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Book Reviews

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Book Reviews

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BOOK REVIEWS

Steeped in the Blood of Racism: Black Power, Law and Order, and the 1970 Shootings at Jackson State College.

By Nancy K. Bristow.

(Oxford University Press, 2020. xiv, 299 pp. \$34.95)

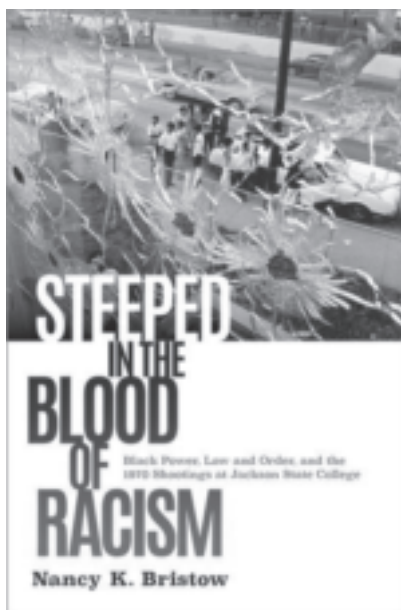
Jackson, Mississippi, is most often remembered in histories of the Black freedom struggle for the horrific June 1963 assassination of NAACP organizer Medgar Evers. The wider story of the Jackson movement has been detailed in John R. Salter's powerful 1979 memoir and in M. J. O'Brien's superb 2013 history, *We Shall Not Be Moved*. Until now, however, the subsequent law enforcement killings of two young Black men at Jackson State College in the early morning hours of May 15, 1970, and the wounding of twelve others have not received book-length treatment by any academic historian.

When they are remembered, the Jackson State killings are linked to the far more famous shooting deaths of four white students at Ohio's Kent State University by National Guardsmen eleven days earlier. But as U.S. English professor Patrick Chura rightly highlighted in a fine 2019 analysis in *Peace & Change*, "the color line

separating the two events and their victims was not incidental but fundamental," for as the excellent *New York Times* journalist Roy Reed wrote at the time, the Jackson State deaths were "almost entirely a Mississippi phenomenon" of white official violence directed at Blacks, not poorly-trained soldiers targeting white students protesting against the war in Southeast Asia.

Nancy Bristow's thoroughly-researched monograph explicates the truth of Reed's statement in extensive detail. Bristow distinguishes the Jackson State deaths from those at Kent, but even in 1970 it was widely appreciated that the Black Mississippi deaths had attracted

far less fanfare than the four white dead in Ohio. *Time* magazine wrote acerbically of the African American victims being treated as "second-class martyrs," yet this discriminatory dynamic was already very well-known. In 1965, the killing of Jimmie Lee Jackson, a Black movement participant, by an Alabama state trooper drew only modest attention, but when two fellow white voting rights propo-



nents, James Reeb and Viola Gregg Liuzzo, were shot to death soon thereafter by Alabama Klan supporters, even President Lyndon B. Johnson personally consoled their families. Likewise, when state lawmen in February 1968 shot and killed three Black students at South Carolina State College in Orangeburg, national reaction was muted.

In Jackson, even a local investigation into the Black students' rock and bottle-throwing, which had preceded the thirty-second burst of over 150 rounds of gunfire, found "no evidence that the crowd . . . threatened the officers prior to firing" (128). Likewise, a subsequent federal probe called the shootings "unreasonable, unjustified . . . clearly unwarranted" and concluded that "racial animosity on the part of white police officers was a substantial contributing factor" in the capricious barrage (134).

Bristow does a fine job in showing how Jackson State's students, often from working-class backgrounds and the first in their families to attend college, had manifested "a determination to stay out of trouble" that sharply distinguished them from young white activists angered by U.S. conduct in the war in Southeast Asia (67). Her insistence that Jackson was thus different in kind from Kent State, where race played no role in the students' deaths, is powerfully clear but also fully congruent with other knowledgeable commentators from Reed in 1970 through Chura in 2019.

