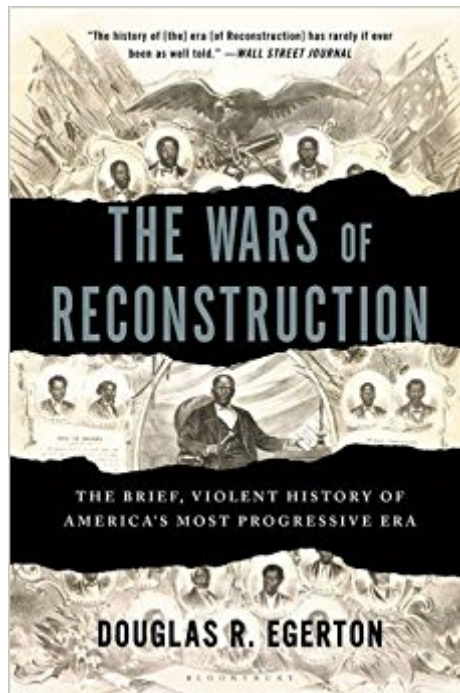




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The Wars Of Reconstruction: The Brief, Violent History Of America's Most Progressive Era



Synopsis

By 1870, just five years after Confederate surrender and thirteen years after the Dred Scott decision ruled blacks ineligible for citizenship, Congressional action had ended slavery and given the vote to black men. That same year, Hiram Revels and Joseph Hayne Rainey became the first African-American U.S. senator and congressman respectively. In South Carolina, only twenty years after the death of arch-secessionist John C. Calhoun, a black man, Jasper J. Wright, took a seat on the state's Supreme Court. Not even the most optimistic abolitionists had thought such milestones would occur in their lifetimes. The brief years of Reconstruction marked the United States' most progressive moment prior to the civil rights movement. Previous histories of Reconstruction have focused on Washington politics. But in this sweeping, prodigiously researched narrative, Douglas Egerton brings a much bigger, even more dramatic story into view, exploring state and local politics and tracing the struggles of some fifteen hundred African-American officeholders, in both the North and South, who fought entrenched white resistance. Tragically, their movement was met by ruthless violence--not just riotous mobs, but also targeted assassination. With stark evidence, Egerton shows that Reconstruction, often cast as a "failure" or a doomed experiment, was rolled back by murderous force. *The Wars of Reconstruction* is a major and provocative contribution to American history.

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Customer Reviews

“The history of [the] era [of Reconstruction] has rarely if ever been as well told as it is in

Douglas R. Egerton's forcefully argued and crisply written *The Wars of Reconstruction*. •

• *Wall Street Journal* • "Key figures develop into rich characters, balancing Egerton's own objective, wide-seeing perspective, which even explores the revisionist Reconstruction histories that informed the American consciousness, particularly the pernicious effects of influential racist cinema. All told, Egerton's study is an adept exploration of a past era of monumental relevance to the present and is recommended for any student of political conflict, social upheaval, and the perennial struggle against oppression. •

• *Publishers Weekly* • "[A] fierce corrective . . . Egerton's book is thorough and cogent in recreating the stories of these fearless, articulate and conscientious black activists and politicians . . . •

• *Bookforum* • "A richly detailed history . . . An illuminating view of an era whose reform spirit would live on in the 1960s civil rights movement. •

• *Kirkus Reviews* • "Understanding issues that continue to roil American politics--the definition of citizenship, the meaning of equality, the relative powers of the national and state governments--requires knowledge of Reconstruction. For this reason alone, the appearance of Douglas R. Egerton's *The Wars of Reconstruction* is especially welcome . . . its dramatic account will challenge and enlighten . . . Egerton paints a dramatic portrait of on-the-ground struggles for equality in an era of great hope and brutal disappointment. •

• *Eric Foner, New York Times Book Review* "The Wars of Reconstruction is one of the best and most readable studies of that era to appear in many years. Its emphasis on the active role that African Americans played in this crucial period is especially welcome. Douglas Egerton has given us another gripping, thoughtful, and deeply researched book about slavery and the fight for freedom." •

• *Bruce Levin, author of The Fall of the House of Dixie: The Civil War and the Social Revolution That Transformed The South* • "Offers a fresh perspective on why the grand experiment of Reconstruction failed and how it took nearly a century afterward for African Americans to gain any semblance of equal rights in the South. •

• *Bookpage* • "This is a very 'Du Boisian' work, sharing the great scholar's view that Reconstruction wasn't just about rebuilding the Southern economy, but reconstructing democracy throughout the US. Recounting Northern blacks' struggles for voting rights and the national quest for universal public education bolsters Du Bois's insight, as do sections assessing Reconstruction in scholarly and popular memory. Through detailed evaluations of officeholders and other activists, Egerton asserts that Reconstruction was the most progressive era in US history. Proponents of the 1960s and, especially, the New Deal may differ, but Egerton's strong case stimulates debate. Summing Up: Recommended. •

• *CHOICE* • "[Egerton's] crisp, immersive history follows an army of black activists,

politicians, ex-slaves, educators, clergy, veterans and their white allies who hoped to remake the devastated South. *The Atlantic*, Best Books of 2014

Douglas R. Egerton is a professor of history at LeMoyne College. He is the author of six books, including *Year of Meteors: Stephen Douglas, Abraham Lincoln, and the Election that Brought on the Civil War*, *He Shall Go Out Free: The Lives of Denmark Vesey*, *Gabriel's Rebellion: The Virginia Slave Conspiracies of 1800 and 1802*, and *Death or Liberty: African Americans and Revolutionary America*. He lives near Syracuse, New York.

