

July 2008

Book Review of Thomas J. Davis, *Race Relations in America: A Reference Guide with Primary Documents*

Brant T. Lee

University of Akron, btlee@uakron.edu

Please take a moment to share how this work helps you [through this survey](#). Your feedback will be important as we plan further development of our repository.

Follow this and additional works at: http://ideaexchange.uakron.edu/ua_law_publications



Part of the [Law Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Brant T. Lee, *Thomas J. Davis' Race Relations in America: A Reference Guide with Primary Documents*, 26 Law & History Review 467 (2008) (book review).

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by The School of Law at IdeaExchange@UAkron, the institutional repository of The University of Akron in Akron, Ohio, USA. It has been accepted for inclusion in Akron Law Publications by an authorized administrator of IdeaExchange@UAkron. For more information, please contact mjon@uakron.edu, uapress@uakron.edu.

http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/lhr/26.2/br_24.html

From the *Law and History Review* Vol. 26, Issue 2.

Viewed February 25, 2009 9:59 EST

Presented online in association with the History Cooperative. <http://www.historycooperative.org>

Book Review

Thomas J. Davis, *Race Relations in America: A Reference Guide with Primary Documents*, Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2006. Pp. 301. \$75.00 (ISBN 0-313-31115-3).

One may be a serious student of race in America without having seriously thought to consider the entire history of U.S. race relations as a single piece. To convey the breadth and complexity of the subject while maintaining a coherent narrative is an ambitious and complicated undertaking. Thomas Davis's effort in *Race Relations in America* largely succeeds, on the strength of its structure and strong multiracial vision. 1

A significant strength of the book is the concept of the series of which it is a part, Major Issues in American History. Following the series format, each of the 15 chapters examines a watershed event in the history of race relations. Each chapter begins with a narrative introduction of 6–10 pages, followed by selected excerpts from historical documents. Thus, including the 18–page overview that introduces the book, Davis conveys his story in only half a book, roughly 140 pages of prose text. 2

And what is that story? Davis emphasizes how the national self-conception and motivating mythology has been racialized from the very beginning. The initial encounter with the American Indian was an engagement with an uncivilized "other" that was viewed in racial terms by European colonists. The developing conflict over slavery was not a fight about racial equality but a debate over whether black people should be exploited as slaves or excluded as inherently incompatible with the developing liberal society. The war with Mexico was a confrontation with an alternative American political arrangement, relatively nonracialized, one that the United States emphatically rejected. At each point Davis describes the tension between the advancement of white prestige and power and the gradual development of more universal democratic principles. In his narrative the more consistent and powerful theme is the protection of white privilege. 3

The first part of the book is the strongest and presents a compelling synopsis. After an initial chapter on the racial realities reflected in the Constitutional compromises, three chapters take us through the early nineteenth century struggles leading up to the Civil War, covering Indian wars and removals, slave rebellions and fears, and the racial aspects of the war with Mexico. The Civil War chapter is followed by four chapters that take us from the Civil War through the first half of the twentieth century, focusing on Reconstruction, the culmination of the Indian Wars, the progress of anti-Asian sentiment leading up to the Japanese American internment, and the urban migration of the black community. 4

The Civil Rights Movement gets its due in a chapter, but the race story gets murky from there, and the five chapters that take us to the present day reflect that ambiguity. They cover recent developments on Indian reservations, the backlash against affirmative action, the spectacle of the O. J. Simpson and Rodney King trials, the current state of indecision over immigration, and the status of Arabs and Muslims following 9/11. 5

There is clearly a multiracial approach here. Neither the selections nor the narrative structure nor even the cover photos reflect any narrow focus on black-white relations. Rather, the initial chapter on the racial formation of the nation emphasizes not only the slavery compromises embedded in the Constitution, but 6

the position of American Indians.

The Chronology provided at the outset sets forth not only the Fugitive Slave Act and the Montgomery bus boycott, but also the 1784 treaty with the Iroquois Confederation, the 1877 anti-Chinese riots in San Francisco, and the 1921 Tulsa Race Riot. The documentary selections show similar range. They include not only the expected excerpts from *Brown v. Board of Education* and *Plessy v. Ferguson*, but Frederick Douglass on the war with Mexico and the 2002 U.S. Census Bureau definition of Indian identity. 7

Davis has made strong choices and is not too timid to present a clear voice. Through clear prose and evocative documents, this book will help readers see more clearly that the plight of American Indians against the expanding frontier, and the developing storm over black slavery, and the war with Mexico were all taking place in the same time frame, and according to a single matrix of reasoning. Similarly, the book helps readers make the connection that the segregation and suppression of American Indians, Asian Americans, and blacks by military or mob violence in the twentieth century developed in parallel. 8

The logic of Davis's narrative captures the tragic predictability of American race relations. After 9/11, Davis writes, "Arabs and Muslims became targets of opportunity as U.S. political and popular reactions appeared to retrace centuries of American history in referencing enemies by race and objectifying them abroad and at home. The retold story replayed the clash of power and privilege against democratic and humanitarian principles that has consistently constituted U.S. race relations" (19). 9

Brant T. Lee
University of Akron

©2008 American Society for Legal History

Content in the History Cooperative database is intended for personal, noncommercial use only. You may not reproduce, publish, distribute, transmit, participate in the transfer or sale of, modify, create derivative works from, display, or in any way exploit the History Cooperative database in whole or in part without the written permission of the copyright holder.