

Roy Finklebine. *Sources of the African-American Past: Primary Sources in American History*. New York & Reading, MA: Longman Publishers of Addison Wesley Longman, Inc., 1997. Pp. xv, 215. Paper, \$6.32; ISBN 0-673-99202-0.

Brook Thomas, ed. *Plessy v. Ferguson: A Brief History with Documents*. Boston & New York: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1997. Pp. 205. Cloth, \$35.00; ISBN 0-312-16284-7. Paper, \$9.99; ISBN 0-312-16284-7.

Two new works document the history of African-American struggle for equal rights in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Finklebine's work, *Sources of the African-American Past: Primary Sources in American History*, is a welcome addition to the primary source literature on the perpetuity of, and challenges to, the social positions African Americans inhabited from the slave trade through recent times. Organized chronologically along topical lines, the book covers the slave trade, the colonial experience, the Revolution, free blacks, slavery, black abolitionism, emancipation, Reconstruction, segregation, progressivism, the New Deal, the two World Wars, migration, school segregation, the civil rights movement, black nationalism, and African Americans since 1968. Each section is introduced by a brief summary covering the general contours of the period. Critical, thought-provoking questions follow each section as well, as does a useful bibliography of each period.

Most of the sources are brief enough to retain a student's interest, yet each one reveals in some depth the richness of the African-American experience. Many of them have rarely been used before, and all evoke the major themes in African-American history--oppression, hope, and resistance--as reflected in the daily lives of the participants. Especially noteworthy are the selections from the lesser-known figures whose writings and/or views have received little mainstream attention. Thus, while the writings of Benjamin Banneker, Phyllis Wheatley, and Frederick Douglass are given appropriate attention, undergraduate students are also exposed to a varied set--former slaves, emigrants, poets--of African-American thinkers and activists they otherwise would not study in a standard history class. As just one example, Louisa Picquet, a mid-nineteenth-century domestic slave, tells of living with her older master, and having four of his children, in forced concubinage in New Orleans.

This diversity is one of the real strengths of the book. Finklebine presents a varied set of main actors--professionals, laborers, thinkers, radicals, soldiers, and others. He allows for the multi-dimensionality of the African-American experience in United States history to come through. Within their community, there was a set of status positions that belies easy conflation to one ideology or behavioral tendency. Yet the evidence is also clear that, underneath the diversity, blacks commonly faced a caste position in a society that for several hundred years practiced either legal or cultural apartheid. Despite its status mobility, or internal ideological differences, the African-American community was often judged in accordance with the overarching social definition of race in U.S. history.

Finklebine's collection of sources also points students to how standard interpretations of American history might be subjected to critical scrutiny through the use of primary sources temporally closest to the event. The 1851 speech by Sojourner Truth, which belies a later white feminist account that Truth speaks in slave dialect, and repeatedly utters a refrain, is a good example.

Perhaps more attention could have been given to the post-1968 period, which seems thin compared to the rest of the periods. Especially interesting would have been more information on the contemporary integration v. exclusion positions, the latter represented by Louis Farrakhan. An index would have also been helpful.

Brook Thomas's work is more, but not exclusively, legal in scope. *Plessy v. Ferguson: A Brief History with Documents* places racial attitudes in social context through speeches, essays, legal decisions, books, and other documents. The selections provide much argumentative depth on the racial equality issue. Complete speeches (one previously unpublished by Charles W. Chestnutt; one annotated by its author W.E.B. Dubois) and articles counterpoint the African-American viewpoint with those of a southern politician, a proponent of scientific racism, and a northern minister. The depth also prohibits as wide a selection of sources as in Finklebine's collection. Nevertheless, the practical and ideological implications of race in nineteenth-century America come through clearly. Thomas wants the book to allow students to understand the Court's reasoning in the *Plessy* case, the factors behind the decision, and the effects of the decision on race relations, as well as legal precedents.

There are three main points to the book: the legal issues in the *Plessy* case; the Court's opinion on the case in full, along with samples of different views on race, and varied reactions to the decision at the time; and a section on how the N.A.A.C.P. developed strategies to overturn the decision, and on how the decision affects racial politics today. The excellent appendices provide a brief profile of the members of the Court during the decision, a concise chronology of events associated with the cases, and some very useful summary questions dealing with the issues raised by the case.

While all sections are interesting, perhaps the most intriguing insight Thomas provides is how the *Plessy* case relates to contemporary discussions of race and affirmative action. It is ironic, he notes, that Justice Harlan's dissent in *Plessy v. Ferguson*--that the Constitution should be color blind--is now a position held by opponents of affirmative action. Also, the affirmative action debate is now faced by the same paradox that led the court to rule in 1954 that Jim Crow laws of separate but equal had not in fact produced equality in public schools. But the *Brown* paradox, Thomas wisely suggests, was based on clear historical/empirical evidence of the negative effects of school segregation. The 1978 *Bakke* paradox is future-oriented, asking Americans to assume (without any empirical evidence) that such a restriction on affirmative action will produce a color-blind society.

Both books are excellent sources for upper-level undergraduate courses, or as a primary source supplement for graduate classes, in African-American history or race

relations. Thomas's book would also be appropriate for classes in constitutional history, or twentieth-century U.S. studies. The works are also useful for providing lecture materials and selected source documents.

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**David Carlton and Peter A. Coclanis, eds. *Confronting Southern Poverty in the Great Depression: "The Report on Conditions of the South" with Related Documents.* Boston & New York: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1996. Pp. viii, 168. Paper \$7.50; ISBN 0-312-11497-4.**

Begun in 1993, the Bedford Series in History and Culture, edited by Natalie Zemon Davis and Ernest R. May, has become a wonderful addition to the study and teaching of American history. Designed as a week's worth of reading that combines a short narrative introduction with primary documents related to important personalities, events, writings, or critical historical eras, the Bedford books have uniformly been of high quality and especially helpful in developing the capacity for critical thought and analysis among undergraduate students. David L. Carlton and Peter A. Coclanis, editors of *Confronting Southern Poverty in the Great Depression*, have continued the fine standards of the series. The particular challenge they confront is in convincing students and others that the major document they have selected to explore poverty in the South during the 1930s, "The Report on Economic Conditions of the South," can speak to generations that are often unaware of that poverty--past or present. "Whether of southern origin or not," the editors note, "Americans today might well have a difficult time believing that the South was once defined in part as a uniquely poor region in a land of plenty. Those who have grown up during the glory years of the so-called Sunbelt, in particular, might find it surprising, even a little implausible, that a bit over fifty years ago the South was called 'the Nation's No. 1 economic problem' by no less an eminence than the president of the United States."

The "Report on Conditions of the South," published in 1938 by the federal government, was indeed crucial, not only in forcing national attention on southern poverty during the Great Depression era, but equally important in the role it played in President Franklin Roosevelt's attempt to "purge" his own Democratic Party of its right wing, primarily southern, opposition during the 1938 political election. Behind the famous Roosevelt attack on southern critics of the New Deal like Senator Walter George, whose Georgia re-election campaign first prompted FDR to proclaim the South as the "nation's number one economic problem," lay other significant concerns. It was pro-New Deal southern liberals like Francis Pickens Miller and young Clark Foreman, the first official New Deal "Adviser on Negro Affairs," who with a handful of other liberal white southerners within and outside the Roosevelt Administration,