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Kimberly Harper. *White Man's Heaven: The Lynching and Expulsion of Blacks in the Southern Ozarks, 1894-1909.* Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2010. xxv + 325 pp. $34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-55728-941-4.

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Who is "Entrenched in a Southern Mindset"? Anti-Black Lynchings and Expulsions in the Southern Ozarks

Between 1894 and 1909, white residents of the Southern Ozarks repeatedly shattered and scattered the regional black population through the use of racist violence. One after another, those in Monett, Pierce City, Joplin, and Springfield, Missouri, and in Harrison Arkansas, employed mob violence (usually lynching) which terminated in the mass–and often permanent–expulsion of entire black communities. In *White Man's Heaven*, historian Kimberly Harper weaves these interconnected episodes into a single narrative aimed at explaining the "regional experience" of anti-black racism and violence (p. xviii).

Organized chronologically and by community, *White Man's Heaven* is part of a trend toward examining so-called sundown towns (all-white or nearly all-white towns which actively, often violently, discouraged black settlement), as exemplified by the work of George C. Wright, in *Racial Violence in Kentucky, 1865-1940: Lynchings, Mob Rule, and 'Legal Lynchings,'* (1990) and, more recently, James W. Loewen, in *Sundown Towns: A Hidden Dimension of American Racism* (2005), and Elliot Jaspin, in *Buried in the Bitter Waters: The Hidden History of Racial Cleansing in America* (2007). "The expulsion of African Americans remains an understudied aspect in the extensive literature of racial violence," Harper rightly notes. "Expulsion was one of the most extreme forms of social control as African Americans were forced to leave behind everything they had worked for" (p. xxiv).

Harper contributes significantly to the history of race relations, demography, and mob violence in the Ozarks. After reviewing economic development and settlement patterns in each community, she provides comprehensive accounts of the violence which engulfed each, exploring the alleged black criminality which provoked white fury, analyzing the lynchings and expulsions which followed, and documenting popular support for this violence among whites. In addition, the author documents the usually fruitless efforts of black victims to pursue legal justice through the courts. Certainly, she has produced a work which will be of value to anyone interested in the nature of white supremacy and racist violence in this region or in the Border South or Midwest more generally.

Unfortunately, *White Man's Heaven* suffers from several problems which limit considerably its broader theoretical and methodological value. Its most significant shortcoming, perhaps, is Harper's failure to deliver the promised exploration of the Southern Ozarks as a unique and under-investigated region. At the outset, she piques the curiosity of readers with a description of a heterogeneous population drawn from settlers from the North and the South. "Southwest Missouri, with strong Unionist sentiments, was a hotbed of Confederate guerilla activity during the Civil War," she writes. "A local populace with limited contact with African Americans prior to the war, a small influx of former slaves from the South, 'carpetbaggers,' and bitter ex-Confederates combined to create a cauldron of racial disharmony" (p. xvii). In addition, Harper deems the region unique because it "stood at the edge" (p. xvi) of various sections of the country, "perched on the border of the South, Midwest, and West" (p. 41).

In practice, however, Harper does little to investigate the unique complexity of the Southern Ozarks because

of her aggressive commitment to situating her narrative within southern traditions and historiography. Throughout her work, she rarely misses an opportunity to press this view. Even as she details northern migration into the region in the introduction, for instance, the author simultaneously signals her view that, lip service to complexity notwithstanding, this is *really* southern history, noting that they arrived as "the era of the New South dawned" (p. xvii). "In Pierce City," she writes elsewhere, "like much of the South, the murder of a young white woman was just cause for extralegal justice" (p. 41). In another place she adds that a "dozen women were escorted to view the remains, a common practice at southern lynchings" (p. 25). Gazing forever southward, Harper fails to acknowledge that white mobs (including white women participants) lynched blacks for similar alleged offenses outside the South or to grapple with the ways in which these facts might challenge or transform her rigid southern paradigm itself.[1]

