

BOOK REVIEW AND NOTE

The Assault on Elisha Green: Race and Religion in a Kentucky Community. By Randolph Paul Runyon. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2021. ix + 249 pp.

The career of Jim Crow never loses its strangeness. In this work, based on extremely careful research in local records and newspapers, one main protagonist is an ex-slave turned respected minister and autobiographer Elisha Green. Born in 1818, he came of age in Henry Clay's Kentucky. Green started pastoring in the 1840s, drawing white as well as black listeners. He took odd jobs on the side, and eventually saved up enough money to purchase his freedom. For many years, he pastored two churches in the towns of Maysville and Paris, Kentucky (just a few miles to the northeast of the state capital of Lexington). The train ride between his two pastoral charges required him to pass through Millersville, the home of his future white assailants. He later helped to found what was then called Kentucky Normal and Theological Institution (today the name is Simmons College, located in Louisville). Green died in 1893, 10 years after, while traveling on a train to preach to one of his churches, two white men assaulted him: George T. Gould and Frank Bristow. Gould was the President of Millersburg Female College; Bristow was a music teacher there. Gould was a minister for the Southern Methodist Church. He was also evidently a good popular sermonizer (skilled at harmonizing "science" and "religion") but otherwise a total creep: a hothead, a liar, a philandering drunk, and a racist clumsy enough to embarrass his white colleagues, although his racism hardly prevented him from pursuing sexual liaisons with African American women. His anger management issues eventually did him in.

The contrast between Green – someone who fits perfectly with his fellow black Kentuckian's William J. Simmons's pantheon, published in the 1880s, entitled *Men of Mark: Eminent, Progressive Rising* – and the two stooges, Gould and Bristow, could hardly be more stark. It's somewhat to the book's misfortune that the dismal figure of Gould, not a particularly interesting character even in the rogues gallery that fills this book, ends up consuming more pages than does that of Elisha Green, someone important in Republican politics after the Civil War and evidently charismatic enough to have Frederick Douglass show up at a couple of events in his life (including his late-life second marriage to a light-skinned woman).

The incident on the train arose when President Gould (a title belied by the fact that he had borrowed money from his father-in-law to purchase Millersville Institute, and never paid it back) accompanied a group of young women from the school who were going to perform in a musical exhibition. Asked to give up his seat, Green refused. And for good reason, there were other seats made available for the female students. But of course Gould had to play his part as Defender of White Womanhood; as he put it, *If any man has fallen so low as to think white women should stand while negro men keep their seats then him I have insulted, and really I do not care if I have.* The implication that they had to stand while Green kept his seat was a lie. Green hoist his assailants on their own petard, recording the words that he later recounted

in his own account of his life, one easily accessed online at (<https://www.docsouth.unc.edu/neh/greenew/greenew.html>).

At the time, Green was just doing what he did for decades: take the train from Maysville to Paris, Kentucky, to fulfill his pastoral duties that he split between two churches (sometimes to the displeasure of his congregants, a fact which local rival ministers capitalized on). In this version of the strange career of Jim Crow, Kentucky's trains were not officially segregated until 1893, a decade after Gould and Bristow assaulted Green. Green sued them, hoping to win \$1000; they were found guilty (and Green was well-known and well-liked enough that the fatuously racist defenses of Gould and Bristow got nowhere), but eventually was paid only \$27.50 each by the two (about \$800 in current money). Gould soon thereafter fled town, but that had more to do with his public episodes of drunkenness and his perpetual fighting with townspeople than with his physical assault (spurred, evidently, in part by Gould's anger at his soon-to-be-ex-wife, with whom he fought the morning of the incident) against the prominent personage of Green. Shortly thereafter, Green's son was killed in Cincinnati, collateral damage of a race riot in the city.

Later in the book, the author follows Gould's (mis)fortunes in Las Vegas, New Mexico, where he briefly became a sort of local star preacher of the Henry Ward Beecher variety, until his past reputation and continued personal addictions caught up to him. Bristow similarly faded out. Meanwhile, Green's work lived on through his connection with Simmons College. The ex-slave Green lived a life of honor and dignity, exactly as the privileged white men Gould and Bristow did not.

One might have wished for a greater engagement with the considerable scholarly literature on Kentucky, notably Luke Harlow's *Religion, Race, and the Making of Confederate Kentucky* (Cambridge University Press, 2015). Green is an important and fascinating figure, one who lived in a state defined by slavery but allowing some measure of social mobility for black men, and a state that remained in the Union and therefore was exempt from the Emancipation Proclamation. Like his contemporary from that era, the great black social gospeler and polemicist Henry McNeal Turner, Green metaphorically created the bootstraps by which he pulled himself up, and he masterfully played his part in unveiling the fakeness of the honor of the white men who pretended to redeem the South. I will never forget Green; I hope to drown thoughts of Gould and Bristow as soon as possible in a decent snifter of Kentucky bourbon.

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