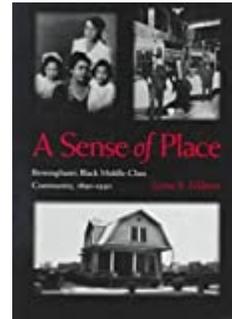




Lynne B Feldman. *A Sense of Place: Birmingham's Black Middle Class Community, 1890-1930.* Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2000. xvi + 326 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8173-0969-5.



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Racial Uplift and Race Solidarity in Early Twentieth-Century Birmingham

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One of the glaring gaps in post-civil rights era southern and African American scholarship has been the near-total neglect of turn-of-the-century black Birmingham, Alabama. For a city that was home to the largest black urban population in the United States in the years preceding World War I, and which became identified internationally as a citadel of southern segregation after World War II, the long absence of a single comprehensive study of Birmingham's black community confirms that there remain significant areas where the post-sixties revolution in historiography has not yet fought its first skirmishes, let alone triumphed.

Carl V. Harris' solid 1977 study, *Political Power in Birmingham*, demonstrated the ways in which racial phobia worked its way, insidiously, into every major civic debate during this period, but viewed the city's African American community (sympathetically) as inert, stuck inexorably on the receiving end of alternating white paternalism and malice. A series of studies by Blaine Brownell from the same period and George Leighton a

generation earlier established that the rise of the "Magic City" was but one variant in the larger story of southern urbanization and industrialization, but devoted less attention to the distinct experience of its black residents. The publication of Lynne B. Feldman's solidly-researched *A Sense of Place: Birmingham's Black Middle Class Community, 1890-1930* is therefore to be welcomed as a significant advance –earned the hard way through the imaginative use of a broad range of archival sources–which will add significantly to the growing body of work on black racial uplift and institution-building in the Jim Crow South.[1]

Feldman's study centers on the development of Smithfield, initially a suburb of Birmingham which evolved from an overgrown cornfield into a racially and economically diverse (though not integrated) settlement in the 1880s, and later into an overwhelmingly African-American neighborhood dominated socially and economically by Birmingham's black elite. In an era of rising segregation and racial hostility, Smithfield seemed to provide a refuge for respectable blacks, a "home sphere" within which they could apply the tenets of economic

self-help and racial pride espoused by Booker T. Washington and others.

Through meticulous examination of the contemporary black press, tax and probate records, real estate surveys, and an array of manuscript and census materials, the author carefully reconstructs the public and private lives of Birmingham's most prominent race leaders, offering a collective portrait of the city's black middle class as detailed and comprehensive as any we are ever likely to get. Feldman not only provides readers with useful vignettes of leading figures like black entrepreneur William R. Pettiford, *Birmingham Reporter* publisher Oscar Adams, and the "female Booker T. Washington" Carrie L. Tuggle, but also unearths the vital, if complex, relationship between local race leaders and Washington's Tuskegee Machine. While on the whole Birmingham's local black elite acted independently of Washington, airing their differences with him publicly on occasion, (p. 80) in general they shared his accommodationist perspective, played leading roles in organizations like the National Negro Business League, and exhibited the same remarkable combination of social conservatism and racial pride projected by Tuskegee.

Feldman seeks to demonstrate that Birmingham's black middle class did more than merely react to the hostility that surrounded them: sometimes under the guardianship of white paternalists, often on their own initiative, they attempted to carve out an "independent sphere" in which African Americans could exercise a measure of autonomy. But readers expecting an uncomplicated narrative in which a unified black community coheres around the project of institution-building will be surprised at what Feldman has unearthed: in chapters on the black business community, churches and schools, and male and female civic activism Feldman demonstrates convincingly that racial uplift derived from a distinctly middle class agenda, and that its pursuit exposed "class distinctions and class conflict within the black community" (p. 3).