As a result, Harper produces less a study of the uniqueness of the Southern Ozarks, and more an examination of the ways in which this region variously was or was not *southern*, as she reckons that term. "The lynchings and race riots that occurred … in some ways, resembled southern lynchings," she writes in one passage. "In other respects, however, mob violence in southwest Missouri differed from that in many parts of the South" (p. xxi). By insisting upon an interpretation of the Southern Ozarks through the prism of southern history, she precludes a more rigorous investigation of what might be *western* about her subject and, more importantly, limits herself from challenging or reconfiguring timeworn assumptions about the distinctions between the sections.

By her conclusion, Harper has ceased to pay even lip service to western history, referencing it only through veiled, subordinate, almost grudging, allusions to "vigilante" traditions, allusions that function primarily to reinforce her southern myopia. "The region's southern heritage of violence," she writes, "in tandem with a vigilante view of justice in a postbellum nation, led to mob violence" (p. 254). In the final paragraph, Harper seems to anticipate reader dissatisfaction with her effort to force her subject into the Procrustean bed of southern history; despite her own apparent discomfort, however, Harper stubbornly restates her position. "It was a land and people not quite southern, but definitely children of the Confederacy, still locked in the traditions and customs of their rebellious forefathers" (p. 256). Harper may believe that her white subjects were "entrenched in a southern mindset" (p. 254), but this is not a fair assessment. They were entrenched in an *Ozarks* mindset. It is, instead, Harper who is entrenched in a southern mindset and this mindset prevents her from ever genuinely exploring her topic on its own terms.

A second problem is Harper's tendency to subordinate her own voice in deference to leaders in her field. Rather than blazing her own trail–engaging historians where useful or necessary but employing their insights in the pursuit of her own objective–the author instead allows the secondary literature to overwhelm her, to set her agenda, and to drown out her own narrative. In some places, she presents her work as significant principally as a testing ground for the theories of others. Reviewing the scholarship of leading scholars in one passage, she writes that the "lynchings and black expulsion that occurred in the Southern Ozarks might serve to test their varying models" (p. xix). Consequently, the reader senses again that Harper's story is less about mob violence in the Southern Ozarks than an inventory of the way in which the events there were or were not like the southern lynchings examined by historians such as Edward Ayers and W. Fitzhugh Brundage. "If the settings of the lynchings recall places studied by Ayers, some of the lynchings in southwest Missouri defy Ayers's interpretation," she writes in one representative passage (p. xxv). Reflecting her view of her work as a forum for proving or disproving older arguments rather than for advancing new ones, Harper makes broad and unpersuasive claims on the basis of very limited evidence, employing a single incident in the Ozarks as a means of challenging or confirming the findings of scholars whose conclusions result from the examination of hundreds of incidents. "In some cases, lynch mob members were prosecuted for their participation in Virginia and Georgia," she writes, referencing Brundage's classic *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880-1930* (1993). "But this was not the case in southwestern Missouri. After the lynching in Pierce City, there was no mention of prosecution against members of the mob" (p. 58).

Harper's overreliance on the theories of others often distorts her story in other ways as well. She leans heavily on the work of Ayers, who, she notes, has argued that the "railroad … was crucial" to the surge of racist violence in the South in the late nineteenth century, "bringing economic development, urbanization, and in-migration to many parts of the region" (p. xix). Ayers, she continues, "contends that the primary factor encouraging lynching was black in-migration into areas that had not previously harbored significant black populations" (p. xix). Yet, in her effort to make her evidence corroborate Ayers's

model, she is unpersuasive because the railroad–and the accompanying (though still small) growth of the black population–arrived in the early 1870s, several decades before the explosion of racial violence that engulfed the region at the turn of the century. By the 1880s, she notes, there was already a "vibrant black community" in the Southern Ozarks (p. 9). If the "presence of black newcomers ... stirred trouble" (p. 6), as she claims, then why did "white hostility toward blacks" manifest "itself with the first major outbreak of racial violence" in the mid 1890s (p. 19)? Harper never successfully explains the decades-long incubation period for this alleged backlash against the "newcomers," insisting that it "was perhaps only a matter of time before the simmering cauldron boiled over" (p. xvii).