Better editing would have saved Bristow from a trio of errors. The U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit, not "the Fifth District," turned aside a

suit for civil damages on behalf of the victims (160). Bristow also fails to cite, or fully utilize, the appellate court's richly detailed 23-page opinion (*Burton v. Waller*, 502 F. 2d 1261), relying instead on only news summaries of it. The prominent civil rights activist Julian Bond was a state representative but never a "Georgia Congressman" and Eric Garner, a Black man who died at the hands of a New York City police officer in 2014, was killed not "in Brooklyn" but in the borough of Staten Island (173, 193).

The tradition of official state violence against Black Americans is now better understood and more widely condemned than at any prior point in American history. The long roster of deaths such as those of James Green and Phillip Gibbs in Jackson in 1970 will receive ongoing reflection for—in Martin Luther King, Jr.'s words—"as long as the cords of memory shall lengthen."

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Resisting Equality: The Citizens' Council, 1954-1989. By Stephanie R. Rolph. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2018. Acknowledgements, notes, bibliography, index. Pp. xii, 237. \$48 cloth. ISBN: 9780807169155.)

In 1971, historian Neil McMillen published *The Citizens' Councils: Organized Resistance to the Second Reconstruction* (University of Illinois Press). McMillen exposed the organization at the center of massive

resistance for what it was—a loosely affiliated network of local white supremacist groups that used economic reprisal and other forms of terrorism to combat the efforts of the NAACP during the classical phase of the civil rights movement. Updated and reprinted in 1994, McMillen's work has remained the standard history of the Council. Its members' self-styled sophisticated resistance to civil rights agitation, defined against the violent and self-defeating resistance of the Ku Klux Klan, has become an indelible part of the scholarly civil rights narrative.

Stephanie Rolph's valuable new monograph, *Resisting Equality*, "builds on" McMillen's work by situating the Citizens' Council within a long civil rights movement framework, specifically within the transformation of American racism that followed the seeming, though never wholesale, collapse of organized massive resistance in the 1960s (3). Focusing on the Council's coalition-building efforts on the national stage and its leaders' steadfast commitment to white supremacy, her work strengthens the historiography of white resistance associated with scholars like Jacquelyn Dowd Hall and Joseph Crespino. She argues that historians have "for the most part, ignored the Council's later years," which, she maintains, "restricts our understanding of Council activism to its ultimate failure" (3). She explains that the organization ultimately "cultivated ideology over political positions" and that its "unwavering commitment to white supremacy," despite a shift in tactics and focus, "ensured its continued

relevance" (3).

Rolph is less concerned with the semi-autonomous local councils that carried out reprisal campaigns against civil rights activists than she is with the Citizens' Council of America (CCA) and the Association of Citizens' Councils of Mississippi (ACCM), both headquartered in Jackson. Rolph argues that a "sustained and unapologetic advocacy for white supremacy," especially via various means of publishing and disseminating propaganda, "won [the CCA and ACCM] a variety of allies within Mississippi, across the country, and around the globe." Such networks allowed the CCA and ACCM to find their place in the conservative counterrevolution of the 1970s and 1980s, long after civil rights activists managed to overcome the terrorist activities of the local councils (4). These connections allow us to see more clearly how white supremacy was "reborn," rather than "irreparably weakened," and how the desire to maintain white power "converged with mainstream thought" (4, 6).

Certain Council leaders loom large in this study, and Rolph emphasizes their intention to develop an elite-led movement that nonetheless inspired whites at the grassroots to take the initiative, sometimes through violent action. The CCA's William Simmons is the most visible of this cadre. Simmons edited the Council organ, *The Citizen*, and produced and moderated its syndicated radio program, *Forum*. These outlets served as Simmons' vehicles for positioning the Council within a developing conservative movement while still cham-

tioning white supremacy. Whether posturing as a staunch Cold Warrior in the pages of *The Citizen*, cozying up to the South African Nationalist regime that was holding fast to Apartheid, or hosting Republican opponents of federal government overreach on *Forum*, Simmons kept an unabashed biological racism at the core of Council ideology.

