Americans could carry forward after Reconstruction’s demise, and into Jim Crow.

Kinghan’s efforts to foreground Cardozo’s role in South Carolinian Reconstruction, and in the efforts of African Americans to combat the behemothic social challenges that faced them in freedom, are undoubtedly successful and result in a highly informative text. Kinghan’s focus on the bureaucratic angle of Reconstruction through Cardozo’s career reveals otherwise forgotten accomplishments that may reshape our understanding of the period.

The work’s opening chapter charts Francis Cardozo’s early life in the free Black district of Charleston. Born to a white Jewish father and Black freedwoman, Francis emigrated to
Scotland in 1858 for a classical education at Glasgow University, later becoming ordained as a Presbyterian minister. Drawing on the recollections of a future student of Cardozo, and an interview with the present-day archivist of a Charlestonian church that possibly funded his education, Kinghan presents Cardozo’s outstanding academic record – and experience of relative racial tolerance – in Britain as a formative experience for his abiding belief that Black Americans could achieve the same success as whites. This outlook proved central to his political career upon his return to the United States in 1864. Cardozo’s earliest forays into politics came as a Connecticut state delegate to the National Convention of Colored Men in New York, and as a vice president of the National Equal-Rights League. Chapter two follows Cardozo’s postwar return to Charleston, as head of the American Missionary Association’s Saxton school. The chapter is based on Cardozo’s communication with the AMA, providing insight into the various challenges facing the school, not least the tensions between free and freed Black students amid an atmosphere of entrenched white hostility to their education. Despite these challenges, Cardozo made a resounding success of the school, winning praise from Charleston’s white elite and establishing Francis as a well-respected educator.

From this position of authority, Cardozo launched himself into the politics of Reconstruction, with chapter three examining his activities as delegate to the South Carolina constitutional convention of 1868 and election to the position of Secretary of State. Kinghan illuminates Francis’ efforts to politically mobilize South Carolinian Black men through his role as a minister, providing fascinating insight into the political role of Black churches. As a delegate, Cardozo voiced caution among his Radical colleagues but entertained radical pronouncements on certain issues, even helping to strike down a proposal for literacy tests for voters. As secretary of state, Cardozo battled endemic corruption in the South Carolina Land
Commission to achieve a measure of success in distributing land to freed people. Kinghan demonstrates in chapter four how the white, Democratic press favorably exempted Cardozo from their frequent charges of corruption and incompetency against Republican politicians. In his early years as state treasurer, Cardozo maintained this rare reputation by working to clean up state finances, whilst also managing to improve funding for Black education.

With a more cooperative governor in Daniel Chamberlain, Cardozo’s fiscal prudence and anti-corruption crusade won considerable white Democratic support for the state government to the consternation of their Radical colleagues, whose efforts to remove him are detailed in chapter five. The chapter concludes with the outbreak of white violence in South Carolina, contributing to the collapse of Cardozo’s reputation and the administration itself with the rise of Wade Hampton’s redeemer government in 1876. Kinghan stresses that a combination of white violence and lack of support from the Hayes administration condemned the state’s Republican Party to collapse. Though a calamitous end to Reconstruction in South Carolina, the author makes the compelling case that Cardozo once managed, however briefly, to achieve a degree of legitimacy for Republican government among white Democrats. This illustrated claim certainly alters the historiographical emphasis on Reconstruction’s failures.

The final chapter follows Cardozo’s ignominious exit from office. New issues plagued Cardozo in the form of a series of legal challenges from the new government alleging corruption while in office, resulting in his trial and imprisonment. Outlining the heavily politicized nature of the trial, Kinghan posits that the Democratic government’s need to pursue Cardozo so harshly is indicative of the latter’s genuine successes, evidence of Cardozo’s own life mission to prove the readiness and capability of Black men for government. Upon release, Cardozo worked briefly in the Treasury Department in Washington, before serving as principal of the Colored High School
in 1884. Later heading two other Black schools in D. C. before his retirement and death in 1903, Cardozo’s post-political career allowed him to further contribute to the development of African American education, his most enduring legacy.

Kinghan’s biography is an authoritative treatment of a critical figure both to South Carolinian Reconstruction and African American history more generally. He competently outlines Francis Cardozo’s undeniable successes – primarily with land distribution, financial reform, anti-corruption, and above all education – bringing to life an overlooked character that resisted a variety of challenges (bureaucratic, incompetent, and violent in nature) to secure lasting positive changes for African Americans. With extensive use of newspapers, official correspondence, and local and family histories, Kinghan salvages Cardozo from historical irrelevance and restores him to his rightful place as one of Reconstruction’s most influential Black politicians. Indeed, Kinghan deserves special praise for piecing together Cardozo’s life, and giving us a flavor of his motivations, frustrations, goals, and setbacks, with the limited personal source materials produced by Cardozo himself.

Yet certain questions regrettably remain unexplored in this work. Firstly, one wonders about the experiences of Francis’ siblings, and spouse, and the extent of their influence on his career. Indeed, Francis’ wife appears briefly in the first chapter and then disappears from the narrative entirely, and we similarly might wonder after his fellow politico brother, Thomas, attention to whom, too, seems frustratingly brief. Likewise, whilst the author acknowledges Cardozo’s successes in the relatively safe urban environments of Washington, Columbia, and Charleston, no comparative attention is given to Black social reform efforts in rural areas, which were far more vulnerable to vigilante violence. This might better situate Cardozo’s own
achievements amongst other African American reformers desperately and dangerously working to advance their social condition in this period.

These issues aside, Kinghan offers the definitive portrayal of Cardozo’s life with important implications for assessments of the Reconstruction period. The narrative remains faithful to Cardozo’s guiding principle: that African Americans are just as capable of the same achievements as whites, with Francis’ own remarkable career a resounding testament that reminds us of some of Reconstruction’s positive legacies. This book is a worthwhile read for students of Cardozo himself, the political and bureaucratic intrigue of the South Carolinian Reconstruction governments, and the development of African American postwar education.

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