A baffling aspect of *White Man's Heaven* is Harper's claim that "little scholarship exists on the string of lynchings and expulsions" which convulsed the Ozarks (p. xvii), a claim which demands scrutiny. Although she references a chapter on the Pierce City incident in Jaspin's study, the author makes no mention here of the extensive discussion of these incidents in the work of historian Dominic J. Capeci Jr., in *The Lynching of Cleo Wright* (1998). Furthermore, while she references Loewen's work on sundown towns generally, she makes no reference to his discussion of *every one* of the incidents addressed in *White Man's Heaven*, or to his considerable attention to the events in Pierce City and Harrison. Loewen makes Harper's omission particularly conspicuous because he provided a striking précis of her subject. "A series of at least six race riots in the Ozarks, along with smaller undocumented expulsions, led to the almost total whiteness of most Ozark counties," he noted: "In 1894, Monett, Missouri, started the chain of racial violence.... After the lynching [there], whites forced all African Americans to leave Monett. Pierce City, just six miles west, followed suit in 1901. Again, a crime of violence had been perpetrated upon a white person, and again, after lynching the alleged perpetrator, the mob then turned on the black community.... Some African Americans fled to Joplin, the nearest city, but in 1903 whites rioted there. Three years later, whites in Harrison, Arkansas, expelled most of their African Americans, and in 1909, they finished the job. In 1906, whites in Springfield, Missouri, staged a triple lynching they called an 'Easter Offering.' " [2]

Notwithstanding her claim to have unearthed events hitherto unknown, Harper provides instead a more detailed examination of events well known and well documented. In fact, considering the degree to which the essential sequence of events in the Ozarks is already known, she might have provided a more valuable contribution had she investigated some of the "smaller undocumented expulsions" referenced by Loewen or broadened in some other manner the parameters of this story.

In addition to these larger problems, *White Man's Heaven* is burdened by considerable redundancy. Because of its organization, the book tends to follow a repetitive pattern: a survey of each town's history, the growth of its black population, an act of alleged black-on-white crime, and, finally, an explosion of white supremacist terror resulting in the execution of one or more black victims and the expulsion of the black population. Had Harper reviewed the growth of these communities, the various population groups, and the emergence of the railroad in a contextual chapter at the outset, and then organized the subsequent chapters around themes common to each of the stories, she might have avoided much of this redundancy and achieved a greater focus on racist violence and expulsion, issues that often become buried beneath the weight of excessive local details. Finally, Harper never explains why she chose to include the incident in Harrison, Arkansas, in a book that clearly takes the history of southwest Missouri as its topic. She provides a map of Missouri but no corresponding map of Arkansas, and she often substitutes the term *southwest Missouri* for the Southern Ozarks throughout the book. As a result, she seems to treat the events in Harrison as an appendix, included because of their similarity and proximity to the incidents in neighboring Missouri; unfortunately, she fails to integrate those events satisfactorily into the larger story.

Notes

[1]. On anti-black lynching in the West, see for example James H. Madison, *A Lynching in the Heartland: Race and Memory in America* (New York: Palgrave, 2001); Stephen J. Leonard, *Lynching in Colorado, 1859-1919* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2002); and Michael J. Pfeifer, *Rough Justice: Lynching and American Society, 1874-1947* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004).

[2]. James W. Loewen, *Sundown Towns: A Hidden Dimension of American Racism* (New York: The New Press, 2005), 95-96. Harper also fails to acknowledge discussion of these incidents in Michael J. Pfeifer, "The Ritual of Lynching: Extralegal Justice in Missouri, 1890-1942," *Gateway Heritage* (Winter 1993): 22-33.

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