Rolph combines a fresh examination of some well-worn sources, such as *The Citizen* and the papers of figures like James Eastland and John Stennis, with transcripts of *Forum* and a litany of other Council publications and correspondence, and the papers of Medgar Evers, to provide a rich view of the Council's endurance. As she notes, the Council persevered in the face of conflicts with competing institutions, notably the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission, and a sustained challenge from Black activists. Simmons and Council founder Robert Patterson were ultimately unable to maintain white unity under Council influence in their home state, but their broader vision dovetailed with the rise of the New Right closely enough to ensure the Council's relevance until the shuttering of the Jackson offices in 1989.

The book's brief concluding chapter on the Council since 1964 might leave historians wanting more, though Rolph does emphasize the elements of Council activity and ideology in the years prior to 1964 that presaged its evolution in the 1970s and 1980s. This is necessary reading for anyone hoping to fully understand The Citizens' Council and white resistance to the civil rights movement. All scholars of twentieth century and contemporary

American politics should find it engaging and useful.

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Black Litigants in the Antebellum South. By Kimberly M. Welch. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018. Acknowledgments, illustrations, map, notes, appendix, index. Pp. xi, 328. \$39.95 cloth, \$29.99 E-book. ISBN: 978-1-4696-3643-6.)

In *Black Litigants in the Antebellum South*, Kimberly Welch examines a largely unexplored record of civil suits involving free and enslaved Black litigants in courts in and around antebellum Natchez, Mississippi. Building on her startling discovery that Black litigants often successfully sued whites and each other in civil court, Welch argues that African Americans found success in such cases by appealing to property, and "claimed legal personhood through the language of property" (13). Property ownership and the rights of legal and social personhood imbued in property offered Black litigants a language and legal infrastructure to press claims (for debt repayment, divorce, the recoup of stolen goods, and even occasionally manumission) and to insist on social belonging. Welch finds that Black litigants understood and utilized slaveholders' preoccupation with the preservation of property rights, exploiting the legal foundation of slavery itself to make claims, as property-holders, for civic inclusion and to create a more "tolerable world"

for themselves in white society (147). This tension between race and property permeates the study and whites routinely prioritized the sanctity of Black property over white superiority. Further, Welch builds on Walter Johnson's critique of agency and hegemony. Antebellum southern law was not simply a tool of oppression for whites and antebellum Blacks were not wholly excluded from legal rights based on race or color. In court, whites had no monopoly on rights and the law was available to every member of the Old South, including free Blacks and slaves.

Welch divides the book into two thematic halves. The first focuses on the tactics and strategies Black litigants found successful in court. Blacks constructed narratives to justify their claims, which forced the court to accept non-white voices as authoritative. African Americans also exploited tropes of Black inferiority to demand that whites articulate their expectations of Black behavior; thus holding whites accountable for their limited racial power in court. Black litigants' very presence in court, Welch argues, presented a paradox that challenged the racial logic of antebellum Mississippi. When white lawyers represented Black clients and judges heard these cases, they were "compelled" to admit a different order, one in which knowledge, law, and experience belonged to Blacks as well as whites (106). Welch is careful not to overstate Blacks' successes in court, however. Blacks occupied a subordinate position in the slave South, and whites took advantage of the courts to undermine them in court. That so many white judges and juries ruled in

favor of Black plaintiffs, Welch maintains, reveals the untidy operation of law and white supremacy.

The second half examines the scope and significance of antebellum Black civil litigation. When Blacks lent money to whites, for example, they initiated creditor/debtor relationships that mirrored the master/slave relationship. Such interactions, Welch argues, inverted the entire racial order of the South. Black lenders routinely sued white debtors, often successfully, highlighting the region's primacy of property over race. Mississippi and Louisiana judges readily protected Black property rights, which Black property holders understood in expansive terms as civil rights. Property ownership and the legal protection of various forms of property buttressed free Blacks' identities as householders, providers, and their ability to "handle the responsibilities of freedom" (145). Likewise, Welch examines slave litigants and finds that they were "doing analogous things in court" (163). Enslaved people were only allowed to file suit in freedom cases, Welch explains, but they demonstrated facility in the legal language and courtroom strategies of free Blacks.