While the Reconstruction Era lasted only a short time its impact on the nation's progression was far reaching. Scholar Douglas R. Egerton attempts to encapsulate the trials and tribulations of Reconstruction in his publication, *The Wars of Reconstruction: The Brief, Violent History of America's Most Progressive Era*. The slaves might not have freed themselves, but it was up to them, according to Egerton, to build some sort of appreciable meaning into that freedom. For that purpose Egerton sets Reconstruction in the South. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Egerton does not rely on narrative stylings to tell Reconstruction's story; instead he utilizes an array of local primary sources such as newspaper reports, case law, and various other outlets to impart the story for his audience. Almost immediately he sets a tone in which "Reconstruction did not fail, as some Historians have long maintained; rather he states it was "violently overthrown by [the same] men who had fought for slavery during the Civil War, [continuing] that battle as guerrilla partisans throughout the succeeding decades. (p. 19) Arguably, his most successful chapter is the fourth: "The Lord Has Sent Us Books and Teachers; his focus being "missionaries and community formation. (p. 134) The shortly lived Freedmen's Bureau assisted in the transition of slaves becoming settled free citizens in the South. It is also in this chapter that Egerton reminds readers "that the Reconstruction era neither reached a precise conclusion nor failed to achieve all of its goals, an important distinction to make considering segregation would continue for nearly eight more decades, before *Brown vs. The Board of Education* would be voted on. "Hundreds of new schools [were] sponsored by the federal Freedmen's Bureau, and as Egerton kindly notes- it was an uphill battle. (p. 11) Northern teachers traveled south, doing so accompanied by Union troops; the Bureau was never "elevate(d) into the

president's advisory circle [and so] remained under military auspices. (p. 147) Blacks had to force legislation that would require their children to maintain "regular attendance" in hopes of remedying the "forced ignorance and degradation" of their past. (p. 148) The Freedmen Bureau had limited resources, funds, teachers, and facilities with which to indoctrinate the thousands of children, and their parents, who needed (demanded) educating; accordingly, Egerton does not shy away from the dedication and courage Northern teachers showcased. Especially in the face of homegrown terrorists such as the Ku Klux Klan. That the Freedmen's Bureau had such "spectacular gains in literacy" proves, according to Egerton, its success as an organization and the agency of Reconstruction in our nation's history. (p. 166) The implementation of schools in the South were only one of the functions the Freedmen's Bureau undertook, being responsible for assisting with housing, providing food, medical assistance; truly reforming "every aspect of society." (p. 270) At the end of the day (by the end of his book), I believe one of the most significant take aways from The Wars of Reconstruction is that 150 years after the Civil War, after Reconstruction, we still find it "impossible to separate religion and government" and our schools are still a mess on the grounds of funding, location, and the ethnicity of student body population. (p. 143) It is impossible to do justice to any book in a review of less than one thousand words, however, Egerton puts forth spectacular effort breaking down a largely misunderstood portion of American history. He not only explicates the successes of Reconstruction, but elucidates how failures and setbacks were at the hands of homegrown "terrorists" set on thwarting true nationalism and growth. (p. 240)

Reconstruction has not been adequately examined, especially by the general public. Fortunately, there have been scholars that have opened fresh inquiry into this period which for most of the American public has been viewed through the lens of *Gone With The Wind*, if at all. New scholarship debunks this romantic version and rightly consigning it to be gone with the wind. Nonetheless, it is difficult to get the general public to read almost anything, especially non fiction. There are scholars who write, it seems, with other scholars in mind. And there are scholars who write with the general public in mind, and Douglas Egerton is among them, without writing down. I appreciated Eric Foner's work on Reconstruction but wouldn't recommend it to just anyone. It can easily cause some readers to get

bogged down and put it aside. Not Egerton's work. Top notch scholarship, especially revealed in his notes, and a substantive index. He has a page turning writing style that will enable more persons to keep reading on. His underscoring Reconstruction as America's first progressive effort is an interesting context in which to view this unresolved period of American history. So much of today is the failure of yesterday. I understand Ken Burns is working on a Reconstruction PBS series. He would do well to read Egerton, and he would find Egerton well, a more interesting read. It is encouraging that more historians are delving into this epochal moment of our history. This is the first of Egerton's works I've read. He provides a list of his previous works. Most are intertwined with the issues of slavery, the Civil War, and key actors in the same stream. If the writing style is similar, then it will be a pleasure to pursue our painful past.

Having lived in South Carolina for a brief time I found this book very enlightening. Slavery and the freedmen is totally new to me. I did not know of the resentment that the plantation owners had nor the power they wielded. It helped my understanding of the politics of the South.

I checked it out from the library a few times before I finally got smart and bought it. This is an invaluable resource for Reconstruction history and I found myself coming back to it several times for different classes I was taking.

This is a brilliant, heart wrenching account of the debacle caused by Andrew Johnson's presidency and the withdrawal of troops from the southern states. Egerton does not just use statistics, he uses anecdotes of real families and individuals. I had no idea how dangerous it was for those black or white who tried to teach in the South during Reconstruction. I had no idea how dangerous it was just to be African American at this time. One is reminded of the Billy Holiday song about "strange fruit". This should be a "must read" and a definite readable anecdote to the "Gone With the Wind" mentality toward Reconstruction. For those of you who read DuBois BLACK RECONSTRUCTION IN THE OLD SOUTH, some of the same material is covered BUT Douglas R Egerton's book, although still tackling the difficult subject brilliantly, is much easier to read.

Required reading for a better understanding of how white Americans rewrote the history of the period after the civil war known as reconstruction. The research is thorough with many examples. I wish there weren't so many examples and more time was spent covering how southerners took

control of the historical narrative in order to influence future generations on this topic.

Very well written, it gave me a totally different sense of what happened in that tumultuous time.
Wow.

Wonderful read by an accomplished historian with lots of effective and compelling research and storytelling. There is a reason that it's on so many must read lists!

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