

## Book Review

Ronald E. Butchart. *Schooling the Freed People: Teaching, Learning, and the Struggle for Black Freedom, 1861–1876*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010. 336 pp. Cloth \$39.95.

The history of Reconstruction in the United States has a persistent cast of stock characters: the carpetbagger, the scalawag, the unlettered black politician, and the “Yankee” schoolmarm. Although professional historians have revised or overturned most of these, in one way or another, the last one has persisted. Ronald Butchart, however, decided to deconstruct the image of the northern woman so familiar to histories of the Reconstruction South. Contrary to previous historians of freedpeople’s education, Butchart argues that most people who taught in schools for freedpeople were not white, northern, middle-class women full of abolitionist zeal. More than half of teachers in freedmen’s schools, in fact, were southerners, with white southerners making up a quarter of the educators. And more than one-third of all teachers were African American. In light of Butchart’s evidence, the image of an army of young northern white female teachers crusading through the defeated South now seems fairly off the mark.

Butchart bases his conclusions on information from the Freedmen’s Teacher Project database, which he has compiled over several years with the help of a team of graduate research assistants at the University of Georgia. He started the database to answer questions that arose in his own scholarship. With the database, he aimed “to positively identify as many as possible of the women and men who taught in southern black schools between 1861 and 1876” (p. xvii). He estimates that the project has logged in roughly two-thirds of that population, collecting, at minimum, teachers’ names, the state in which they taught, and the years that they served. In many instances, however, Butchart and his assistants were able to track down more information, such as the educational associations that employed a given teacher, and his or her race, previous occupation, state of origin, political leanings, and religious affiliation. Armed with these more nuanced profiles, Butchart proposes to change the story of freedpeople’s education. What he gives us is a more complex picture of what drew teachers to the South in the wake of emancipation and how those varied impulses shaped the history of black education after the Civil War.

Butchart attributes much of our misinterpretation about these teachers to historians’ “overreliance” on the records of the American Missionary Association (p. xvii). Given that the AMA records are

voluminous and readily available in archives and on microfilm, it is not surprising, Butchart suggests, that they have been the basis for much of what we know about the subject. This dependence on the AMA for evidence (an organization arguably more invested in the religious education of freedpeople than in their social and political status after emancipation) has left us unable to discern what really occurred in classrooms, among teachers and students. Further, he argues, it has left us blind to the role that freedpeople's education played in the politics of Reconstruction.

In addition to introducing surprising new quantitative analysis of these teachers, Butchart's other main contribution is the light he sheds on the motivations of those who enlisted to teach in the South after the Civil War. While black teachers, from the North and South, often expressed their desire to improve the condition of their race, most whites explained their readiness to teach in more pedestrian or, at least, more general terms. Many southern whites, for instance, took teaching jobs because they needed the money and often held their posts for only a few weeks or months. Many white northerners needed the work, too. Surprisingly few of them couched their applications for employment in abolitionist or political terms. Northern women outnumbered men two to one, and although many northern teachers were evangelical, most spoke of a general calling to "do good" or to do missionary work without emphasizing the plight of former slaves in the South (p. 105). With such varied and often anemic agendas, the strides made in black education after the Civil War seem all the more remarkable. Yet the shortcomings become more clear as well.

After an introductory chapter, the author devotes a chapter to each of the groups who taught freedpeople: African Americans, white southerners, and white northerners (p. xix). The fifth chapter focuses on the curriculum in schools for freedpeople, a curriculum that often "promoted black intellectual emancipation beyond teachers' intentions" (pp. xix–xx). The final chapter discusses the violent opposition of white southerners to schools for former slaves, while framing that opposition as fundamental to the unfulfilled promise of Reconstruction. Here the author takes on, at length, the "traditional interpretation" of scholars, such as Harry Lee Swint and William Preston Vaughn, that violence directed at black schools stemmed from the presence of northern teachers (p. 157). Butchart posits instead that white opposition to freedpeople's education was based on fear of black political advancement. Though Butchart makes an important point, the traditionalists (with their emphasis on the political implications of northern teachers rather than those of black scholars) already seemed a bit dusty, particularly in light of more recent studies of African-American grassroots activism, such as the work of Heather Williams, Julie Saville, or Steven Hahn.

Throughout, Butchart introduces the reader to the voices of his subjects whenever possible. (This is most difficult for southern white teachers, who left few letters and memoirs behind recording their experiences.) For African Americans, in particular, we can see the effort they expended—despite uncertain employment and compensation, and the need to move about, often to remote rural areas, looking for work—and the dedication many of them demonstrated to the cause of black education. The inclusion of photographic portraits of teachers is a brilliant means of highlighting them as individuals, with particular stories and trajectories. There are portraits of students included as well, though their voices are more muted here. Also, the title could better represent the varied relationships between teachers and students. Referring to black scholars as “the freedpeople,” even if this was nineteenth-century parlance, implies a degree of social distance between former slaves and the people who taught them, a distance that was not always evident, at least not in the writings of many of the teachers. As the author himself notes, he has just begun to create a new understanding of this corps of teachers so little understood before now. His generous hope that this new picture will benefit future historians is certainly well founded.

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