Welch draws her sources from the neglected, deteriorating, and fragmented civil records of courts around Natchez, recovering and documenting a rich, if geographically narrow, history of Black litigation. Her rescue of these important sources is important and she explains the dangers these and other undiscovered records face without preservation and care. The extant case files impose some limitations. Large gaps in the

records obscure the outcome of many cases, and the poor condition of her sources renders testimony and case details incomplete. Moreover, Welch's evidence indicates Blacks' access and success in court often depended on a variety of shifting conditions in the law that eventually prohibited slaves from filing manumission suits and closed legal loopholes for free Blacks. Reputation and standing in the community could change as well, rendering Welch's "model" of Black antebellum litigation slightly unstable (22). Nonetheless, Welch's book is essential reading for scholars of antebellum Mississippi.

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Private Confederacies: The Emotional Worlds of Southern Men as Citizens and Soldiers. By James J. Broomall. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019. Acknowledgements, illustrations, notes, index. Pp. xi, 226. \$90 cloth, \$29.95 paper. ISBN: 978-1-4696-5198-9.)

Confederate soldiers yearned for absentee loved ones, bonded with fellow comrades-in-arms, and, in their anguish, struggled to make sense of defeat. Indeed, they *felt* the Civil War. Men's emotional experiences mattered—it formed their inner selves as it shaped their wider world. In *Private Confederacies: The Emotional Worlds of Southern Men as Citizens and Soldiers*, James J. Broomall examines the emotional and gendered experiences of elite southern men before, during, and after the war. Self-mastered, self-assured southerners struggled

to make sense of their precarious position as Confederate soldiers facing the dual threats of enemy bullets and lethal disease. "They responded by creating emotional communities composed of fellow soldiers who crafted a common language of uncertainty," argues Broomall. "Soldiers relied on each other for psychological support, physical comfort, and personal security" (2). Confederate veterans grappling with a loss of property, a loss of self, and a loss of status resurrected this emotional community in the post-war period in the form of paramilitary organizations. Reconstruction-era Klansmen, argues Broomall, "intended to restore a social order undone by emancipation and war and created a mythology to explain the lost cause" (2).

To understand war's collateral damage, Confederate soldiers must first be understood as antebellum elites. The opening chapter addresses manhood in the decade preceding war. As self-restrained men preoccupied with their public personas, they relied on public facing 'masks' and shunned overt emotional displays. Placing individual men at the center of a national struggle, Broomall draws deeply upon men's dairies—and the private, less-guarded thoughts contained therein. The result of this methodological approach is at once compelling and limiting. Some men emerge as near-living specters who felt the full range of emotions (exhilaration, rage, depression, and exhaustion) while others, oftentimes women, minorities, and non-elites, are largely invisible. Yet, sentiments conveyed though the written word required a degree of verbal facility, and Broomall's case

studies offer compelling glimpses into elite men's innermost thoughts and feelings.

War tested men. It shook their personal resolve as it remade their social networks. Upon entry into the army, men, such as Mississippian Ruffin Thomas, came together as Confederate soldiers. Military uniforms and camp culture, according to Broomall, "fostered emotional exchanges" between soldiers (32). In such a space, men came to rely on each other for necessary emotional support. For some Confederate men, the trauma of war "caused mental consternation and emotional duress; others, nonplused, continued to affirm antebellum belief systems that provided a bulwark against the conflict" (63).

