



# Lincoln Lore

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## ERIC FONER'S *RECONSTRUCTION:* *AMERICA'S UNFINISHED REVOLUTION 1863-1877*

By Sarah McNair Vosmeier

Any history reflects the concerns and interests of its author; thus history is always influenced by the society in which it is written. This connection between contemporary issues and historical interpretation is especially clear in the historiography of Reconstruction: as our understanding of race and race relations has changed, so have our interpretations of the successes and failures of Reconstruction. Perhaps the most famous historian of Reconstruction was William A. Dunning, who taught at Columbia University from the 1880s to the 1920s, training a whole generation of historians in his perspective. He, and his followers, especially, believed that blacks were inherently inferior to whites and that Reconstruction was a horrible interlude in which corrupt Northerners and incompetent blacks ruled over the hapless white population. The Dunningites argued that civilization was restored only with the return of "home rule," a euphemism for white supremacy. W.E.B. Du Bois challenged this interpretation as early as 1910, and in 1935 he published *Black Reconstruction*, emphasizing the importance of social class for both white and black Southerners. However, his interpretation was largely ignored as long as historians continued to believe that blacks were naturally inferior to whites.

After World War II, influenced by the Civil Rights movement, historians began questioning the interpretations of earlier writers like Dunning. Until now, the more recent and accurate understanding of Reconstruction has been fragmented into narrowly defined studies of individual states or partial causes. Eric Foner explains in his preface that his aim in writing this book was "to combine the Dunning School's aspiration to a broad interpretive framework with the findings and concerns of recent scholarship — to provide, that is, a coherent, comprehensive modern account of Reconstruction" (p. xxiv). He succeeds magnificently.

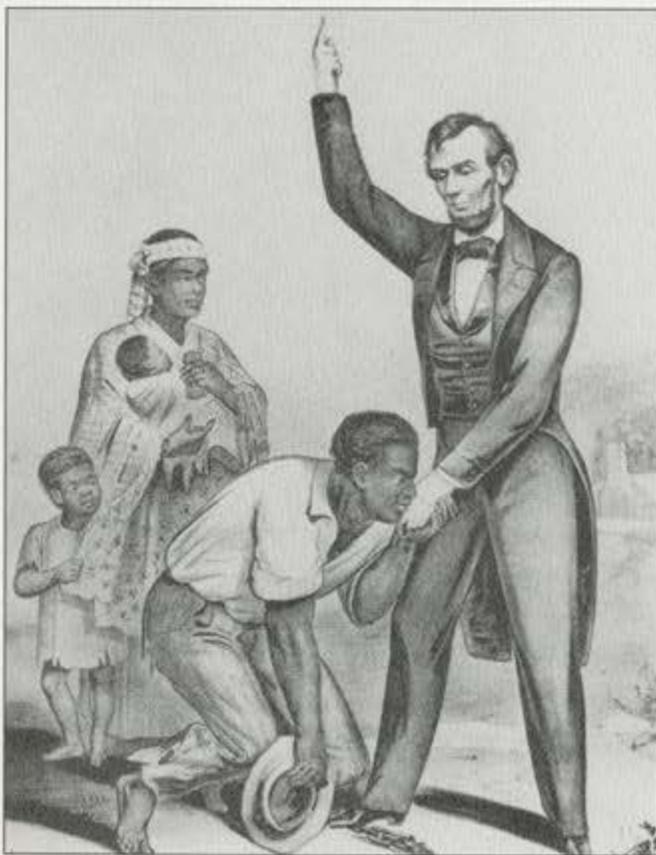
The diversity of themes and events Foner has brought into his synthesis is astonishing, as is the scope of his story. Chronologically, it begins in 1863, with the Emancipation Proclamation, and ends in

1877 with the presidency of Rutherford B. Hayes. Geographically, the story includes the North, the South, and even the West to some extent. Thematically, it concerns mostly the way class and race affected people's actions, but many other issues are touched upon. For example, Foner explains how Reconstruction affected the women's movement, showing how the suffragists moved toward elitism (and racism) after the Fourteenth Amendment failed to guarantee women's rights (pp. 255-56). He also touches on the government's Indian policy for this period, as when he notes that slaveholding Indians who had supported the Confederacy were forced to provide their ex-slaves with land — even when white slave-holders were not (p. 246).

