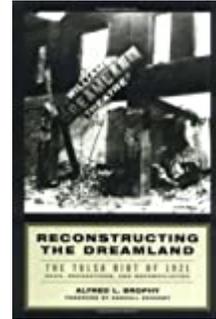




Alfred L. Brophy. *Reconstructing the Dreamland: The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921: Race, Reparations, and Reconciliation.* Preface by Randall Kennedy. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002. ix + 187 pp. \$25.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-514685-1.



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Published on H-Urban (March, 2002)

Making Amends in the Heartland: The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921

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Only recently has the Tulsa Race Riot become a topic of scholarly attention. For nearly eighty years, the events that destroyed Greenwood, the black section of Tulsa, Oklahoma, have remained unfamiliar to most students and scholars of American history. Even within the City of Tulsa and elsewhere in Oklahoma, much of what happened at the end of May and beginning of June 1921 was unknown. It seems unimaginable that the worst race riot in United States history has not been more extensively examined. In the 1920s, the Tulsa Race Riot made headlines across the nation, as both the black and white press covered the event. But in subsequent decades, little was written: a memoir, an occasional newspaper article to honor an anniversary, and R. Haliburton's 1972 article in *The Journal of Black Studies*. The first monograph, *Death in the Promise Land*, published by Scott Ellsworth in 1983, provides an historical narrative and highlights the influence of the local white press and the vigilante mentality and racism that permeated Oklahoma society. Since the mid-1990s, a few more studies have appeared, including

a novel and a play. The most recent addition to the scholarship is Alfred Brophy's *Reconstructing the Dreamland*.

With the establishment of the Race Riot Commission in 1997, Oklahomans and scholars have attempted to organize the historical memory of Tulsans. The commission has completed a thorough investigation of the events, but questions remain. The commission is not even sure of the death toll; it is estimated to be between 25 and 150. Brophy, a member of the commission and a law professor at the University of Alabama, answers the question of liability by exposing the negligence of Tulsa police officials. Brophy's study also examines the mind-set of African Americans living in Oklahoma prior to the riot and considers the issue of reparations.

At first glance, the Tulsa Race Riot does not seem different from those that plagued many U.S. cities during this period. In 1919 approximately twenty-five race riots occurred in cities as diverse as Chicago, Knoxville, and Omaha. The devastation led the Executive Secretary of the NAACP, James Weldon Johnson, to dub the period "the Red Summer." The cause of the riot in Tulsa was not unlike that found elsewhere. Dick Rowland, a

young black man, was accused of acting inappropriately toward a young white woman. What made Tulsa different was the extent of destruction, the irresponsibility of local officials, and the virtual silence that has surrounded the riot since. While the riot is imbedded in the historical memory of African Americans, others are ignorant of its occurrence.

The riot resulted in numerous deaths and the destruction of “thirty-five city blocks”—the result of dereliction of duty by law enforcement officers. Prior to the riot, Greenwood, located in North Tulsa, was known as the Black Wall Street for its thriving neighborhood of theaters, restaurants, retail stores, and a population of approximately eight thousand. It was separated from the rest of Tulsa, physically by railroad tracks and socially by racism. The destruction inflicted by the white mob reflected deep-seeded prejudice. Tulsa police officials deputized and armed white citizens, and the National Guard failed to protect the property of Greenwood residents.

One intriguing element of Brophy’s study is his focus on the faith black Oklahomans had in justice, but not in the state’s legal system. By studying the black press, he found that African Americans living in Oklahoma had a history of defending themselves against lynching and brutality at the hands of their white neighbors and law officers. Brophy attributes their resolve to the increasing sense of the “New Negro” and the belief in equality held by World War I veterans. As early as 1911, black Oklahomans warned that they “would take action to protect their lives and property” (p. 17). Over the years, African Americans often armed themselves and attempted to protect jailed black suspects. In 1920 A.J. Smitherman, editor of the black newspaper the *Tulsa Star*, castigated Oklahoma City residents for allowing the lynching of a black suspect in the custody of police. Smitherman and other black leaders “saw aggressive action as a way of seeking justice” (p. 21). Subsequently, in April 1921, black citizens of Muskogee freed a prisoner there; the shooting of a deputy sheriff in the process was viewed as “a justifiable act” (p. 21). Brophy concludes that “if the rule of law was going to prevail in Oklahoma, it would be through the actions of blacks, not the law officers” (p. 20).

Brophy’s study of state-wide events preceding the riot in Tulsa promotes a better understanding of the mind-set of both black and white Tulsans. When Greenwood residents heard that Dick Rowland was in custody for allegedly assaulting a white woman, they rightfully feared for his safety. The armed African Americans who appeared at the courthouse hoped to protect the young

man. Whites in the vicinity perceived this as a threat. Sheriff W.M. McCullough convinced the African Americans to return to North Tulsa by assuring them that Rowland was safe because he was barricaded with sheriff’s deputies on the top floor of the courthouse. The sheriff had given his men orders to shoot anyone who attempted to take Rowland. Before the black men had dispersed, however, a skirmish broke out and shots were fired. The black Tulsans left the courthouse, while whites congregated and offered their assistance to the police. Brophy found that police officials indiscriminately deputized white Tulsans. Those who did not receive badges were instructed to get weapons and were told where they might be obtained.

