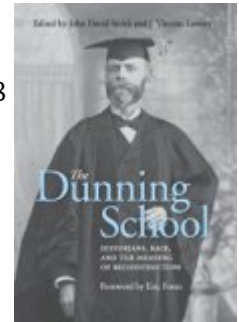


**John David Smith, J. Vincent Lowery, eds..** *The Dunning School: Historians, Race, and the Meaning of Reconstruction*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2013. 338 pp. \$40.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8131-4225-8.



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**Published on** H-SHGAPE (April, 2014)

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Members of the Dunning school were once at the top of our profession, but they have fallen into disrepute, in part because of the racism that suffuses their work (much of it was quite sexist, too). William Archibald Dunning's portrait, as it appears on the book's cover, is that of a man accustomed to deference. He stands in his academic gown and cap, whiskers resplendent, posture rigid, face relaxed. His left elbow is cocked, and left hand is rested against his mid-chest as though evoking the by-then-dated "hand-in-waistcoat" pose. Not only was Dunning a remarkably successful historian, but he also cut a great figure in society. He "frequented exclusive social clubs in Washington and New York City, where he moved in circles that included the country's most famous politicians, academics, and businessmen" (p. 89). Many of those in his circle, the essays in this collection note, enjoyed a similar heady blend of professional success and social status.

John David Smith and J. Vincent Lowery's edited collection, *The Dunning School: Historians,*

*Race, and the Meaning of Reconstruction*, with a foreword by Eric Foner, consists of a series of careful intellectual biographies of Dunning, his mentor John W. Burgess, and eight of his most successful students. These men (and one woman) were exemplary professionals. With the notable exception of the sloppier Walter Lynwood Fleming, they were footnote users, primary-text aggregators, and institution builders. Their social status opened libraries, archives, and private collections to them. Many interviewed and corresponded with political leaders from the period of Reconstruction, and with their widows and children. And they were remarkably prolific. Dunning published "forty-three articles on history and political science topics, two books on the Reconstruction era, and three works on Western political theory" (p. 77). His students claimed similar achievements: Ulrich Phillips published an important book and fifteen articles in the six years after graduate school.

The essays are unusually well sourced and sharply written, and cohere to a degree rare for

an edited collection. Together, they reveal that the “Dunning School” was more multi-vocal and fluid than many assume. Paul Ortiz shows that William Watson Davis was deeply critical of secessionists; insisted on slavery as the cause of the war; was quite conscious of class oppression; and, until he turned to issues related to race, brought “scholarly depth and nuance” to his study (p. 264). Paul Haworth, as Lowery argues, “believed that African Americans were inferior to whites” but rejected his fellows’ scientific racism; “instead, he attributed blacks’ condition to their oppressive treatment by southern whites” (p. 204). William Harris Bragg reminds us of C. Mildred Thompson’s insistence of the centrality of economic factors to problems of Reconstruction, and of her New Deal liberal *bona fides*.

The essayists do not sugarcoat the racism of these historians. White supremacy was indeed the “steel frame” of their analysis (p. 173). Each essay amply documents its subjects’ racist claims, slurs, and analysis, such as Davis’s repeated efforts to explain black political participation as a form of “voodooism,” or his chilling explanation that white violence emerged in part because drunken and insolent black people “invited killing” (pp. 267, 270).

Most of these essays, however, hope to extract what was valuable in these historians’ work from the mire of their racism. Bragg goes furthest in defending the value of the work: “Their scholarship, typified by meticulous footnotes, extensive bibliographies, and thorough explorations of a wide variety of subjects (most divorced from race), should command academic respect” (pp. 299-300). Shepherd W. McKinley says of Burgess’s work that “his positive accomplishments in history and political science ought not be forgotten and his racism and its origins should not be ignored” (p. 65). John Herbert Roper Sr. writes of Joseph Grégoire de Roulhac Hamilton that “on balance, he seems a good historian flawed by racism in his interpretation” (p. 197). Michael Fitzgerald, though

he clearly loses little love on Walter Lynwood Fleming, writes that “this dismissal is, in a sense, too bad” (p. 173).