Only a very good writer could manage to fit all of these themes into a readable narrative. Foner does so through a number of devices. First, he makes the black experience the focus of his story. For Foner, blacks were not simply the "problem" whites had to solve, and they did not passively accept programs imposed upon them by white politicians. As he demonstrates,

During the Civil War [the blacks'], actions helped force the nation down the road to emancipation, and in the aftermath of that conflict . . . did much to establish Reconstruction's political and economic agenda . . . . Black participation in Southern public life after 1867 was the most radical development of the Reconstruction years, a massive experiment in interracial democracy without precedent in the history of this or any other country that abolished slavery in the nineteenth century (p. xxiv). Not only does Foner make the black experience central to his story, but he uses the voices of Southern blacks to tell that story.

This skillful use of quotation is another way Foner keeps the book from degenerating into a confusing mass of unconnected dates and issues; the characters of his story come alive through their words, and they bring together the different issues Foner discusses. For example, using an 1869 letter to the governor of South Carolina, Foner



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FIGURE 1. Currier and Ives lithograph commemorating the Emancipation Proclamation. (Foner identifies the proclamation as the beginning of Reconstruction because after the 1863 the South could not return to the Union with slavery.)

lets A.D. Lewis, a black North Carolinian, describe race relations in the South.

I was in my field at my own work and this Jones [a white man] came by me and drove up to a man's gate that live close by . . . and ordered my child to come there and open that gate for him . . . while there was children in the yard at the same time not more than twenty yards from him and jest because they were white and mine black he wood not call them to open the gate. . . . I spoke gently to him that [the white children] would open the gate . . . . He got out of his buggy . . . and walked nearly hundred yards rite into my field where I was at my own work and double his fist and strike me in the face three times and . . . cursed me [as] a dum old Radical . . . . Now governor I wants you to please rite to me how to bring this man to jestus.

Foner uses this quotation, not only to give us a window into the ex-slaves' world, but to show how significant these minor incidents really were.

Lewis' letter conveys worlds of meaning about Reconstruction: his powerful sense of place, his quiet dignity in the face of assault, his refusal to allow his son to be treated differently from white children or to let a stranger's authority be imposed on his family, the way an everyday encounter rapidly descended into violence and acquired political meaning, and Lewis' assumption . . . that

blacks could expect justice from the government under which they lived (p. 122).

