Black Miami in the Twentieth Century. By Marvin Dunn

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BOOK REVIEWS


Marvin Dunn provides readers with a detailed account of African-American contributions to Miami's history and culture. Despite the book's focus on the twentieth century, Dunn sets the stage by briefly recounting blacks' presence in Florida from the mid-seventeenth century. The author organizes his work chronologically, first setting the stage by discussing migration and settlement patterns in Miami and Dade County. He then reviews changes during the Civil Rights era and school desegregation, and finishes with an in-depth discussion of race riots in Miami. This work concentrates on the public life of Miami's blacks and only to a lesser extent on private feelings and actions. Thus, we learn much about the public fight against discrimination but not the dynamics which brought diverse people together to join in that struggle. Likewise, we are introduced predominately to black elites and not to common men and women.

In detailing the growth of the black community, Dunn recounts four distinct phases: the collapse of the Bahamian economy in the 1880s, the Great Freeze in the southeastern U.S. in 1894-1895, the development of Florida's East Coast Railroad in 1896, and later economic and political turmoil in Haiti and Cuba. One of the most valuable aspects of this study is its recognition of the diversity within Miami's African-American population. While there is often a tendency to see the black community as monolithic, Dunn shows that first Bahamian and later Cuban and Haitian immigration influenced a community which, while often sharing skin color, differed greatly in its perspective.

This book is not just about the black experience, for Dunn acknowledges that both blacks and whites built the city, struggled for what each thought was right, and at times even worked together to overcome blacks' second-class citizenship status. Of particular interest is his evidence that blacks and whites participated together in civil rights organizations like the NAACP and CORE. Indeed, he finds that in Miami whites comprised one-fourth of NAACP membership and two-thirds of the participants in CORE resistance activities. Despite examples of racial solidarity, Dunn also discusses common practices permitting whites to operate businesses catering to all while relegating African Americans to business opportunities only within the black community. Despite the inherent unfairness of this, it did provide black businessmen with opportunities to prosper, albeit within a limited market. The author also examines the tumultuous beginnings of neighborhood desegregation. By the 1920s, blacks comprised 32 percent of the city's population, but only occupied 10 percent of the city's available space. Dunn recounts how opportunistic real estate brokers used the fear of integrated neighborhoods to drive down prices of white housing. White realtors then resold the homes to black families at inflated prices. The result was desegregation, but at the price of increased racial friction.

Dunn devotes considerable space to tracing racial incidents in the city from 1898 to 1980. While these incidents are not directly related, they that show the potential for violent clashes remains near the surface. Many of Dunn's findings reflect the situation in other southern cities, showing that, in many ways, Miami was not all that different from other locales. Dunn claims, however, that the presence of many northern whites in Miami made the social climate there less
Having said this he notes that black frustration with limitations imposed by the white community took several forms, including civil disobedience, black self-help organizations, and political organizations such as CORE and the NAACP. He also notes that relations between the black community and police have always been strained in Miami. Until the 1950s arbitrary arrests and torture were not uncommon. Although reform efforts eradicated some of the most egregious abuses, a legacy of mistrust remains.

This book is primarily a local study that will most interest citizens of Miami, but it does an excellent job of documenting the activities and contributions of those often ignored in white-authored histories. Dunn makes excellent use of local and state archives to provide readers with evidence to support his points. He also deftly uses oral histories to bring previously unknown stories and perspectives to public attention.

Kathleen S. Howe