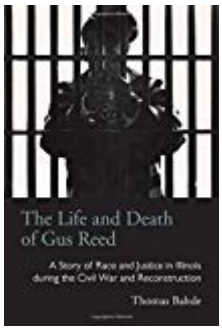
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Thomas Bahde. *The Life and Death of Gus Reed: A Story of Race and Justice in Illinois during the Civil War and Reconstruction.* Law, Society, and Politics in the Midwest Series. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2014. xii + 226 pp. $29.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8214-2105-5.

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Published on H-War (March, 2016)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

In 1878, an African American named Gus Reed died in the Illinois State Penitentiary. A native of Georgia, Reed had arrived in Springfield around the end of the Civil War. Over the following decade, he was arrested multiple times for larceny and spent time in jail and the state penitentiary. In the spring of 1878, he entered prison for what would be a short and final stay. Shackled to his cell door as punishment for fighting another inmate, then gagged and whipped for yelling and refusing to remain silent, Reed suffered fatal internal hemorrhaging. The circumstances of his death prompted an outcry from the Illinois press, which led to an official investigation and the dismissal of the guards responsible for the way he had been treated.

In *The Life and Death of Gus Reed*, Thomas Bahde uses the case of Reed as a lens through which to examine the social and political context in which the case occurred. In Bahde's words, "with Gus Reed's unique history to give it shape, this book considers the consequences of the Civil War, emancipation, and Reconstruction in the nation's heartland, and traces the changing influence of race in politics, culture, and criminal justice during the latter half of the nineteenth century" (p. 2). It is an ambitiously expansive goal for a single short volume, over one-quarter of which consists of appendices, footnotes, bibliography, and index. The 160 pages of text are divided into six chapters and an epilogue that span a broad assortment of topics: the contentious home front of wartime Illinois, the evolution of an African American community in Springfield from the antebellum era through Reconstruction, the white supremacist ideology that permeated the political culture of Illinois both during and after the war, the criminal justice system in Illinois during the late nineteenth century, and the pseudoscientific theories of "black criminality" that were prevalent in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In researching these topics, Bahde has mined a wealth of primary sources—contemporary newspapers accounts, court records, and archival material—which make *The Life and Death of Gus*

Reed a valuable contribution to the growing literature on Reconstruction in the Midwest, belonging on the same shelf with such works as Leslie A. Schwalm's ***Emancipation's Diaspora: Race and Reconstruction in the Upper Midwest*** (2009) and Jack S. Blocker Jr.'s ***A Little More Freedom: African Americans Enter the Urban Midwest, 1860-1930*** (2008). The daunting challenge in writing a microhistory is successfully balancing the specific and the general, the particular details of an individual case and the larger themes that the case illustrates, and it is a task made especially difficult when the recorded history of the title character is so sparse. The material contained in ***The Life and Death of Gus Reed*** is well researched, but the shaping of this material into a cohesive whole is not entirely successful.

Following a brief opening chapter on Reed's native Georgia, chapters 2, 3, and 4 ("Illinois in Wartime," "Black Springfield," and "A White Man's Country") examine the political and social climate of Illinois during the Civil War and Reconstruction. These three chapters will be essential reading for any serious student of the subject. In painstaking and sometimes ponderous detail, Bahde describes a great deal of interesting and revelatory material. Springfield attorney William Herndon is famous as Abraham Lincoln's longtime law partner; less well-known is Herndon's elder brother Elliot, a prominent figure in the state Democratic Party and fierce critic of Lincoln, and the contentious relationship of the Herndon brothers makes for a compelling story. The Civil Rights Act of 1870 is usually associated with the federal government's efforts to reconstruct the South, so the description of an Illinois court case brought under the act's provisions is enlightening. The chapter on African Americans in Springfield during the 1860s and 1870s will be an indispensable starting point for future researchers of this topic.

In chapters 5 and 6, the book's focus shifts to the particulars of Reed's case, including the circumstances of his various arrests and his death in prison (the only events involving Reed that left any trace in the historical record). Reed's case intersected with the lives of two notable figures. One of the homes he burglarized belonged to Elliot Herndon, while his incarceration in the state penitentiary occurred during the tenure of prison warden Robert McClaughry, a prominent late nineteenth-century criminologist. Herndon and McClaughry appear intermittently throughout the book, but their stories are never fully developed into narrative threads to tie together all the chapters, and the lack of any such thread will likely deter the general reader. One of the most noteworthy aspects of the Reed case is left unstated: Reed died under horrible circumstances, but it is nearly inconceivable that in any southern state the death of one black prisoner would have generated significant press criticism, a full investigation, or disciplinary action against the prison guards. Bahde convincingly demonstrates that Reconstruction-era Illinois was a challenging and oppressive environment for African Americans, but where in the United States would newly freed people have found conditions much better? It would seem that most African Americans who moved to the state had good reason for finding it preferable to the places from whence they came.

Bahde's attempt to situate Reed's actions within a theoretical framework is both thought provoking and problematic. In the brief opening chapter, he examines the concept of "theft" within the moral economy of enslaved African Americans. He cites Thomas Jefferson's ***Notes on the State of Virginia*** (1785), in which Jefferson noted that any "'disposition to theft'" on the part of enslaved persons "'must be ascribed to their situation, and not to any depravity of the moral sense.'" ***Notes on the State of Virginia*** has become notorious for its noxiously crude descriptions of supposed racial differences in physiognomy, but when analyzing "the moral sense" Jefferson displayed much greater acumen. "'The man, in whose favor no laws of property exist, probably

feels himself less bound to respect those made in favor of others,'" observed the slaveholding sage of Monticello, who concluded that "'ideas of moral right and wrong'" were derived from "'the relations in which a man is placed'" (pp. 5, 13). In the final chapter, Bahde explores the theories of "black criminality" put forth by various late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century thinkers, including the sociologist Frances Kellor. In Bahde's words, "Kellor claimed that blacks were equipped with a moral foundation that was distinct from that of whites, evoking Thomas Jefferson's observation that slaves' propensity to steal 'must be ascribed to their situation'" (p. 151). The theory of a race-based difference in humans' "moral foundation" is diametrically opposed to Jefferson's idea that "the moral sense" reflects a person's relative situation and not the person's race, so it is difficult to see how one evokes the other.

According to Bahde, individuals such as Reed engaged in theft "either out of necessity or out of protest" (p. 68), a misleadingly reductionist dichotomy. As he later notes, the quantity of goods stolen by Reed "indicate that he was doing more than supplying his own needs" (p. 98). We are thus left with Reed as a protest figure, and it is implied that Reed may have targeted Herndon's home because of Herndon's politics, which seems implausible. Bahde concludes that Reed was "just one among many thousands of criminals, black and white, whose opportunistic notions of justice ran them afoul of the mainstream legal and economic cultures of the nation" (p. 159). It would be worthwhile to pause and consider to what extent "the mainstream legal and economic cultures of the nation" were also grounded in "opportunistic notions of justice." Within the context of the massive corruption of the Gilded Age, Reed engaged in small-scale thievery, but was his behavior so very different from that of a Fisk or a Gould?

Citation: Kevin Young. Review of Bahde, Thomas. *The Life and Death of Gus Reed: A Story of Race and Justice in Illinois during the Civil War and Reconstruction.* H-War, H-Net Reviews. March, 2016.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=44286