The final three chapters analyze the end of the war and the rise of the Klan during Reconstruction. Coping with the transition from soldier to citizen, personal trauma, and a fluctuating conception of manliness, veterans struggled to come to terms with defeat. Southern social structures had been leveled by war and emancipation; Black freedom represented a loss of white mastery. Broomall argues that "war had partially shattered the forbidding veneer of a closed Southern culture" and, in the postwar decades, men directly related to other men on an intimate, emotional level (127). Seeking solace, men sought out other veterans. White southerners joined paramilitary organizations, which were, Broomall rightly argues, emotional communities of like-minded, violent men.

Some of this analysis is well-trod ground. Numerous historians have demonstrated the effects of southern

honor, the experiences of Civil War soldiering, and the violence of the Klan. Yet scholarship tends to ignore the emotional lives of men, especially southern men. Published almost two decades ago, Stephen W. Berry's *All That Makes a Man: Love and Ambition in the Civil War South* (2003) was "dedicated to the inner experiences of masculinity, to the private landscapes men negotiated in their confrontations with what their society claimed a man should do and be." Berry's analysis, however, favored the 1850s and early 1860s (12). Broomall takes this approach into the post-bellum period and rightly shows the lasting psychological and emotional effects of war and defeat for elite southern men. Broomall explores how personal thoughts and feelings shaped the very trajectory of historical events. Short in length and sweeping in scope, not all subjects are covered equally or, understandably, in great depth. But *Private Confederacies*, nonetheless, demonstrates the importance of men's emotional lives and reconceptualizes the emotional carnage of war and defeat.

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Sowing the Wind: The Mississippi Constitutional Convention of 1890. By Dorothy Overstreet Pratt. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2018. Illustrations, map, notes, bibliography, index. Pp. ix, 294. \$70 cloth. ISBN: 9781496815460.)

Dorothy Overstreet Pratt has written the first book-length study on the Mississippi Constitutional Convention of

1890. For many decades, in articles and brief passages in books, apologists for the state have explained that the convention was needed to disfranchise uneducated African American voters. Since 1875, the state's Democrats had used fraud and violence to keep Black and Republican voters away from the polls. In 1890, Democratic leaders moved to replace the violence and fraud with laws that would discourage or eliminate Black voting. Since 1890, most white Mississippians have declared the convention and its resulting new constitution a success.

Pratt takes issue with that assessment. While she admits that race was at the center of many debates at the convention, she argues that class issues were also at its heart. Yeomen farmers in white-majority counties (in the hills and piney woods, for example), wanted to increase their influence relative to the Black-majority counties in the western part of the state. The Black-majority counties were led by a relatively wealthy white elite who wanted to resist loss of power and to protect the low taxation of plantation lands. In short, the convention was often a struggle between representatives of white dirt farmers and elite white planters.

The convention did succeed in greatly reducing the number of Black voters in the state, Pratt explains. White elites were also glad that the poll tax and literacy tests reduced the number of poor and uneducated white voters. As time went on, however, the number of white voters of modest means rebounded, the Delta ceased to dominate the state's leadership, and demagogues such as James K.

Vardaman and Theodore Bilbo began to win elections. Under this demagogic leadership, violence against African Americans became more common, and the state failed to advance economically when compared with other southern states.

Pratt's emphasis on class helps explain the mystery of Isaiah T. Montgomery, the lone Black delegate to the convention, who voted for the document despite its goal of disfranchising African Americans and delivered a 1910 speech largely laudatory of the convention. As a wealthy and educated Black landowner in the Delta, Montgomery voted with his class. He was hopeful that tax-paying and land-owning African Americans would still be permitted to vote and he was less concerned about the masses of Black citizens who would lose the franchise. Pratt notes that white delegates of modest means attempted to exclude Montgomery from the convention, while Delta elites voted to seat him.

Pratt is convincing when she traces many of the problems of twentieth century Mississippi to the 1890 Constitutional Convention. She notes that Mississippi and South Carolina were typically at the bottom of a host of economic and social measures, attributing the low rankings to tax policies and school funding issues that arose under the new Constitution. Further, it is hard to argue with her conclusion that because of that document, "the civil rights era was preordained" (210).

