

The Devil's Own Work: The Civil War Draft Riots and the Fight to Reconstruct America

By Barnet Schecter

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On July 13, 1863, the largest riots in American history broke out on the streets of New York City, nearly destroying in four days the financial, industrial, and commercial hub of the nation. Placing the riots in the context of social tension and reform from the 1840s through the 1870s, Barnet Schecter sheds new light on the Civil War era and on the history of protest and reform in America.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly
The 1863 draft riots in New York City, the bloodiest in the nation's history, emerge as a microcosm of the convoluted and contradictory politics of the Civil War era in this absorbing study. Historian Schecter (*The Battle for New York: The City at the Heart of the American Revolution*) pens with a gripping account of the five days of rioting. But he also probes beneath the turmoil to examine the ethnic, religious and class conflicts that made the confrontation so explosive. The rioters, largely working-class Irish Catholics, vented their fury at a draft law that exempted those who could pay $300, at the city's WASP Republican business elite and, inflamed by racist demagoguery, at African-Americans with whom they competed for low-wage jobs and status in America's racial hierarchy.Schecter contends that these dynamics played out nationally in the gradual demise of Reconstruction, thus setting the stage for racial and labor conflict in the century to come. Copiously researched and highlighted with a wealth of period commentary, his lucid narrative colorfully recreates a historical watershed and offers a rich exploration of the Civil War's unfinished business. 40 b&w photos, maps, not seen by *PW*.
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From Booklist
When fireman Peter Masterson led a mob's attack on a federal draft office, producing the first murders of New York City's 1863 riot, he ignited social tinder that was not exclusive to New York in mid-nineteenth-century America. Historian Schecter backgrounds his thorough account of the tumult with social disorders that frequently occurred elsewhere. To existing social resentments, particularly of Irish immigrants toward economic competition from blacks, the Civil War added its combustibles, for New York was not stoutly Unionist. Peace Democrats dominated its politics; its business class sympathized with the South; and its Copperhead newspapers denounced the war and the draft. These factors affected the course of events that Schecter masterfully narrates. From Masterson's initial incitement to the frenzy's subsidence several days and hundreds of deaths later, the author moves seamlessly between the conflagration on the street and the frantic attempts of authorities to quell the mayhem, and explains the affair's ramifications on the Reconstruction era. An excellent encapsulation of the war's social context in the North. *Gilbert Taylor*
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Review

“The most lethal urban riot in American history, the New York City draft riots in July 1863 were not an isolated event. Barnet Schecter provides the most detailed narrative of the riots, and also places them within the national context of the Civil War and the local context of ethnic, racial, and political conflict during the decades from the 1840s to the 1870s. The experience of New York's African American community receives more attention in *The Devil's Own Work* than in any other study.” ?*James M. McPherson, author of Battle Cry of Freedom*

“An acute study of perhaps New York City's most barbarous episode...Schecter throws a wide net in his detailed account of the riots, setting the violence amid the racism, political corruption and brutal inequities of the time, looking not only at what inspired the rebellion, but also at what it left in its wake.” ?*Alison McCulloch, New York Times Book Review*

“A coruscating chronicle of this shameful episode in American history. He might well have contented

himself with a blow-by-blow account, but he also lays bare the depth of pro-Southern "copperhead" sentiments in the North--in New York City in particular--and the persistence of such sentiments after the war.” ?*Fergus M. Bordewich, Wall Street Journal*

“A fascinating look at the explosive witches' brew of resentment and rage that ignited deadly Civil War draft riots and which continued to haunt the nation for another hundred years thereafter. It's all here in this thought-provoking and meticulously rendered work: race and class, protest and reform, and a myriad of colorful voices.” ?*Jay Winik, author of April 1865: The Month That Saved America*

“Schecter's riveting narrative places the violence, dramatized by Martin Scorcese's "Gangs of New York," in a national context, as a microcosm of forces that deferred integration for a century.” ?*USA Today*

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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