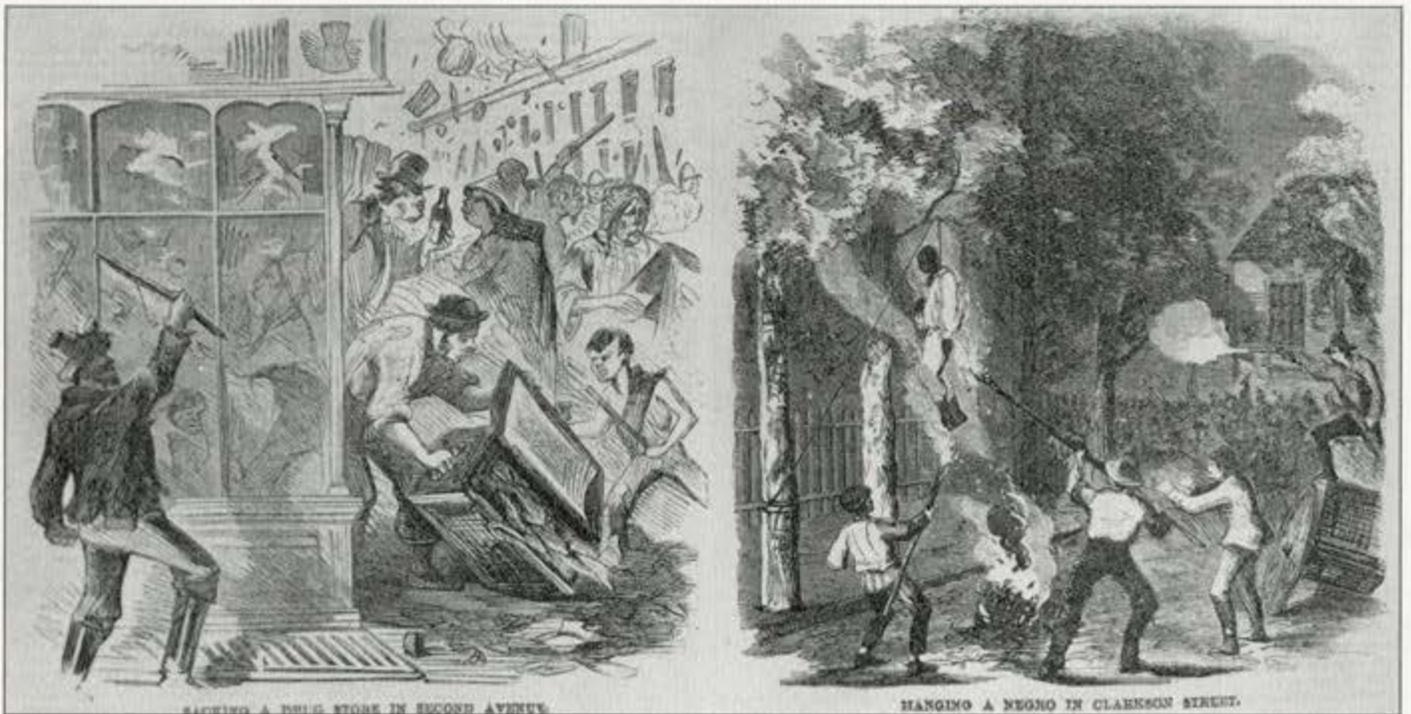
Another theme that ties Foner's book together is his emphasis on the importance of class and economic interest in understanding the conflicts of Reconstruction. Throughout the period, class interests affected how people tried to reshape the South. Although racism was obviously an important factor, Foner shows that economic concerns were more important than they might appear. For example, Foner shows how the planters wanted, above all else, to control labor.

Before the war, planters often encouraged their slaves to supplement their food rations by hunting or fishing; after the war though, many communities passed local ordinances outlawing poaching. These laws did allow vindictive whites to "get back at" their ex-slaves, but they also served a more practical, economic purpose: they were a means of forcing blacks to sign labor contracts with the planters. If the blacks had been able to hunt, they might have been able to eke out a meager existence independent of the whites. However, when they could not hunt, they had to *buy* all their food, and therefore had to contract with the planters for wages. Consequently, because local judges and sheriffs decided how strictly these laws were enforced, planters were willing to bargain away control over national or even state politics rather than lose control over local affairs.



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**FIGURE 2.** Mitchell home, Stone River Battlefield (near Murfreesboro, Tennessee). During Reconstruction, the ex-slaves hoped to preserve their independence by becoming land-owners. Even when they could not buy land, they tried to escape the communal living quarters and work patterns of the plantations to sharecrop in single family units. Although this cabin looks isolated, it retains some communalism because it is a "double log cabin" apparently shared by two families.



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FIGURE 3. New York Draft Riot, from *Harper's Weekly*, August 1, 1863 — illustrating Foner's themes of class and racial conflict (workers attacking wealth on the left, blacks on the right).

If class and economic concerns were important in the South during Reconstruction, they were equally important in the North, and they explain, in large part, why Northerners eventually abandoned Reconstruction. A financial panic in 1873 led to a deep depression during the 1870s. (In fact, this period was known as "the Great Depression" until the stock market crash of 1929 ushered in an even deeper depression.) During the 1870s competition between Northern businesses became increasingly cut-throat, with entrepreneurs cutting costs and increasing productivity at the expense of their employees. The resulting class conflict changed the way Northern elites thought about workers in general, and therefore changed how they thought about the ex-slaves. As Foner explains, the depression of the 1870s "rudely disrupted visions of social harmony" and the dream that America was a society without class conflict.

As widespread tension between labor and capital emerged as the principal economic and political problem of the day, public discourse fractured along class lines . . . In the nation's large cities, and at the upper echelons of both major parties, older notions of equal rights and the dignity of labor gave way before a sense of the irreducible barriers separating the classes and a preoccupation with the defense of property . . . and the economic status quo (p. 517).

