

Reconstruction Historiography

The first generation of scholars to write about Reconstruction adopted the perspectives and positions of former Confederates. These early scholarly interpretations of Reconstruction echoed the viewpoints of southern Democrats and Conservatives during Reconstruction. These scholars came to their conclusions by relying on primary sources authored by southern Democrats and Conservatives, those who opposed Congressional Reconstruction as evidence and accepting their accounts as accurate representations of events. Later scholars, called "revisionists" and "post-revisionists," relied on a larger base of evidence from both opponents and proponents of Reconstruction.

"Dunningite" Version of Reconstruction

The traditional version of Reconstruction historiography emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the writings of James S. Pike, an acerbic northern newspaperman with decidedly pronounced racist views, James Ford Rhodes, a businessman and amateur historian, who wrote a multivolume history of the United States since 1850, John W. Burgess, a historian at Columbia University, and William A. Dunning and his students at Columbia University. In fact, the traditional historical version of Reconstruction soon became synonymous with the so-called "Dunningite school." In this view, Reconstruction was an uncommonly sordid and malevolent affair, characterized by widespread corruption, demagoguery, and cynicism. Northern carpetbaggers "invaded" the South after the Civil War for the purpose of personal aggrandizement and plunder. Joining them were the depraved and opportunistic southern scalawags, who were traitors to their section, interested solely in personal advancement and pecuniary gain. Though the carpetbaggers and scalawags composed a minority of the white population in the South, they were able to dominate the state governments by organizing the newly emancipated blacks politically and, in concert with their northern Republican allies, imposing a military despotism on the South. The temporary disfranchisement of southern whites who had patriotically supported the "Lost Cause," and simultaneous enfranchisement of blacks, lacking even the most basic attributes of schooling or civic knowledge, quickly resulted in the creation of governments dominated by the most ignorant and degraded classes and the virtual "Africanization" of southern white civilization. Meanwhile, vindictive and unscrupulous radical Republicans in the North, motivated solely by their hatred for the South and desire to punish the region, dominated Congress. The radicals quickly repudiated the new Southern governments approved by the President, determined to make the process of Reconstruction as drawn out and humiliating as possible for southerners and imposed a virtual military tyranny on the South. Ultimately, patriotic white southerners had had enough, and determined to "redeem" their states from the control of the carpetbaggers, scalawags, and ignorant blacks. Such writings both reflected and reinforced the prevailing racism of the period and influenced the traditional image of African Americans as second-class citizens. Other writers, including Claude G. Bowers, George F. Milton, and E. Merton Coulter, added to the story, stressing the vindictiveness of radical Republicans toward the defeated and prostrate South, the rascality of carpetbaggers and scalawags, the inferiority and incapacity of African Americans, and

the widespread corruption and "blackout of honest government" prevalent in the former rebel states during Reconstruction.

The Revisionist Version of Reconstruction

The struggle for the civil rights of African Americans in the post-World War II era influenced a new look at Reconstruction. In the 1960s revisionist historians challenged the basic tenets of the Dunningite version of the era and a new and far more sympathetic perspective on the historic changes promulgated by passage of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments and "radical Reconstruction" emerged. Writers like John Hope Franklin, Eric McKittrick, James McPherson, and Kenneth Stampp demolished many of the "myths" perpetuated and endorsed by the Dunningites. Revisionists argued that Reconstruction was a far more complex and involved story than the Dunningites had indicated. Southern whites were not subjected to northern brutality during the era. Revisionist historians dramatically altered the traditional view of radical Reconstruction and the portrayal of blacks under Reconstruction. Radical leaders like Charles Sumner and Thaddeus Stevens were applauded for their idealism and support for the civil rights of African Americans. The passage of the Thirteenth, and, especially, the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments were, in fact, significant and permanent achievements that fundamentally altered the role of the federal government in protecting the rights of American citizens. Throughout Reconstruction African Americans never controlled a state legislature and only one served as a state supreme court justice. Nor were African Americans the illiterate, unprincipled, and inexperienced politicians portrayed by the Dunningites. Political corruption was a national phenomenon, not endemic to the South alone. And while the Dunningites criticized the vastly increased spending by many southern governments during Reconstruction, the revisionists countered that much of the spending resulted from public support for schools, hospitals, asylums, and other noble purposes, often the first time southern state governments had assumed such responsibilities. To the revisionists, Reconstruction was a success because of the extraordinary political and social gains made by African Americans.

The Post-Revisionist Version of Reconstruction

The last two decades have led to a further refinement of the view of Reconstruction by a third school of writers, usually designated as the post-revisionists. The post-revisionists generally agree with the revisionist view of Reconstruction, but tend to be more pessimistic and skeptical concerning the outcome. The Reconstruction Era witnessed a revolution of sorts in terms of the civil rights of blacks and the role of the Federal government in protecting those rights, but it was a "halfway" revolution at best, since Americans of the time lacked the will and fortitude to see the struggle through. Influenced by the continuing racial turmoil of the 1960s and the lingering economic disparity between whites and African Americans following the Second Reconstruction of the civil rights era, post-revisionist historians portrayed many of the alleged gains made by blacks during Reconstruction as superficial. Persistent racism poisoned race relations and the failure to adequately address the former freedman's economic well-being, prevented him from achieving autonomy and economic opportunity.

Concluding Thoughts

The historiographical interpretations of Reconstruction are products of their time. The Dunningite interpretation reflects the racism of American society in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Dunningite scholars relied on white southern accounts and uncritically accepted their accounts of Reconstruction. The Dunningite interpretation highlights the importance of scrutinizing primary sources and the danger of accepting the perspectives presented in them as true depictions of what really happened. The revisionist and post-revisionist interpretations emerged from a different racial climate, the Civil Rights Movement, during which scholars took seriously African Americans' struggles for freedom. The revisionist and post-revisionist scholarship, although not problem-free, nevertheless accounted for a larger body of evidence, using both white- and black-authored sources, and provides a more reliable account of Reconstruction.

Source

The descriptions of the different historiographical schools on Reconstruction and the quotations from scholarship are taken from John Pyne and Gloria Sesso, "A Humanities Approach for Teaching the Reconstruction Era: Encouraging Active Learning in the Classroom," *The History Teacher* 31, no. 4. (August 1998): 467-494.