

The Risen Phoenix: Black Politics In The Post-civil War South

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Review

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Dinnella-Borrego, Luis-Alejandro *The Risen Phoenix: Black Politics in the Post-Civil War South*. University of Virginia Press, \$49.50 ISBN 9780813938745

A Welcome New Work on Reconstruction's Black Congressmen

As we approach the 150th anniversary of Reconstruction, *Risen Phoenix* is a timely new exploration of the careers of six black congressmen from that era. While Phillip Dray's *Capitol Men* recounted the lives of all the black congressmen from the era, the author has chosen to cover only six of these men. They are: John Mercer Langston of Virginia, George Henry White of North Carolina, Robert Smalls of South Carolina, Josiah Thomas Walls of Florida, James T. Rapier of Alabama, and John Roy Lynch of Mississippi. The author chose these congressmen for their diverse backgrounds which he felt reflected better the broad spectrum of the black community. Four were born into slavery. Two were Civil War veterans. Three had formal educations. In fact, Langston founded Howard Law School. The author describes his work as biographical but the sketches of the men's lives outside of politics are so brief as to make the reader beg for more information. However, this really is not a biographical work and as the author points there are more complete biographies that should be consulted. This is a political history told through the work of these congressmen.

The author explores these men's political careers to offer insight into the both the Reconstruction era and the 25 years of Jim Crow that followed. He uses a combination of political, gender and race history to argue that these men effectively represented both their voters back home and the greater African American community. The author does an admirable job of demonstrating their advocacy for civil rights from the floor of the House of Representatives and in the broader world. His use of their participations in peoples' conventions enriches the story. I do think the author could have provided more information on constituent service. Their efforts to obtain government jobs for African

American back home would have added a level of effectiveness that the author misses.

I believe the strength of this book lays in Part III which the author entitles “The Changing of the Guard.” His exploration of Fusion, emigration, and the coming of Jim Crow is both readable and educational. His treatment of the divergence and convergence of fusion politics in some states, the Readjuster movement in Virginia and the Populist party in other states is most insightful. The period from 1876 to 1900 is obviously much longer than the 10-12 years of Reconstruction. The changing of the guard and ultimately the full demise of this black leadership is a compelling story told well by the author. The author’s major point is the fact that these men continued to advocate for civil rights despite the rampant racist violence coupled with disenfranchisement that they faced.

I do wish the author had explored the careers of other black congressmen. For example, South Carolina had three black congressmen after Reconstruction. He mentions Thomas Miller but says nothing about George Washington Murray whose support for voting rights litigation nearly prevented the disenfranchisement of many black voters. While more historical work is needed on this era, the author has made a substantial contribution to the scholarship.

W. Lewis Burke is a Distinguished Professor of Law at the University of South Carolina. He is the author of *All for Civil Rights: African American Lawyers in South Carolina, 1868-1968* (forthcoming in July 2017 U. of G.A. Press) and co-editor of *At Freedom’s Door: African American Founding Fathers and Lawyers in Reconstruction South Carolina* (U. of S.C. Press 2000).