



The Angry Scar: The Story of Reconstruction

W. Hodding Carter II

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Isidore says

This popular overview of the Reconstruction era was issued in 1959 as part of Doubleday's "Mainstream of America" series, which included Bruce Catton's *This Hallowed Ground* and other still well-known texts. Although not a formal academic treatise (there are no footnotes, and it is written in a lively and accessible manner), it was nevertheless respectfully received and often cited in scholarly bibliographies. Today it is forgotten.

Carter's book has been binned because it was supposedly influenced by the "Dunning School", a group of historians writing in the wake of William A. Dunning, whose deeply negative view of Reconstruction dominated the twentieth century; this school is regarded by the present generation of American historians with undisguised contempt.

But if today's "neo-radical" or "neo-abolitionist" school likes to scorn its predecessors as unenlightened bigots, they face a problem with Hodding Carter. Carter was a southern journalist who started crusading for civil rights as far back as the 1930s, an act requiring considerably greater courage than making pronouncements from a Northern academic chair. He won a Pulitzer prize for his efforts in 1946.

I found Carter's book more genuinely humane and even-handed than most modern work on the subject. His historical figures are complex individuals, not cartoons in an ideological comic book. He plays no favourites and is scarcely a Southern apologist. He surveys the turbulence of the Reconstruction era and its troubled legacy with detached, rueful compassion; a tragic view of history suffuses his writing. Like everyone else, he was a product of his time and place, and doubtless has blind spots and biases, but I don't think he fares worse in this regard than today's historians.

The book is loosely organized on chronological lines, and carries on through to the Jim Crow era of the 1890s. Most books about Reconstruction stop with the "redemption" of the southern states (i.e. the end of military/Radical occupation), a process completed by 1877. By proceeding on for another generation Carter is able to offer us some useful insights: for example, he shows that the former Confederates who dominated Southern politics for years after "redemption" retained more of the civil rights gains of the Radical Reconstruction era than is commonly understood: to an unexpected degree, blacks continued to vote, hold office, and interact freely with whites. Today's "Neo-abolitionist" historians are so upset when their heroes, the Radical Republicans, lose power that they ignore the constitutional and judicial continuities with the period which follows.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century the aging former Confederates were forced out of office by a new, ruthless, and far more racist generation of political leaders ("Pitchfork Ben" Tillman *et al*) who introduced the *systematic* segregation and disenfranchisement of blacks from which we get our mental stereotype of the racist South.

Within the book's broad chronological framework, chapters are arranged more or less topically, and often devolve into a series of biographical profiles. Carter clearly wanted to cover as broad a range of types as possible, so we get vignettes about slaves, white conservatives, scalawags, Populists, and so on, often related in their own words. There's an interesting section in which Confederate General P.G.T. Beauregard explains his attempt to forge a coalition of *both* black and white voters to fight political corruption in Louisiana (his

racial progressivism carries no weight with the present mayor of New Orleans, who recently tore down his monument). The astonishing career of Albert Morgan, a Radical carpetbagger whose rise to power in Yazoo City, Mississippi was marked by mass violence and shoot-outs, gets a lurid chapter to itself.

Recommended to anyone interested in a relatively agenda-free overview of the subject.