Thus, Northern industrialists began enacting laws to control their labor force, and these Northern laws sometimes bore remarkable resemblance to the laws Southern whites enacted to control black laborers. For example, in Indiana, new laws forced men who refused employment to work on city streets, and allowed convicts to be "leased" out to local manufacturers; these laws resembled Southern vagrancy laws which forced blacks into labor contracts and leased Southern black criminals to local planters (p. 519).

This decreasing sympathy for the working class in the North allowed more overt racism to creep into public discussions of Reconstruction. Foner cites James S. Pike, Lincoln's ambassador to the Netherlands, as one of the most influential examples of this trend of increasingly blatant racism. Pike had been an abolitionist journalist before the war, but in 1873 he began writing articles describing Reconstruction in South Carolina in virulently racist terms. (The articles were later gathered together and published as *The Prostrate State*.) Pike described South Carolina govern-

ment as being overrun with corruption and controlled by "a mass of black barbarism . . . the most ignorant democracy that mankind ever saw." Pike's influential descriptions encouraged Northerners to see the planters as the legitimate rulers of the South and blacks an animal-like beings who needed to be controlled.

Lincoln, himself, appears in less than 50 of Foner's pages, but the actions of his associates (like Pike) during Reconstruction often reveal aspects of their characters that might not have been obvious during Lincoln's lifetime. For example, Lincoln students who have not explored American politics after Lincoln's death might be surprised by General Benjamin "Beast" Butler's life after the war (see pp. 431-492). Butler had been a Democrat in the 1850s, but later converted to Republicanism. After the war he became even more radical, shocking reform-minded Republicans like Carl Schurz with his radical agenda as well as his political style. Frequently equated with Karl Marx, Butler advocated legislation (like limiting the work day to eight hours) that was criticized as an attack on private property. His political style even inspired the word "Butlerism" to describe a new form of mass politics. Butler was a master of a kind of emotional politicking that was eventually known as "waving the bloody shirt." (When the Republicans "waved the bloody shirt" they appealed to the voters' emotional loyalty for the Union and avoided discussing the issues.) The phrase may in fact originate with one of Butler's stunts. While arguing for legislation against the Ku Klux Klan, Butler actually brought a bloody shirt into Congress as evidence of a brutal whipping a Northerner had received in the South.

Even Lincoln students with limited knowledge about events after 1865 should have no difficulty with Foner's book because he does not assume prior knowledge of Reconstruction events. However, he does not always define his terms explicitly. "White line" Democrats are referred to several times, but not indexed. (White Line was a group similar to the KKK, but in this context, Foner apparently means Democrats who emphasized the "color line," and prevented blacks from voting.) "Stalwart" Republicans (who emphasized the importance of party organization and patronage, ignoring ideology) are defined only in context on page 484.

Foner's book is so impressive that one reviewer has complained, "because this synthesis is so successful and thorough, it does raise one unsettling question. . . what is left to be done?" (Michael

Perman in "Eric Foner's *Reconstruction*," *Reviews in American History*, March, 1989). Given the historiography of Reconstruction so far, it is unlikely that Foner's book will remain unchallenged forever. Historians will probably find new information about Reconstruction, and they are certain to change their minds about it eventually. C. Vann Woodward has recently suggested the movement he thinks the history of race relations should take ("*Strange Career Critics*," *Journal of American History*, December, 1988). He notes that reviewers of books like Foner's often "pronounce works good because they promote good works — worthy causes, movements for justice, equality, the brotherhood of man, the sisterhood of women," but he points out that these good works can cause problems of their own.

I wonder if we have been sufficiently alerted to the menace of morals — moral concerns such as the passion for justice, the commitment to decent human relations . . . . Before proceeding further, let me say that I am not against morals or justice or decency or noble causes. I am only saying that the integrity of the art over which Clio presides can be threatened by the just as well as the unjust, the righteous as well as the unrighteous, the moral as well as the immoral.

Perhaps the greatest strength of Foner's book is his treatment of Southern blacks. It is a joy to read about the small heroisms of blacks in the post-Civil War South and to understand the way they shaped much of what happened during Reconstruction — especially since previous histories have often ignored or denigrated them in favor of the more visible elites. Nevertheless, if another history of Reconstruction takes this book's place, it may be because of

Foner's treatment of ex-slaves.

