

Reference

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Richard White, *The Republic for Which it Stands: The United States During Reconstruction And the Gilded Age, 1865-1896*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. 941 pages. ISBN 978-0-19-973581-5.

The thirty-six years between the ending of the American Civil War and the beginning of the Progressive era are commonly stereotyped as part of a lugubrious and nebulous period in American life, a bathetic interlude between the gravitas of Lincoln and the dynamism of Theodore Roosevelt. Although Richard White's meticulous addition to *The Oxford History of the United States* series does not always dispel this reputation, it does much to alleviate its peripheral position in the American historical pantheon.

In making this period politically salient, White manages to synthesize both breadth and depth. The book deftly chronicles every major political event from 1865 to 1896, but each chapter retains a specific focus, encompassing methodical explorations of subjects that range from the logistics of homestead buying in the 1870s to the development of mining in the 1880s. The result is immensely sophisticated, moving seamlessly from disciplines as diverse as theology, the law, and economics. Whilst the statistical detail is not all accessible, White incentivizes the reader to engage through literary observations which transcend the complexities. In a chapter dealing with the consequences of the 1873 depression, he leavens the catalogue of economic chaos and falling living standards with a description of the new phenomenon of tramps by Walt Whitman, who concludes "our republican experiment...is at heart an unhealthy failure" (quoted in White, 271). Other literary invocations are more sporadic. The opinions of the realist novelist and literary critic William Dean Howells provide commentary on issues as discrepant as the table manners of Andrew Carnegie (described as having a 'queer pig face') and the societal prevalence of neurasthenia, a catch-all term for depression and emotional distress.

For all White's versatility and interdisciplinary expertise, *The Republic*

for *Which it Stands* is grounded in longstanding motifs which dominate the 1865-1896 timeframe. White's acknowledgments view the past as 'a secret refuge for all historians', yet the banal and familial are dominant influences in his writing (ix). A recurring conceit of White's analysis is the 'home', a symbol of independence that was a contested terrain for American political life in the last third of the nineteenth century. Home was the motivation of the settler aspiring for a homestead on Indian lands, but it was also the ideal of Klu Klux Klan terrorists who murdered enfranchised African Americans under the pretext of protecting white womanhood, the women temperance and suffrage activists who campaigned against the impact of the saloon on domestic life, and the writing of Danish-American social reformer Jacob Riis, who bemoaned the 'murder of the home' wrought by tenements and industrial America. Thanks to White's command of the material, the traditional iconography of the home becomes richly allusive, a shared national idyll seeking protection from political, social, and economic change.

Through the home's simultaneous role as refuge and cause of ideological discordance, *The Republic for Which it Stands* forms an apt companion piece to Sean Wilentz's *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (2005), a book which traces the growth of American democracy from the 1790s to the Civil War. Delineating the changes of the U.S.'s political parties and their attempts to mask tensions over slavery, the conclusion of *The Rise of American Democracy* is richly cathartic, contrasting the corrupt bargains of the 1850s with Lincoln's inaugural and its invocation of the egalitarian precepts of Jefferson's Declaration of Independence. *The Republic for Which it Stands* presents a landscape where the core values celebrated in the 1860s Republican Party, an ideology of what White calls 'free labour' and a 'homogenous citizenry', are subject to clashing interpretations. 'Free labour', a condition of equality supposedly born out of the end of slavery and the colonization of the West, is used by conservative jurors to rationalize the corporate authoritarianism of the post-Civil War period. White conveys how Supreme Court Justice Stephen Field's reading of the fourteenth amendment in the 1873 *Slaughterhouse* case "made licensing laws, strikes, boycotts, the closed shop, and even some public health regulations the legal equivalents of slavery" (531).

The shibboleth of a 'homogenous citizenry' also encountered diminishing returns. Used as glue for the Republican Party's conservative (confusingly called 'liberal') and radical wings, homogenous citizenry vaunted a uniform national culture and the constitutional amendments passed in

the five years succeeding the Civil War. The year of President Ulysses S. Grant's re-election, 1872, however, established the subjectivity of this vision. The defeated Horace Greeley was nominated by both the Democrats and the 'liberal Republican Party', a reactionary faction who viewed the extension of black suffrage under Reconstruction as a dangerous corruption of democracy. White's juxtaposition of Grant's Reconstruction agenda with his Native American policy further highlights a more pernicious dimension to homogenous citizenship's pursuit. At the same time as the paternalistic Freedman's Bureau arbitrated the struggle for black freedom in the South, evangelical reformers and army officers coerced Comanche tribes in the West to embrace Christian belief and an authentically American self-reliance.

It might be tempting to perceive these tragedies as emblematic of a nihilistic epoch, a kaleidoscope of failed presidencies and economic depredation. Yet White draws exuberance from figures who challenge the hegemony of Gilded Age elites. There is Albert Parsons, an ex-Confederate Cavalryman who underwent a damascene conversion to radical Republicanism and agitated during the Great Strike of 1877; Sara Winnemucca, a Paiute activist whose protests reduced President Rutherford B. Hayes's wife Lucy to tears; Lizzie Borden, a New England woman acquitted of murdering her parents in a cause celebre for the suffragist movement. This is their story too and their rebellions resonate right through to the 1890s conclusion of this powerful historiography.

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