The pressures impelling black Birminghamians from diverse social and economic backgrounds toward racial solidarity should not be underestimated. The deterioration of race relations at the turn of the century is epitomized in the complaint lodged by Will Mathis, a white man on death row in the city jail, who won the right to have his hanging take place "at a different hour from the time that [a black inmate would be hanged] and...from a different gallows" (p. 11). Exhibiting the same intense obsession with segregationist etiquette, city councilors

denied African Americans permission to build a skating rink after legislation barred them from existing facilities in 1907 on the grounds that it was "best for the Negroes that they should not be encouraged to assemble in large numbers too frequently" (p. 14).

More significantly, the rise of Smithfield as a more or less exclusively black neighborhood derived in part from legislation that barred blacks from moving into "area[s] of the city...generally and historically recognized at the time as an area for occupancy by members of the white race" (p. 27). Faced with such determined action aimed at preventing even the most innocuous breaches of the color line, it is unsurprising that "self-segregation" found a resonance among large numbers of African Americans, particularly when it came wrapped in the mantle of racial pride.

Feldman's account shows the folly of assuming that such pressures could permanently submerge divisions in the African American community, however, and is especially attentive to the ways that class differences produced regular, if unsustained, intraracial confrontation. Even as whites withdrew from Smithfield, leaving it in the hands of the most respected race men and women in Birmingham (and a small army of black and white landlords and creditors), black elites, accompanied by a relatively small number of less established homeowners, removed to streets geographically separated from the shotgun houses and alleys inhabited by African American laborers and their families. "We knew nothing about them," one homeowner recalled (p. 73). Not surprisingly, tensions surfaced within churches and schools, the fraternal orders and ladies' auxiliaries, softened at times by pervasive white hostility but never completely eliminated.

While *A Sense of Place* does an exemplary job of uncovering these tensions, the author's ambivalence about the middle class's project of racial uplift distracts her from following through on the logic of her own evidence. In her discussion of Pettiford, for example, Feldman reveals the heavy sense of paternalism—even arrogance—that informed his prescription of individual thrift as the solution to black poverty; she acknowledges his "disdain for the mob" (p. 96) and notes that his close relations with the city's white power brokers (p. 19) alienated African Americans outside the elite circle. But in contrasting Pettiford's accommodationist, occasionally sycophantic style to that of uncompromising black editor R. C. O. Benjamin, the author concludes (approvingly, one surmises) that Pettiford's "cautious and deliberate manner enabled him to elicit change gradually and without incident" (p.

78).

There are problems with this approach. As the author would no doubt agree, the limits to such change were set by local white elites, and Pettiford and others were “effective” only within the limited social space allowed them. In industrial Birmingham, the boundaries of acceptable race progress were set by the district’s leading white employers, who struggled to balance their commitment to white supremacy with a pragmatic concern for their “bottom line.” The steel, coal, and iron bosses who dominated local affairs were amenable to adjusting aspects of the racial order only when these did not interfere directly with profits. They seemed particularly agreeable to reform when continued neglect disrupted or demoralized the local labor supply (as when they lent their support to calls for a new black vocational school). But their noblesse oblige was predicated on maintaining the intrinsically unequal relationship between themselves and their mostly black labor force; no amount of racial uplift, however enthusiastically undertaken, could alter that reality.

Pettiford’s solution could therefore deliver cosmetic amelioration, but not fundamental reform: when changed circumstances imbued black workers with the confidence to challenge the very foundations of the social order (as during World War I), clashes between black workers and “industrial accommodationists” were inevitable. The uplifters’ function as intermediaries between white employers and black workers is therefore key to understanding their role across the New South, and this aspect of the Birmingham story merits more attention than it receives in Feldman’s study.[2] It is their conflicting roles in the industrial economy—far more than differences in complexion, or in differing notions of race decorum—that is key to deciphering the antagonism between black elites and black workers in Birmingham.[3]