I can see why the scholars who collaborated on this volume chose to invest their time here: historians of the Reconstruction era remain deeply invested in positioning ourselves in relationship to the Dunning school, though almost always negatively. The question of why Reconstruction-era historians today still so frequently cite the Dunning school invites analysis. Whether we acknowledge it or not, our work is shaped by the fact that our field was founded so resolutely on white male privilege (imagine the sources they did not collect, the interviews they did not think to schedule, and the questions that did not occur to them). Still, I am not convinced that thinking about the relationship of our work to that of the Dunning school, beginning our writings with a reference to them, returning to them for insights we may have missed, or even congratulating ourselves on overcoming aspects of their legacy is the best path forward.

This collection seems premised on the idea that it is possible to segregate the problematic racist ideas from the valuable remnant of these scholars’ work. I would like to see this collection acknowledge that the pervasive racism (and sexism) the Dunning school embraced was not a flaw in the system of otherwise commendable professionalization, but was rather a key element of the system. Dunning school members’ comfort with privilege and exploitation powerfully shaped their analysis even when they were not specifically justifying white oppression of southern black men and women. At the same time, professionalization was in large part about gatekeeping. Socially powerful groups in the Progressive Era sought effective monopolies on areas of knowledge by claiming that only those who had benefited from expert training, learned specialized terminology, mastered specific techniques, and performed certain resource-intensive tasks could

rightfully work in a given field. The fetish for the footnote; the requirement of extensive, expensive, time-consuming archival travel; and the practice of giving professional positions and opportunities through networks of graduate-school mentors, students, and peers effectively served this purpose. As grateful as we should be for rigorous citation practices, the professionalization process was also key to the project of strengthening an upper-class, white, male cultural monopoly on historical writing at the very moment that a small but growing group of men and women of color, white women, and nonelite white men were gaining enough resources, education, and access to print that they might threaten to write history themselves.

I love the idea of a rescue mission, in which historians troll through unduly neglected works of previous generations to find hidden facts and insight. Yet there are works more worthy of such attention than those of Dunning and his students. Surely there are thousands of theses and unpublished, perhaps unfinished, perhaps ill-footnoted, historical manuscripts by precisely those would-be historians that the Dunning school wrote out of the profession: men and women of color, white women, and nonelites.

Even what is most impressive about the Dunning school's accomplishments—their enormous energy and productivity—rests on elite white male privilege. In his essay, Roper praises the “equal partner[ship]” of Hamilton and his wife, Mary Cornelia Hamilton, compellingly detailing their lifelong working arrangement. She was his “full scholar-partner,” “publicist-partner,” and “institutionalist-partner” (p. 142). Yet a Worldcat search lists Mary Cornelia Hamilton as a coauthor of record for only one of Hamilton's many books, *The Life of Robert E. Lee for Boys and Girls* (1917). Who among us would not be remarkably more productive if we had a spouse to relieve us of domestic concerns, together with some household staff, and to provide us with a lifetime of highly

skilled research, editorial, translation, secretarial, and writing labor? The first decades of the historical profession saw so many brilliant careers because Dunning and most of his students so fully, and so unselfconsciously, benefited from the poorly or uncompensated labor of wives, employees, and others.

Not surprisingly, W. E. B. Du Bois, the man most effectively engaged in challenging these historians' racist work in their lifetime, appears in most of these essays. He famously labeled most of the works of Dunning and his students as “Standard--Anti-Negro,” as some of the essays recount. Yet as a black scholar who managed to become an important historian under these conditions, he would seem to obscure or correct the perception that racism was endemic to professional history itself rather than a personal trait of its professionalizers. Du Bois was willing to work with these white historians who controlled sources, publications, and institutions, and who did the vast bulk of reading and research in his field. Occasionally, they were willing to work with him. He even, from time to time, gave one of them an approving nod. These moments are duly noted, arguably overemphasized, in the essays.

Reconstruction-era historians' perpetual returning to the Dunning school has always felt too much like nostalgia to me, even where it is critical: an unintended, but unfortunate echo of its subjects' nostalgia for the antebellum world. Rather than reevaluating the gifts and wringing our hands over the sins of these fathers, it would be more productive to turn our attention elsewhere. Perhaps we could seek those historians who they so effectively excluded. Or perhaps we ourselves are called on to give birth to disciplinary practices and cultures less implicated in the oppressions we analyze.

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**Citation:** Elaine Frantz Parsons. Review of Smith, John David; Lowery, J. Vincent, eds. *The Dunning School: Historians, Race, and the Meaning of Reconstruction*. H-SHGAPPE, H-Net Reviews. April, 2014.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=40901>



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