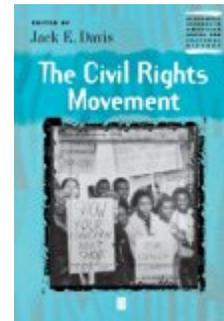


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jack E. Davis, ed. *The Civil Rights Movement*. Blackwell Readers in American Social and Cultural History. Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2001. xxiv + 314 pp. \$62.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-631-22044-2.

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Bringing Civil Rights Into the Classroom

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Jack Davis, who teaches at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, has compiled a useful reader on the history of the civil rights movement. It is part of the Blackwell Readers in American Social and Cultural History Series edited by Jacquelyn Jones. The book consists of essay contributions from prominent scholars whose work covers a range of themes in the ever-burgeoning civil rights historiography. The essays are drawn from the contributing scholars' own works, such as journal articles and chapters from books. This is an important aspect of the book, because it enables readers to engage in the current scholarship rather than in, say, dumbed-down or reductionist pieces specifically for the book. Davis edits with a judicious touch. In addition to the essays, the sections, which are organized thematically, include primary documents in order to allow students to engage in the sorts of documents historians use on a daily basis. Each chapter includes a useful bibliography. The book is intended for a primarily undergraduate audience for classroom use, although it could also be useful in some graduate seminars as well.

The Civil Rights Movement begins, after the traditional introductions and acknowledgments with a tremendously detailed and useful chronology tracing the Civil Rights Movement, writ large, from the Emancipation Proclamation to the 1998 conviction of Former KKK Imperial Wizard Sam Bowers for the 1966 murder of Mississippi activist Vernon Dahmer. Davis' own introduction

takes its cue from a graduate student paper produced at the University of South Florida in which Ellen Babb explored the activism of Bette Wimbish and other women in St. Petersburg, Florida. The inclusion of this student's work is typical of one of the central themes of Davis' book—the idea of bringing the study of some of the hidden aspects of the civil rights movement to light. The use of a student paper to do so is especially apropos.

Davis breaks the book into six thematic parts that are loosely chronological: "Sowing Seeds," "Defiance," "Participants," "Local-National Relationships," "Empowerment," and "The Continuing Saga." Each of these sections then gets two essays that cover sub-topics within these themes. Some of the essays fit their particular theme better than do others, and some teachers might find it necessary to draw links for students who may not know as much about the civil rights struggle as others. Nonetheless the essays are almost universally excellent. Many professors who choose to use this reader (and many should) will be familiar with most of the selections contained here, though the context might open some eyes.

Despite the quality of the essays and Davis' skilful editing, the book has some flaws. The worst of these, in this reviewer's eyes, is the lack of footnotes in the essays. Given that these pieces initially appeared as scholarly works they are based on original historical research and when they appeared they had footnotes or endnotes or other forms of citation. The purpose of a reader is

to introduce students to a range of different perspectives on historical issues and events. But such sources should also introduce students to the historian's craft. Given the rather specific nature of this book, it will not be used in general freshman surveys, and instead is most likely to be a part of upper level courses on civil rights or Southern history or else in graduate courses. In any of these cases it is important that students begin to understand how scholars use footnotes and how historians analyze sources. By bowdlerizing these essays Davis takes away a prime opportunity to teach students about putting together research papers. Furthermore, he is not even consistent. While he takes away all but a few footnotes in most of the pieces, he does not remove the distracting parenthetical citations in LaVerne Gyant's essay on women in the civil rights movement. Such foolish inconsistency is a hobgoblin of this reader's mind.

This brings me to a second point. As with many readers, this one includes primary sources intended to bring the students closer to the events the essays depict. The problem here as with most books of the type is that the documents here have little to do with the essays at hand. Thus Patricia Sullivan's fascinating essay on Southern reformers during the New Deal era is accompanied by

two supporting primary documents: a 1901 Street Car Petition from Jacksonville, Florida and a 1955 NAACP School Segregation Petition. Far from facilitating an understanding of primary sources and the historical craft examples such as these mainly serve to distract readers. A better approach (and one that would validate the use of footnotes) might have been to have had the contributors choose a handful of documents that they used to make their argument or construct their story. In so doing they would show students how to use documents and how historians go about utilizing primary sources to write history. This seems a far better approach than simply to throw together primary documents in a slapdash fashion that have only passing relevance to the essays they are purported to support.

These criticisms aside, however, this book makes an important contribution. There are very few readers on the civil rights movement, and fewer still with this depth and scope. This is among the very best. The fact that many of the historians included here represent a new wave of scholars who will continue to redefine civil rights historiography for years to come makes this a lively and important contribution to our efforts to bring scholarship into the classroom.

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