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Robert J. Dillard’s *Two Counties in Crisis: Measuring Political Change in Reconstruction Texas* is one of the most interesting and surprising academic texts that I have ever read. Dillard is a political scientist who has read widely in the historical literature, and he has written a volume that makes an original contribution to the historiography of Reconstruction in Texas. There are parts of this book that stunned me, and I am glad that it was published by the University of North Texas Press despite the fact that I disagree with the author at times.

In many ways, this book is the origin story of the much-maligned Texas Constitution, written in 1876. Since then, the Texas legislature has proposed, through 2022, 700 amendments. Voters have approved an astounding 517 of these alterations. The result, states Dillard, is that the “indecipherable” Texas Constitution “is accessible only to the most devoted of constitutional law scholars and sleep-deprived of graduate students” (p. 175).

Dillard challenges a wide range of earlier historians who have seen the 1876 Constitution as the creation of the reactionary, agriculturally focused planter minority. Instead, Dillard sees it as a result of a genuine popular movement, albeit one led by elites. Born of cultural backlash to Radical Reconstruction, the 1876 Texas Constitution’s supporters included a broad range of white Texans, many of whom had been on the opposite side of the issue of secession in 1860.

Political opponents in the secession crisis, Dillard argues, became increasingly united during Reconstruction in reaction to Radical political leadership. Dillard concludes that conservative whites deployed the politics of fear and sought group polarization by race to create a bloc of voters large enough to overcome the Republican coalition built around African American voters.

In his effort to unpack this process, Dillard often compares and contrasts pro-Union Collin County with planter-led Harrison County. From
the perspective of a historian, there is less of this comparison that one might expect given the title and standard historical approaches to case studies. Most of Dillard's research is in state government records and largely focused on the actions of the Texas governors during Reconstruction. Collin County and Harrison County are vantage points he uses from time to time to understand the impact of governor and state action. While he is certainly aware of the social, economic, and political history of these counties, this book is nothing at all like the more traditional historical case-study monograph, such as Randolph Campbell's *Grass Roots Reconstruction in Texas, 1865-1880* (1998).

Dillard is, of course, a political scientist and not a historian. He never intended to write such a study. I bring it up here for historians who plan to read Dillard's work so they are not as surprised as I was by the role of the two counties in the study.

Dillard's work is refreshing and original in a number of ways. He takes the actions, statements, and positions of whites during Reconstruction period seriously but without dismissing, as did the Dunning school of historians, the importance of racism. He also is quite critical of Republican leadership, especially Radical governor Edmund J. Davis, which contrasts with more recent historical work that has praised Davis and rehabilitated his image. Davis was much maligned by conservative historians of Texas in the century or so after the Civil War, and many recent historians have been very reluctant to agree or even to appear to agree with these earlier historians. In criticizing Davis, however, Dillard does not criticize his laudable goals, such as the protection of civil rights for African Americans. Instead, Dillard believes that Davis's poor leadership made the attacks on those rights more powerful by uniting whites who had earlier been political opponents. To this reader, one can see our modern political divide influencing Dillard's analysis. Instead of ideological support for local control or even low taxes, Dillard argues that “cultural contrarianism” better explains opposition to Davis's specific policy initiatives (p. 102). In short, the white majority sought to oppose everything that Davis and his allies proposed simply because they were on the other side of a cultural war.

While I found this book arresting and thought-provoking, there were elements that made me a bit uncomfortable. More than other scholars, I have never liked using the pejorative terms “carpetbagger” and “scalawag,” but Dillard is in the mainstream in using these descriptors. It was a bit more surprising to read several other phrases in the book. Chapter 4 is entitled “The Davis Regime,” repeating the phrasing that Davis’s conservative critics used to describe what they perceived as the dictatorial, undemocratic Davis administration. I found the title odd because Dillard does a nice job of explaining Davis's constitutional thinking, even on his controversial attempt to hold on to power after the election of 1873. Chapter 6's title, “Texas Redeemed,” produced the same uneasiness I felt with chapter 4. While the white majority believed that Texas had been “saved” by God from the hellish period of Republican rule, the vast majority of African American Texans certainly did not feel this way.

The title of these chapters points to a larger frustration that I have with the book. It is largely the story of how white Texans overcame political differences and became a unified bloc by the mid-1870s. The perspective of African Americans is marginal in this work. In some ways, it is easy to see why this is the case. Dillard's question is about the 1876 Constitution, written overwhelmingly by whites. Yet I feel that there should have been more attention to how African American voters saw all of the developments of the period.

Finally, there are several smaller issues where I have differences of interpretation with Dillard. I believe that the author makes too little of the importance of political violence in silencing would-be white Republicans. While he mentions attacks on African Americans from time to time, there is little emphasis on mob violence against whites...
who allied with the Republican Party. Likewise, I tend to think that Dillard's view of Reconstruction in Texas is too deterministic. He says that Reconstruction was “almost doomed to failure before it ever began” (p. 42). While he certainly highlights the missteps of particular leaders as hastening and building the cultural backlash to Reconstruction, he makes too little of the role of key events in shaping this history. For example, I think he makes too little of the assassination of Abraham Lincoln and the disastrous leadership of Andrew Johnson. I also think he makes too little of the impact of the Panic of 1873 on the Ulysses S. Grant administration, whose support of Texas Republicans was essential in light of the state’s excessive violence against Republican voters.

I do not wish to end on these differences of interpretation and my criticisms of his use of particular language. Overall, I think we are much better off for having this book. It takes seriously people who have not been taken seriously by many recent scholars. So many scholars refuse to be even lightly critical of Republicans during Reconstruction lest they be cast with the Dunning school. The press includes a blurb from historian Carl H. Moneyhon on its back cover. Moneyhon, the author of what I view as the best book on Reconstruction in Texas, believes that Dillard’s book is a “new approach” that “represents original thinking.” I agree and urge all those interested in this important period to read Dillard’s study.

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