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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Brian Butler. *An Undergrowth of Folly: Public Order, Race Anxiety, and the 1903 Evansville, Indiana Riot.* Studies in African American History and Culture. New York and London: Garland Publishing, 2000. xx + 273 pp. $50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8153-3722-5.

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Published on H-Indiana (January, 2002)

Vice and Violence

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On July 3, 1903, John Tinsley, aka Robert Lee, shot and killed Evansville police officer Louis Massey in an exchange of gunfire on the streets of Baptisttown, an African-American neighborhood. Himself wounded, Tinsley was easily arrested and jailed. By the time a mob formed on the following day to avenge this murder of a popular European-American police officer by an African American, Sheriff Chris Kratz had removed Tinsley to Vincennes. A bigger mob threatened the jail again on Sunday, July 5. A committee selected from the mob was allowed to conduct a thorough inspection of the jail, but the mob continued to besiege the building despite the committee's assurances that Tinsley was absent. When an armed group of 20-30 African-American men began to march toward the jail, a riot began, during which the mob attacked black citizens, homes and businesses. By Monday, July 6, Governor Winfield T. Durbin had authorized mobilization of Evansville's company of the Indiana National Guard, who were deployed to protect the jail from further assaults. When the mob pressed too closely on the line of troops, the guardsmen and deputies fired, bringing return fire from the mob. In all, twelve were killed in the shooting, and scores were wounded, but the bloody encounter brought the riot to an end.

The Evansville riot took place during a period when lynching and other forms of anti-black collective violence were common in both the South and the North. Akron, Ohio had experienced a similar riot three years before, and Springfield, Ohio was to follow in 1904 and again in 1906, and Springfield, Illinois in 1908. In the lower Midwest, such violence helped to redirect the flow of African-American migration from the small towns and mid-size cities, such as Evansville, to which African Americans had been attracted since the Civil War, and toward the major cities of the region, which seemed to promise security in numbers. Evansville's riot was a catharsis of sorts: Indiana experienced no further recorded outbreaks of anti-black collective violence until the Marion lynching in 1930.[1]

In his published dissertation, Brian Butler provides the first detailed analysis of the Evansville riot, placing it in the context of fifty years of struggle over "order" in the Ohio River city. Indeed, *An Undergrowth of Folly* devotes more space to the riot's background than to the event and its aftermath. Butler shows that German and Irish immigrants during the antebellum period were identified as threats to community order. They were succeeded in the public eye by wartime and postwar African-American migrants and by the saloons, brothels, and gambling houses of the Gilded Age. Butler is careful, however, not to accept at face value definitions of order promulgated by Evansville's self-designated "moral arbiters." Instead, he shows in the case of Germans and German-Americans that they held a different conception of order, one that incorporated the beer garden and Sunday entertainments. The riot mob in 1903, then, appears, ironically, as one more group attempting to impose upon other city residents their own conception of order, in their case one that allowed for immediate punishment and, if possible, expulsion of "disorderly" elements.

For those interested in understanding the conditions of life for African Americans in small cities such as Evansville, Butler's book provides a useful complement to Darrel Bigham's detailed history of the city's African-American community.[2] Butler makes a particularly valuable contribution by painting a careful portrait of Evansville's "demimonde," which, as he points out, was "one of the few [environments] in the city...where the races mingled socially" (p. 132). His discussion of the tensions arising from black-white contact in the vice district also fits well with Kevin Mumford's reading of the "interzones" of Chicago and New York.[3] Such investigations of vice and its regulation as Butler provides are

especially needed for non-metropolitan communities.

The explanation of the 1903 riot itself, however, is less successful, perhaps because explaining a single outbreak of violence is fraught with greater difficulty than delineating larger patterns. Butler's portrayal of a half-century of local struggle over community order tends to undermine his attempt to explain its timing by showing that the conditions existing in 1903 were also present long before. Both political parties exploited white racism, or "Negrophobia," in the 1899 and 1901 city elections, but such exploitation was not a new element in city politics. Indeed, it seems to have been a staple of local politics since the first significant influx of African Americans during the Civil War. Nor were African-American attempts at political independence from the Republican party novel at the turn of the century. A triple lynching in 1901 in nearby Boonville and Rockport may have heightened racial tensions, but white Evansvillians had carried out their own double lynching of two African-American men as far back as 1865.

An intriguing possibility raised by the sequence of events during the 1903 riot, but not investigated by Butler, is that the militance of black Evansvillians had reached a new level at the time of the riot. The murder of Massey provoked formation of a mob, but the riot was triggered by the accurate (though exaggerated) report that the group of armed African-American men intended to confront the mob. It is quite clear that African Americans fought back during the subsequent conflict, usually in defense of their homes and businesses, but also sometimes in attack mode. Recent work by Sundiata Cha-Jua has explored the use of armed self-defense in midwestern small towns during this period, and future studies of anti-black violence should be alert for this form of African-American agency.[4]

An Undergrowth of Folly is distinguished by the thoroughness of its research. Butler has exploited an exceptionally wide range of sources in order to learn as much as he can about the people who move through his story. He is particularly to be commended for amassing background information, in quantitative form whenever possible, about actors on all sides of the struggles he recounts. Unfortunately, the book is also distinguished by the poor quality of its grammar. Although Butler's prose style is straightforward and his writing vigorous, punctuation, syntax, and spelling errors abound. Butler wrestles with the comma throughout the book, but in the end his opponent pins him to the mat, with aid from the apostrophe. In this respect, the author has been poorly served by his publisher, whose copyediting assistance was wholly inadequate.

In sum, general readers and professional historians alike will find in *An Undergrowth of Folly* a careful, thorough, and balanced depiction of the struggles over vice in a midwestern small city during the latter half of the nineteenth century. Butler's portrait of the African-American role in this struggle adds a necessary dimension to the emerging picture of African-American life in small urban communities, the most common environment for midwestern blacks during the three decades after Emancipation, and helps us to understand why they began to abandon such places during the years marked by Evansville's riot.

Notes

[1]. James H. Madison, *A Lynching in the Heartland: Race and Memory in America* (New York: Palgrave Publishers, 2001).

[2]. Darrel E. Bigham, *We Ask Only a Fair Trial: A History of the Black Community of Evansville, Indiana* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987).

[3]. Kevin J. Mumford, *Interzones: Black/White Sex Districts in Chicago and New York in the Early Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997). Mumford's book, however, does not appear in Butler's bibliography.

[4]. Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua, "'A Warlike Demonstration': Legalism, Violent Self-Help, and Electoral Politics in Decatur, Illinois, 1894-1898," *Journal of Urban History* 26 (July 2000): 591-629.

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Citation: Jack Blocker. Review of Butler, Brian, *An Undergrowth of Folly: Public Order, Race Anxiety, and the 1903 Evansville, Indiana Riot.* H-Indiana, H-Net Reviews. January, 2002.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=5848