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Beyond the Crossroads: The Devil and the Blues Tradition. By Adam Gussow. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017. Acknowledgements, appendix, index, song credits. Pp., 404. \$90 cloth, \$19.95 paper. ISBN: 9781469633657.)

Adam Gussow, associate professor of English and Southern Studies at the University of Mississippi, has crafted a creative and exhaustive new study of blues history and culture centered around a narrow yet fascinating theme—the form and function of the devil in the blues. Through combining close readings of nearly ninety years of blues lyrics with oral histories and other primary sources, Gussow examines the amorphous nature of the seemingly ubiquitous Satan figure that has served as a vibrant character in blues culture and lore for most of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in Mississippi and beyond. Thanks to decades of well-intended blues scholarship and folklore, the devil within studies of the blues has remained a shadowy figure closely linked to African American spiritual concepts centered on the timeless duality of good versus evil, “where the devil,” in fact, “was the devil.”(4). Given the devil figure’s widespread presence across the blues, Gussow is not convinced of this myopic interpretation. This study seeks to widen our understanding of the multifarious representations of the figure across both time and space and the numerous impacts these interpretations have had on blues music, artists, and history.

In five parts, *Beyond the Cross-*

roads peers into both familiar and previously unexamined arenas within the blues where the devil, through deeper analysis, becomes more than just “the devil.” In fact, as the author contends, the shapeshifting devil character within blues music is the “only actor, apart from the blues singer, who is an icon for the music a whole” (10). With this idea in mind, readers travel on a nimble path as Gussow explores this concept. First, he examines the origins of the term “the devil’s music” among Black elders and community leaders responsible for creating the scared-secular dichotomy at the turn of the twentieth century. This older generation chastised young blues musicians for their devilish ways but did not foresee how these young, skeptical Black southerners rejected their “devil” and dualistic world view for one of youthful modernity. Chapter two follows the devil icon along the paths of the Great Migration to New York City where Black blueswomen purveyed a different and equally modern devil image to publicly combat antiquated conceptions of virtue and respectability directed toward contemporary Black feminism and sexuality.

Part three, one of the most creative in the book, argues that blues songs, although filled with intimations describing white supremacy in the Jim Crow South as the devil, were at the same time laden with innuendo suggesting Black blues singers become the devil in order to battle racism. Chapter four examines the all too familiar paradox among those who know blues music and its frequent association with sexual de-

sire. Here, Gussow contends that the devil became a tool for softening the juxtaposition between the freedom of post-emancipation Blacks to choose a lover on their own terms and the “unfreedom”—the “unstable antagonistic relationship”—that has trapped one or the other partner in a living hell of jealousy and heartache (155). The book’s final 111 pages investigates the most mythically Faustian figure in all of blues lore—the legendary Robert Johnson. Here Gussow rejects revisionist scholars’ interpretations of Johnson by presenting the fabled figure as a “fearless young modernist” whose impact on American popular culture (most notably the 1986 Hollywood film *Crossroads*) and on Mississippi Delta towns like Clarksdale has been so profound that the figure of the devil has proliferated into the twenty-first century.

Tightly organized, impeccably researched, and masterfully written, *Beyond the Crossroads* is an important addition to an impressive canon of blues analysis and criticism. Offering criticism here seems moot, but a growing corpus of twenty-first century blues scholars have shied away from an overabundant use of song lyrics, which Gussow seems to reject. Nevertheless, when the author corroborates song lyrics with primary and empirical sources along with oral histories, the reader is left with ingenious explorations. In part three of the final chapter, for example, Gussow probes the veracity of Clarksdale as ground zero of the blues as well as its surprisingly close relationship to the devil-blues mythology. Contained within this section is a fascinating community study of an economically

crippled region clinging to the blues. The blues’ role in turning the “Magnolia State” into the “Birthplace of America’s Music” is on full display here, and Gussow has brilliantly captured one of this transition’s key moments.

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