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Glenn T. Eskew. *But for Birmingham: The Local and National Movements in the Civil Rights Struggle.* Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1997. xi + 434 pp. $24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-4667-4; $59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2363-7.

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Race, Class, and Civil Rights in Birmingham

In the last decade or so historians have devoted increased attention the the civil rights movement at the local level. All of these studies have enhanced our understanding of grass roots mobilization, but few have examined closely the sometimes difficult relationships between local movements and national organizations. With this book, Glenn Eskew not only fills that void, but also attempts to shed light on the dynamic relationships among various groups in Birmingham and how those relationships affected the outcome of the Birmingham campaign.

Eskew places civil rights struggles within the context of a town he believes to have been controlled by men who did the bidding of U.S. Steel and other "absentee" corporations. These "Big Mules," "neo Bourbons," or "industrial paternalists," (Eskew uses all three designations) allied with "lower-middle-class" whites in maintaining white domination of the best jobs in the city, or, as Eskew calls it, the "race wage." This "race wage," the author argues, was part of a broader design by U.S. Steel and other corporations to prevent Birmingham from achieving its full potential. The man designated to enforce segregation, the "race wage," etc. in the 1950s and 1960s was sportscaster turned police commissioner, Eugene "Bull" Connor. According to Eskew, the "Big Mules," through state representative James Alexander Simpson, made sure that Bull Connor defended segregation and their interests. Eskew supports his argument that Simpson was a cipher for the "neo Bourbons" by pointing out that Simpson's law firm did work for the Steel Corporation.

In a wonderfully detailed chapter, Eskew describes "Bull's Birmingham." The picture that emerges is a grim one. Police brutality against blacks or anyone who challenged the system was common. Bombings of black residences took place regularly and Connor's police did nothing. The police force during the 1950's was full of corruption. If anyone threatened to blow the whistle, Connor got rid of them. Connor did run into some political problems in the mid 1950s, when a reform movement unseated him, but he went back to his old constituency, "the lower-middle-class," and in 1957 returned to power as the champion of white supremacy.

Such was the situation blacks faced as they began their initial efforts to dismantle the Jim Crow system. The local movement against segregation was led by the Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth and the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACMHR). Shuttlesworth had grown up in the Birmingham District, but according to Eskew his experiences working in Mobile, along with a conviction that he was doing God's work, moved him to adopt a strategy of confrontation when dealing with the "white power structure." Shuttlesworth and his organization demanded an immediate end to discrimination in Birmingham. The ACMHR therefore represented a departure from the accomodationist posture of a group of black leaders that Eskew labels "the traditional Negro leadership class." Led by the wealthy A.G. Gaston, this "traditional Negro leadership class" promoted the philosophy of Booker T. Washington, an approach Shuttlesworth considered inadequate. In fact, Shuttlesworth referred to opposition within the black community as Uncle Toms at times.

Eskew explains at length the history of the ACMHR and its affliation with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). In 1962, after a number of confrontations between the ACMHR and "the white power structure," Shuttlesworth decided to invite Martin Luther King, Jr. and the SCLC to Birmingham in hopes of finally achieving the goals of the local movement. Coming off the difficult Albany, Georgia campaign, King and his advisers were uncertain about their next move and worried about going to Birmingham. Eskew provides an excellent discussion of King's decision, capturing well the sense of desperation the SCLC felt in early 1963. This is a key

point, for the need for a victory would govern King's and the SCLC's actions during the Birmingham campaign.

The last four chapters tell the story of the Birmingham campaign. These chapters alone are worth the price of the book. Eskew has done his research and manages to explain it all to the reader while capturing the drama, irony, tragedy, and, occasionally, dark humor of this most important episode in the history of the civil rights movement. The basic story is well known, but Eskew provides detail that will force many professors and teachers to change their lectures. He carefully reconstructs the division among whites at the time, correcting past renderings of the story in which the white population is portrayed as monolithic. More important, the author is one of the few willing to criticize the way King left Birmingham. This is not to suggest that Eskew fails to recognize the importance of "Letter from the Birmingham Jail" and King's other contributions to the movement. But he leaves little doubt about King's willingness to accept less than Shuttlesworth and the ACMHR had demanded in order to get a "victory."

