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## **Too Great a Burden to Bear: The Struggle and Failure of the Freedmen's Bureau in Texas**

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ISBN: 978-08232-7176-4.

During and after the U.S. Civil War, many Republicans envisioned a program of Reconstruction that would refashion the postwar South in the image of the free labour North. Central to their ability to do so was the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, usually referred to as the Freedmen's Bureau. Christopher B. Bean, currently Associate Professor of History and Native American Studies at East Central University, provides a detailed overview of the Bureau's Texas activities, with particular attention to subassistant commissioners, "the men in direct contact with Southern civilians" (p. 2). The typical Texas subassistant commissioner "was a well-intentioned, honest man toward the freedpeople. Although influenced by contemporary attitudes toward labour, dependency, and gender, for his time he engaged in work seen as quite philanthropic" (p. 3). This judicious study explores both the shortcomings and successes of the Bureau and its agents and provides in-depth, insightful analysis of how policy unfolded on the ground in Texas.

Who were the Bureau agents? The vast majority were white and two-thirds of them were born north of the Mason-Dixon Line. Furthermore, many southern-born agents came from states like Alabama, Tennessee, and Virginia with large unionist populations. Military officers played an important role in the life of the Bureau and, as might be expected, the Bureau usually distrusted the planter class and shied away from employing planters as civilian agents. In sum, the Bureau "hesitated to employ men from the former Confederacy and desired men with Northern roots" (p. 10). When discussing why men joined the Bureau, the author makes an important point: different

occupations would have been safer and financially more remunerative. He contends that men joined the Bureau for reasons beyond the desire for employment. Some emphasized the opportunities the Bureau provided to help the freedpeople. Others wanted to promote Radical Republican ideology. Some served from patriotism, where others desired revenge against the rebels. In other words, many motivations drove men to join the Bureau, not just a pressing need for employment.

*Too Great a Burden to Bear* analyzes the Bureau during the leadership of four Assistant Commissioners: E. M. Gregory, J. B. Kiddoo, Charles Griffin, and J. J. Reynolds. Gregory, the first Assistant Commissioner, had an exceptionally difficult task. War had barely touched Texas and in many locales life continued unchanged. Feuds between assistant and subassistant commissioners, as well as subassistant commissioners and local authorities complicated the work of Bureau agents. Furthermore, many subassistant commissioners felt their superiors did not understand the problems they faced. In addition to squabbles, both internal and external, Bureau agents had to calm white Texans, who believed African Americans planned to rebel and murder all white Texans. In addition, Gregory's agents faced the headache of trying to develop a system of free labour. To do so, they turned to the contract, but planters did not prove willing to sign contracts and agents had to explain to freedpeople that "free labor and contracting meant freedom" (p. 40). Subassistant commissioners, following Gregory's policies, generally took a more lenient approach toward former slaves when they enforced contracts. Thus, they did not leave the freedpeople to the tender mercies of white Texans.

Gregory lasted less than a year. In March 1866, Commissioner Oliver Otis Howard reassigned Gregory to Washington because many Texans disapproved of his zeal in favour of the freedpeople. Howard

replaced Gregory with J. B. Kiddoo. Problematically, white Texans saw Gregory's removal as a victory. Thus, they were encouraged to greater resistance. Agents faced intransigent local and state officials emboldened by Andrew Johnson's lenient policies, to say nothing of an unpleasantly contentious populace. In the face of continued white resistance, Bureau agents often called on soldiers. In addition, agents could place offenders on trial in Bureau courts. Bureau men usually "cast a skeptical eye toward claims by employers against their hands" and "suspicion sometimes guided their policy toward whites" (p. 72). Furthermore, during the Kiddoo era, agents attempted to modify what they saw as problematic behaviour by the freedpeople and "constantly battled behavior contrary to Victorian societal norms" (p. 92). In particular, agents instituted regulations about marriage and divorce. However, although they played a heavy-handed role in attempting to modify elements of the freedpeople's behaviour, Bean contends that agents should not be held responsible for the development of sharecropping because they lacked uniformity about whether wage labour or sharecropping was better for the freedpeople.

In late 1866, General Charles Griffin, commander of the District of Texas, relieved Kiddoo of his position and succeeded him as Assistant Commissioner. Although the Bureau reached its apex, in terms of agents employed, under Griffin, the new Assistant Commissioner began to transfer responsibilities to the civil authorities. He hoped that newly-enfranchised African Americans would create a "new order" in Texas, one based on the ballot and jury service. Indeed, Griffin "hoped his 'new order' would further freedpeople's self-reliance with little interference (beyond protection of their wages) by subassistant commissioners" (p. 111). However, all that said, Griffin did not leave freedpeople without any protections. His expansion of Bureau personnel placed

an agent within the reach of all citizens. Furthermore, during the Griffin era, Bureau agents became very involved in politics, to the point that they became "foot soldiers for a Republican political machine" (p. 116). Indeed, agents "winked at the idea of being nonpartisan. Considering their work, it was difficult to be anything but politically involved" (p. 123). As voter registration proceeded in Texas, white resistance intensified and white people turned their anger on both freedpeople and Bureau agents. Bean details the economic, social, and physical dangers commissioners faced and how "constant strain could be just as debilitating as physical violence" (p. 137).

After Griffin died of yellow fever, Joseph J. Reynolds replaced him and oversaw the end of the Bureau's work in Texas. At Griffin's death, the Bureau had the highest number of agents and subdistricts it would ever have. However, from that point onward, it gradually lessened operations. Furthermore, "most of Reynolds's policies were to prepare the freedpeople for the day without the agency" (p. 150). Many agents were profoundly unhappy about the Bureau ceasing operations. They believed that their work remained unfinished and that departing would leave the freedpeople vulnerable to intransigent white rebels. In the long run, according to Bean, historians should exercise some caution when analyzing the Bureau. As he comments, "critics must remember not all things were possible after the Civil War. Those so-called failed promises, in other words, were incapable of being fulfilled" (p. 181).

The portrayal of Bureau agents in this book is positive. Bean clearly dislikes the argument that Bureau agents were overly conservative. He contends that they were active and sympathetic to the freedpeople. In addition, he makes the important point that black people frequently turned to the Bureau for help and thus argues against scholars who suggest freedpeople sought help either infrequently or not at all from

the Bureau. Furthermore, he contends agents had not “internalized the nineteenth century cultural stereotype of the promiscuous black female” (p. 94) and thus refutes studies suggesting Bureau agents did not prosecute sexual assaults. However, his praise of Bureau agents might have been more measured at times. As he observes, “in conjunction with teaching the freed community to abide by the law, subassistant commissioners tried to educate them to contemporary social behavior” (p. 89). One wonders if he misses some of the paternalism and racism of Bureau agents. Furthermore, many freedpeople undoubtedly knew how to abide by the law before the arrival of the Bureau. For that matter, Bureau agent standards of behaviour were not the only standards of behaviour at the time. In any case, while he is correct that Bureau agents are often unfairly maligned, he is sometimes overly laudatory in his praise.

In sum, *Too Great a Burden to Bear* is an interesting and well-written account of the Freedmen’s Bureau, its agents, and several years of operations in Texas. Bean pays attention to individual stories and to the broader context and the result is an excellent overview, both for people new to the subject and those with some background in Texas history. This book will be useful in upper-division undergraduate courses as well as graduate seminars.

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