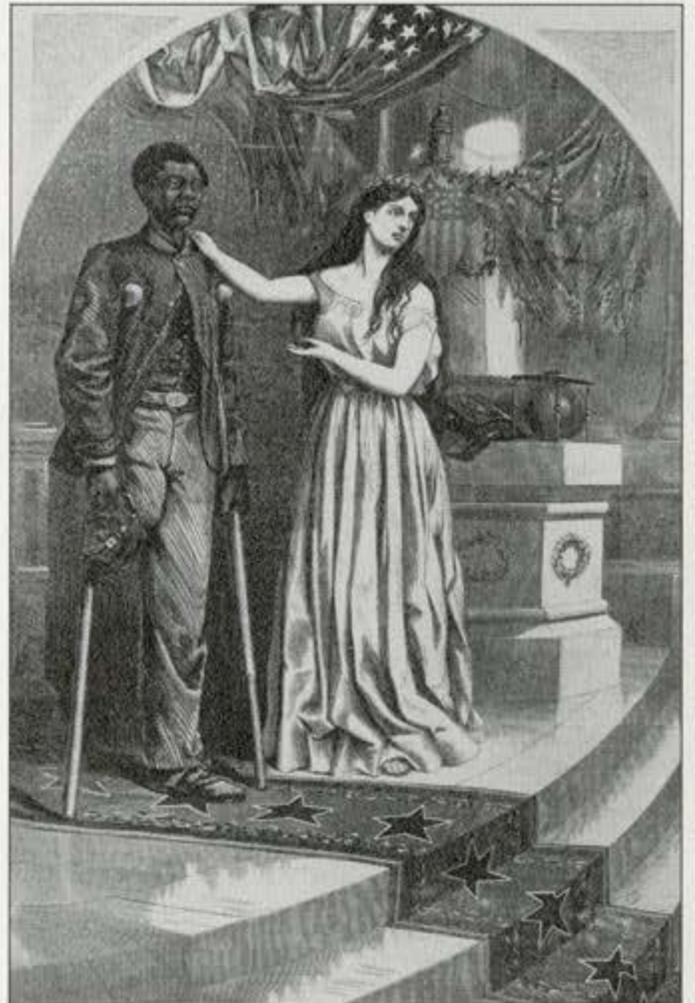
In Foner's story the ex-slaves are easy for modern readers to identify with, and they seem to be the only ones who understood the realities of Reconstruction. For example, unlike Northern reformers who believed in utopian ideas about free labor, the ex-slaves knew they needed land and economic independence to become truly free. Furthermore, the ex-slaves were under no illusions about other groups' interests, whereas white Northerners and Southerners (and even blacks who had been freed before the war) misunderstood each others' motives and interests. (Foner explains that President Andrew Johnson "held the view — not uncommon among Southern yeomen — that slaves had in some way joined forces with their owners to oppress nonslaveholding whites" [p. 181].) The only error in judgement the ex-slaves made was in expecting the federal government to protect their rights, but from a modern point of view this error seems reasonable, and even commendable because it meant that the blacks did not turn to violence as the whites did. Once we know Foner's heroes as well as we know his villains, we may find the ex-slaves were as irrationally human as the rest of the characters in his story.

In any case, Foner's work is good — and not just because it promotes good works. We can expect *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution 1863-1877* to remain the standard work for many years — perhaps as long as William Dunning's account did. Foner addresses the complexity of the post-war period, touching on a wide diversity of issues and events connected with Reconstruction, and he describes how Reconstruction affected the North as well as the South. Significantly, he gives blacks the attention they deserve as important actors in Southern history. Finally, he unifies the complexity of his story by making blacks central to the story, by focusing on the themes of class and racial conflict, but, above all, by good writing and skillful use of quotations that let the historical characters tell the story themselves.



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FIGURE 4. Benjamin Franklin "Beast" Butler.



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FIGURE 5. *Harper's Weekly*, August 5, 1865. At first, Northerners were generally sympathetic to the ex-slaves, although this attitude later changed in the 1870s.