But for Birmingham is a book of many strengths. The narrative of Birmingham during the 1950's and 1960's is very nicely done. But when Eskew turns to explanations of why Birmingham was the way it was, serious flaws emerge. Most troublesome is Eskew's argument that corporate executives called the shots in Birmingham and were largely responsible for the system of segregation there. Almost every important conclusion he offers about white Birmingham is rooted in this version of the "colonial economy thesis." For example, the division in the "white power structure" that is so critical to Eskew's thesis comes as the economy shifts from reliance on heavy industry to a "service economy." According to Eskew, the folks who directed the "service economy: were more willing to accept the end of Jim Crow than the colonial masters of industry. Unfortunately, Eskew offers little evidence of "corporate" hostility toward the civil rights movement. The best he does is to show that James Simpson did work for U.S. Steel. Eskew leaps from this to the conclusion that U.S. Steel backed Connor. Such a conclusion simply defies logic, unless there is a smoking gun we do not know about. A lawyer's client cannot be held responsible for the political views of the lawyer. Surely many good lawyers take political positions at odds with clients whose interest they defend in court or other venues.

Eskew's contention that corporations defended segregation because the "race wage served their interests is no more convincing. Supposedly corporations paid whites a premium wage in order to keep them divided from blacks. At the same time, outside corporations conspired, at least indirectly, to retard Birmingham's development. Readers will see this and accept it as a truism in history circles. But Eskew's confidently stated colonial economy argument has been repeatedly challenged, and for good reason. First of all U.S. Steel saved a company–Tennessee Coal and Iron–from collapse. If the Steel Corporation wanted to eliminate its competition, why not let TCI go under. Instead U.S. Steel fought a long anti-trust suit that grew in part from its purchase of TCI and then pumped millions into the community in wages, benefits, and investment in updated technology.

Birmingham's economic problems cannot be explained with the colonial economy thesis. Nor can one explain segregation in the work place as a part of a larger strategy to slow Birmingham's progress. The "race wage" was not the brainchild of corporate executives alone. Indeed, the only examination of racial segregation at individual Birmingham companies I know of finds some improvement for blacks during the first two decades of the twentieth century despite white workers' protests.[1] Moreover, Eskew himself found at least one Steel Corporation executive who appeared to be at least a racial moderate, especially when compared to many of his employees in Ensley.

Working class whites since Birmingham's earliest years demanded preferential treatment and, as Eskew attests, generally got what they wanted. Robert J. Norrell and Herbert Hill have convincingly demonstrated that labor organizations insisted upon white preference in the work place and went to court to defend segregated jobs and lines of promotion.[2] Eskew acknowledges all of this but still manages to relieve the white working class of responsibility. When Eskew writes about relevant court cases he leaves out the involvement of organized labor despite readily available evidence to the contrary. But this distortion is minor compared to the way the author simply defines class in a way to exclude skilled whites from the working class. Skilled whites become the "lower middle class," with no explanation, that allied with corporate executives in defense of Bull Connor and segregation. Eskew tells us real white workers–the unskilled–supported black aspirations. Judging from this book, however, there is no existing evidence of this working class racial accord. One wonders why unskilled whites would not have desired preference over blacks in promotion policies. Eskew's own voting data, moreover, appears to contradict his statements about workers' behavior. Bull Connor turned to them and to the skilled portion of the white working class everytime he got into trouble.

Perhaps corporate executives voted for Connor and defended him, but his base was Birmingham's white working class and he knew it.

Eskew's analysis of divisions in the black community is more persuasive, though it suffers throughout from key contradictions and unsupported assertions. Both problems arise in regard to Eskew's assessment of community support for Shuttlesworth and the ACMHR. The author at times seems to be arguing for the ACMHR as the voice of the black masses. Yet when we get to the Birmingham campaign itself we learn that the SCLC looked to school children because adults were unwilling to participate. Eskew does us a service by revealing just how ambivalent local blacks were, but confuses the issue with his repeated attempts to portray the black masses as a radical vanguard. It appeared to this reviewer that the men Eskew disparages as the "traditional Negro leadership class" did more to advance the cause of black equality than the masses did, though their approach may have been inadequate.

All in all *But for Birmingham* is a book historians and others will want to read. Many will undoubtedly want to give it some awards. The book certainly contains as fine a description of Birmingham and what happened there as I have seen. But when Eskew moves from narrative to analysis he overreaches. The author's explanations for the behavior of various groups in Birmingham, while rich in detail, fall short because the author simply accepts notions about southern history and its racial and class system that should be challenged. Unfortunately the profession does not reward young historians who take on certain long accepted "truths." Professor Eskew, in the end, played it safe.

Notes:

[1]. McKiven, Henry M. Jr. *Iron and Steel: Race, Class, and Community in Birmingham, Alabama, 1875-1920*(Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

[2]. Robert J. Norrell, "Caste in Steel: Jim Crow Careers in Birmingham, Alabama." *Journal of American History* 73 (December 1986): 669-94. Herbert Hill, "Race, Ethnicity and Organized Labor: Opposition to Affirmative Action," *New Politics* 1 (Winter 1987): 31-82.

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