Based on eyewitness accounts given in several subsequent trials, including that of Police Chief John A. Gustafson, Brophy concludes that police officials armed the mob that was responsible for the deaths and destruction in Greenwood. Police Commissioner Jim Adkinson testified that “we were unable to limit the commissions to our choices.... Some of those men might have lost their heads” (p. 39). Chief Gustafson agreed with Adjunct General Charles Barrett of the National Guard that “those special deputies” were “the most dangerous part of the mob” (p. 59). The National Guard units from both Tulsa and Oklahoma City were also partly to blame. They failed to protect black Tulsans or their property. The guardsmen arrested some African Americans and interned others. The guard later argued that this was done to prevent additional violence. However, they failed to intervene when whites looted and burned homes and businesses in Greenwood.

Brophy, by utilizing the testimony of guardsmen, local police officials, and numerous white and black witnesses, proves the culpability of law enforcement officials. A white judge and fireman and a black repairman reported seeing “uniformed officers,” “deputy sheriffs and special deputies” looting and burning homes (pp. 54, 57, 58). Sheriff McCullough testified that on the morning of June 1st, he went to North Tulsa to persuade the armed white mob to stop the arson. McCullough added: “The police gave everyone a gun who came in [the station]” (p. 53). Brophy’s use of sources enriches the current literature. He also expands our knowledge of the events that transpired at the police station and in Greenwood. These accounts further support the contention that city law enforcement officers neglected their duty and were indirectly responsible for the murders and destruction of property.

In addition to establishing the liability of the police, Brophy comments on the issue of reparations. In late June 1921, a grand jury found that black Tulsans incited the riot. However, later that year, Police Chief Gustafson was tried for neglect of duty and was removed from office. And in 1926, the Oklahoma State Supreme Court found that the deputized officers were to blame for much of the destruction. Nonetheless, neither the city nor the state was held financially responsible. In his Epilogue, Brophy points to domestic and international examples in which reparations have been made to victims and/or their families. For example, reparations were made to Japanese Americans interned during World War II, the United States government and museums returned property to Native American groups, and savings account funds were given back to Holocaust victims. Brophy cites several factors supporting reparations in the Tulsa Race Riot, including the city's acknowledgement immediately following the riot that it had a moral obligation to assist the victims, the city and state's negligence, "very specific damage" in terms of loss of life and property, and the fact that some of the victims are still alive.

Brophy believes it is this last factor that is the most important—emphasizing the riot's "direct, living connection between the past and today" (p. 106). He believes that if "the government which wronged them has acknowledged that wrong," the healing process can begin (p. 106). Brophy argues that the city and state can recognize the injustice to Greenwood residents through various means. One example is Florida's 1994 appropriation of funds and the establishment of a scholarship to the survivors and families of the 1923 Rosewood Massacre. Brophy acknowledges that the probability of reparations to the victims of the Tulsa riot is very small. The Oklahoma State Legislature voted in 2001 not to make reparations to riot survivors directly. However, he believes that having the Race Riot Commission investigate and promote awareness of the events that occurred in 1921 "has already advanced the cause of justice" (p. xx).

Brophy's study also "advances the cause of justice"

by presenting previously unused sources, law cases, and eyewitness testimony, and uncovering the mind-set of African Americans in Tulsa during this period. *Reconstructing the Dreamland* is an important book for serious students of the Tulsa Race Riot. It is also useful to the reader who is encountering this heinous moment in United States history for the first time. Brophy's study is not only important for its contributions to the growing literature on the riot, but also for its discourse on reparations and reconciliation. The author acknowledges the delicate and sensitive nature of the debate but emphasizes the need for "moving in the direction of justice...[and] build[ing] trust in the community" (p. 112).

The title, *Reconstructing the Dreamland*, refers to the popular theater that was destroyed during the riot and later rebuilt. The Greenwood district was restored with little or no help from white Tulsa or city officials. In fact, Hannibal Johnson in *Black Wall Street* argues that Greenwood in the post-riot years was more prosperous than it had been in 1921. However, later in the twentieth century, Greenwood went into decline; the neighborhood became a victim once again. Most recently, a preservationist spirit has restored some of the old business district and established the Oklahoma Jazz Hall of Fame, an historic home, and a branch campus of Oklahoma State University. Greenwood is also home to an annual Juneteenth celebration. North Tulsa is once again undergoing a renaissance.

Oklahomans pride themselves on their ability to come together in times of crisis. Their resolve and compassion was evident in the aftermath of the bombing of the Murrow Federal Building in 1995, the devastating tornado of 1999, and the loss of ten members of the Oklahoma State University basketball program in a plane crash in 2001. Oklahomans, often with aid from outside the state, offered financial assistance to the victims and their families and created dignified and poignant memorials. Isn't it time for Oklahomans to make amends and recognize, repay, and honor the victims of 1921?

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Citation: Amy E. Carreiro. Review of Brophy, Alfred L., *Reconstructing the Dreamland: The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921: Race, Reparations, and Reconciliation*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. March, 2002.

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