The ambiguity in Feldman’s study has an extended and, in many ways, completely understandable lineage in studies of black leadership in the Jim Crow South. Neil McMillen’s caveat, in *Dark Journey*, that “the study of black politics in the period before World War II must begin with an appreciation of feasible limits,” is relevant here. Even the most “jelly-backed” race leaders were subject to racial violence in the period described recently by Leon Litwack as the “most violent and repressive . . . in the history of the United States”; conversely, race militants like DuBois were frequently compelled to retreat in the face of white belligerence.[4] But the best of the recent local studies of race leadership[5]—in whose company Feldman’s work certainly belongs—all seem to ac-

knowledge that the stories they tell are unrepresentative of the lives of the mass of black Southerners.[6]

Feldman’s impressive, well-researched study fills a large gap in our knowledge of Birmingham in the early twentieth century, illuminating some of the major problems facing historians of the Jim Crow South. But to take the historiography forward scholars will have to move out beyond the “Talented Tenth” and rethink their assumptions on the relationship between black workers and black elites.

Notes

[1]. Carl V. Harris, *Political Power in Birmingham, 1871-1921* (Knoxville: University of Kentucky Press, 1977); Blaine A. Brownell, “Birmingham, Alabama: New South City in the 1920s,” *Journal of Southern History* 38:1 (Feb. 1972): 21-48; George R. Leighton, *Five Cities: the Story of their Youth and Old Age* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1939). On black Birmingham, see Otis Dismuke and Robert J. Norrell, *The Other Side: The Story of Birmingham’s Black Community* (Birmingham: Birminghamfind, 1980).

[2]. For a detailed study of the relationship between race leaders and Birmingham’s industrial employers (particularly in the coal industry), see my *Race, Class, and Power in the Alabama Coalfields, 1908-21* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001).

[3]. Feldman is led astray in her discussion of the Birmingham labor movement by an over-reliance on Henry L. McKiven’s *Iron and Steel: Class, Race, and Community in Birmingham, Alabama, 1875-1920*, which focuses exclusively on the steel industry. Horace Mann Bond’s *Negro Education in Alabama: A Study in Cotton and Steel* is listed in her biography, but no trace of the very different perspective that Bond brought to the problem is evident in Feldman’s discussion of race relations in industry. In addition, the author somewhat misrepresents Daniel Letwin’s (generally positive) remarks on black and white cooperation in the coal mines: in her account, the United Mine Workers appear to have operated an exclusionary policy against black miners in Alabama. See Feldman, *A Sense of Place*, 19 and Letwin, “Interracial Unionism, Gender, and ‘Social Equality’ in the Alabama Coalfields, 1878-1908,” *Journal of Southern History* 61 (Aug. 1995): 519-54.

[4]. Leon Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (Knopf, 1998), xiv; Dominic Capecci Jr. and Jack C. Knight, “Reckoning with Violence:

W. E. B. DuBois and the 1906 Atlanta Race Riot,” *Journal of Southern History* 62:4 (Nov. 1996), 762.

[5]. See for example, in order of publication, Neil McMillen, *Dark Journey: Black Mississippians in the Age of Jim Crow* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982); Jacqueline Anne Rouse, *Lugenia Burns Hope: Black Southern Reformer* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989); Cynthia Neverdon-Morton, *Afro-American Women of the South and the Advancement of the Race, 1895-1925* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989); Dolores Janiewski, *Sisterhood Denied: Race, Gender, and Class in a New South Community* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992); Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993); Janette Thomas Greenwood, *Bittersweet Legacy: The Black and White 'Better Classes' in Charlotte, 1850-1910* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994); Darlene Clark Hine et. al., eds., *Black Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1994); Fon Louise Gordon, *Caste & Class: The Black Experience in Arkansas,*

1880-1920 (Athens, University of Georgia Press, 1995); Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Gender & Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: Harper Trade, 1996 rep.); Kevin K. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); and Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894-1994* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999).

[6]. Fon Louise Gordon's groundbreaking *Caste and Class: The Black Experience in Arkansas, 1880-1920* goes furthest towards acknowledging the fundamental rift between uplifters and working class African Americans. "The black experience in Arkansas at the turn of the century," she writes xii, "involved an internal struggle as well as an external struggle against Jim Crow...the black population [was] a diverse and dynamic community, not merely a monolith facing oppression."

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