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Book Review: A Right to Read; Segregation and Civil Rights in Alabama's Public Libraries, 1900-1965

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Book Review

Graham, Patterson Toby. *A Right to Read: Segregation and Civil Rights in Alabama's Public Libraries, 1900-1965*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002. 200 pp.

In the mid-1930's a system of segregated libraries with small, understaffed and poorly funded branches for African-Americans existed in a few of Alabama's cities and in rural Walker County. By 1963 libraries in Mobile, Montgomery, Huntsville, Birmingham, Selma, and Anniston (and presumably other Alabama cities and towns) had been desegregated, some peacefully and some not so peacefully. The Alabama Library Association began accepting African-Americans as members two years later, in 1965.

Dr. Graham's extremely interesting and well-written work is a detailed account of the varying levels of library access afforded Alabama's African-American citizens from 1900 to 1965. It is based on painstakingly sound research in books, journals, newspapers, correspondence, library board minutes and records, and interviews with librarians and others who related their own experiences. The book contains an introduction and conclusion, five chapters of text, twenty-one pages of notes, and a bibliographic essay.

Chapter One, "Black Libraries and White Attitudes, The Early Years," discusses the period from 1918-1931 and the segregated (for blacks only) libraries in Birmingham and Mobile, the first Alabama cities to have any sort of library service for African Americans. Chapter Two, "Black Libraries and White Attitudes II, The Depression Years," tells about the Julius Rosenwald project, which funded a network of libraries for African Americans in Walker County and the respective roles of the Works Projects Administration and the Tennessee Valley Authority in providing them somewhat limited library service. Chapter Three, "African-American Communities and the Black Public Library Movement, 1941-1954," focuses on efforts to secure libraries for their communities by Huntsville, Montgomery and Birmingham's African-American civic organizations, educators, clergy, business leaders and librarians.

Chapter Four, "The Read-In Movement, Desegregating Alabama's Public Libraries, 1960-1963," relates the sit-ins, read-ins, and other events that occurred during the integration of libraries in Mobile, Montgomery, Huntsville, Birmingham, and Anniston. Chapter Five,

"Librarians and the Civil Rights Movement, 1955-1965," tells of the bravery of three librarians: Juliette Morgan (Montgomery Public), Emily Reed (director of the state library agency), and Patricia Blalock (director of Selma Public) and of the actions and non-actions of the American and Alabama Library Associations. Dr. Graham's annotated bibliography should prove tremendous assistance to other scholars of both public library history and of the civil rights movement in Alabama. Especially helpful are the sections on Atlanta University Theses and on using unpublished sources.

Dr. Graham holds a masters in History and both a masters and doctorate in Library Science from the University of Alabama. His knowledge of the civil rights movement and his insights into the conflict of values experienced by Alabama librarians are evident throughout his work. Southeastern librarians, many of whom will remember and relate with the description of events during the sixties, will find this book a fascinating read. For some it may shed light on events that occurred in their own states and libraries. It is this reviewer's hope that Dr. Graham's work will also lead to further reading and research on libraries and race relations, an important and highly relevant topic for today's librarians.

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