

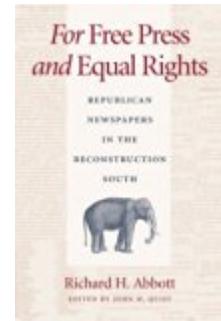
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Richard H. Abbott. *For Free Press and Equal Rights: Republican Newspapers in the Reconstruction South*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004. ix + 266 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8203-2527-9.

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Radical Reconstruction in Print

Richard H. Abbott's *For Free Press and Equal Rights* is by far the best study into this very difficult realm of investigation. The author examined 430 Southern Republican newspapers and periodicals, some of which only published a single or handful of issues. The author follows the expansion of the pro-Republican press as Union armies extended their control across Confederate urban areas and extends his study state by state in the Reconstruction-era South. The book examines both large metropolitan areas and tiny rural communities. This exhaustively researched book is destined to become the classic of its genre.

Most studies of Reconstruction-era politics and events exclude the role of the pro-Republican press in the South. Although hundreds of such periodicals existed at various times during the Civil War and its aftermath, some only lasted a few issues while others were forced to publish at irregular intervals. The U.S. Army assisted many editors of these ventures and its presence often meant the life or death of a newspaper. The business model for these publications offered an almost impossible task. The obvious target population was ex-slaves who were kept illiterate by law in the old South. Pro-Union sympathizers and army personnel often made the difference as loyal readership. Several cities had more than one of these enterprises, which resulted in hardships for all of the publications as they struggled for patronage, advertising dollars, and subscribers. The story of how many of these hard-pressed editors survived against

tremendous odds is, perhaps, the most intriguing focus of this study. The methods employed to begin and continue operation of these newspapers is another powerful part of this story. The measures taken by both the army and politicians to further the aims of the presidency and Congress allowed the author to delve deeply into Southern culture, race relations, and the rights of the First and Fourteenth Amendments.

Of particular interest to social, regional, and local historians is an appendix that lists by state every newspaper uncovered in the author's search. The listings include whether the paper was a daily, tri-weekly, semi-weekly, or weekly publication, and the dates of publication. When combined with the well-written narrative, this volume provides a unique insight into the publications that attempted to sway public opinion in the South during Reconstruction. Although almost entirely doomed to failure, the efforts of those journalists showed courage to publish their editorials and publish admittedly slanted stories in a region that, at best, spread ill will toward them.

Abbott was a professor at Eastern Michigan University. His manuscript was completed and sent for review before he was diagnosed with a terminal illness. Richard Goff, Michael Sinclair, and finally, John Quist brought the work through the review process to its final version. They are to be commended for their commitment to get *For Free Press and Equal Rights* published.

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