

# The Devil's Own Work: The Civil War Draft Riots and the Fight to Reconstruct America

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## Review

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**Schechter, Barnet** *The Devil's Own Work: The Civil War Draft Riots and the Fight to Reconstruct America*. Walker & Company, \$28.00 ISBN 802714390

The War Within the War

Race and Class in a Larger Context

In a letter to his brother, Walt Whitman described the New York draft riots as the devil's own work. In this important and well researched volume, Barnet Schechter examines the political and social roots of the Civil War riots and traces their influence on Reconstruction and the struggle for American democracy. Demonstrating that the urban riots were not an isolated event, he places them within the national context of the ethnic and racial issues of the historical period from the 1840s to the 1870s. Arguing that the Emancipation Proclamation was the first act in the process of Reconstruction, Schechter concludes that Reconstruction began during the war. He affirms that the debates over how to end the riots and disperse justice foreshadowed the national struggle that developed over Reconstruction.

Barnet Schechter presents a vivid account of the riots that broke out in New York on July 13, 1863 and lasted for four days as a spontaneous uprising against Abraham Lincoln's imposition of the nation's first federal military draft. The exemption of a conscript who could provide a substitute or pay \$300 created resentment. The insurrection was a microcosm of the larger civil war between the North and South. Central to the fight over the government's new conscription law were the issues of slavery versus freedom for African Americans and the scope of federal power over the states. The hiring of black strikebreakers by shipping companies enraged longshoremen. The rioters' rage stemmed as much from the draft as from President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation of January 1, 1863, which caused them to fear the loss of their jobs to freed slaves migrating from the South.

New York City, the main channel for the export of slave-grown cotton, had strong ties to the South. Schechter notes that the city was run by Democrats who were sympathetic with the South and was filled with anti-black and anti-Catholic sentiment. Of New York's one million people in the mid 1860s, at least half were poor or working class. New York City included the poor as well as hundreds of millionaires created by the wartime boom. The author traces the racist demagoguery used to encourage poor and exploited immigrants to lash out against black workers and the oppressed African American community.

Schechter effectively chronicles the draft riots in New York City as the deadliest in American history. The rioting began when a company of firemen became angry and set their office on fire after one of their men had been drafted. Crowds attacked the police stations and battled police for control of the armory. The author details the political protest, which included the sabotage of government targets, and spread to street crimes, looting, and large scale attacks on individuals and property.

The draft riots thus turned against African Americans. A mob looted and burned the Colored Orphan Asylum. The Seamen's Home for Colored sailors was attacked by the mob as the owner, Albro Lyons, and his wife, Mary, stood guard over their property. The Lyons family, including the daughter, Maritcha, eventually joined the black migration out of New York and settled in Providence, Rhode Island. They returned to Brooklyn after the war. Many black people were brutally attacked, beaten, and lynched, and others were chased to the rivers and off the piers. African Americans were forced to take refuge in police stations, on the outskirts of the city, in the swamps, and woods of Bergen, New Jersey, the black community of Weeksville in Brooklyn, and in the barns and out-houses of Long Island. It is estimated that 500 to 1200 persons lost their lives in this catastrophic event, most of whom were rioters. Property damage amounted to approximately \$1.5 million.

Although the author accurately examines the issues and conflicts of the era and is sympathetic toward African Americans, he devotes less space analyzing the self-help efforts of black leaders such as Frederick Douglass, James W.C. Pennington, Charles B. Ray, Samuel E. Cornish, and Henry Highland Garnet in the social revolution known as the Civil War. Many of the leading black abolitionists were ministers who used their pulpits to protest against slavery and racial discrimination. Blacks were encouraged by the emancipation process that allowed separate black units in the Civil War. These leaders and others were

convinced that by serving in the military, black men would prove that they deserved to be equals and had earned the right to be citizens. Both Douglass and Garnet were advocates of enlisting black troops in Union armies. Frederick Douglass pleaded that the war must be fought against both slaveholders and slavery, and he recruited black troops to fight for their own liberation. Henry Highland Garnet, pastor of Shiloh Presbyterian Church, urged blacks to enlist at the outbreak of the war and designed recruiting posters for that purpose. Believing that African Americans must ultimately free themselves, Garnet helped organize the African Civilization Society and promoted black emigration to Africa.

**The Devil's Own Work** by Bernet Schecter is a valuable source that places the New York City draft riot in a national context. This volume encourages us to rethink the Civil War era and the history of protest and reform in American society. Particularly important in this highly informative volume is the Walking Tour of Civil War New York in the Appendix, complete with a website. Mr. Schecter, who lives in New York City, is the author of *Battle for New York, The City at the Heart of the American Revolution* (Walker & Company, ISBN 0802713742, \$40.50 hardcover).

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