



Those Terrible Carpetbaggers : A Reinterpretation

Richard Nelson Current

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Woodrow Wilson described them as men bent on "an expedition of profit," who used "the negroes as tools for their own selfish ends." Horace Greeley, while running for President, said they were "fellows who crawled down south in the track of our armies, generally at a very safe distance in the rear." And in the South they were hotly condemned as "the larvae of the North," "vulturous adventurers," and "vile, oily, odious." But how accurately does this describe the men from the North who came to be called "carpetbaggers"? Were they uneducated, penniless exploiters of the freed slave, jackals who plundered a devastated South? In this eye-opening account, the eminent Civil War historian Richard Nelson Current weaves together the biographies of ten of these men--all of whom are representative, if not the epitome, of the men called "carpetbaggers." The result is a provocative revisionist history of Reconstruction and what has long been considered its "most disgraceful" episode. Set within the larger context of Congressional politics and the history of individual Southern states, Current's narrative reveals a group of men who were often highly educated, almost all of whom had served with distinction in the Union Army (three were generals), and several of whom brought their own money down South to help rebuild a war-torn land. Daniel H. Chamberlain, for instance, was educated at Yale and Harvard Law School--he was described by the President of Yale as "a born leader of men"--was governor of South Carolina, and later made a fortune as a Wall Street lawyer. Adelbert Ames, far from exploiting the black, was a leading exponent of black rights, the author of the main brief of the Supreme Court case *Plessy v. Ferguson*, a major court battle against segregation. And Albion W. Tourgee, author of the best-selling *A Fool's Errand*, was praised after his death by W.E.B. du Bois for his efforts on behalf of the freed slaves. Current's vivid narrative captures the passions of this tumultuous period as he documents the careers and private lives of these ten prominent men. But more important, he provides a major reinterpretation of the entire period, revealing Reconstruction as it was seen by ten of its leading exponents in the South.

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