



Dennis, Michael Blood on Steel: Chicago Steelworkers and the Strike of 1937 Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press 152 pp., \$19.95 ISBN 9781421410180 Publication Date: August 2014

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Blood on Steel: Chicago Steelworkers and the Strike of 1937
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Blood on Steel, essentially a slimmer version of Michael Dennis's 2010 book on the same subject (*The Memorial Day Massacre and the Movement for Industrial Democracy*, Palgrave Macmillan), is a successful introduction to the New Deal-era labor movement that uses Chicago's Memorial Day Massacre of 1937 as a lens through which to explore the politics of mass protest during the Great Depression. Here, Dennis (professor of history at Acadia University) dispenses with the longer backstory, as presented in his earlier work, in favor of focusing more narrowly on the massacre itself, suggesting that it is most productively understood from the bottom up as "one of the moments in the 1930s when a progressive alliance began to live according to a set of ideals that rejected the primacy of profits and private property over human rights" (110).

Dennis begins *Blood on Steel* by situating the massacre not only in the immediate context of the Little Steel Strike, which "expressed the egalitarian themes of the era" and "became part of the larger reorientation of American values in the era of the Great Depression" (9), but also in the broader context of mass protest in the 1930s, which included everything from the Communist Party's Unemployed Councils to the emergence of the sit-down strike. The second chapter narrows Dennis's focus further to the local, examining how the Chicago Police Department had already established its violent hostility toward the labor movement, in part because of the movement's racial and ethnic diversity. Given this groundwork, it's a little surprising that Dennis neglects to mention the 1931 Chicago Massacre, in which three African American Communist protestors were slain by police, but, on the whole, the first two chapters are a concise and effective

setup for the blow-by-blow account of the massacre itself.

Drawing heavily on testimony at a US Senate inquiry into the massacre, Dennis renders the event itself in perhaps overly fine detail, but he succeeds in vividly illustrating the callousness of the police and the helplessness of the victims; ten were killed and dozens more injured at the mass meeting that had drawn approximately 2,000, including women and children. The next chapter examines how the widely disseminated film footage and still images of the massacre were crucial in catalyzing the Senate hearings and building public support for the victims, as well as exposing the police force's complicity with the steel industry in strikebreaking. The final chapter attributes the failure to translate public outrage over the massacre into tangible labor gains to union leadership's reluctance to endorse mass protest tactics, as well as media hostility, which generally fueled perceptions of the movement as dangerous and violent. Dennis, perhaps, attributes slightly too much significance to the massacre when he concludes that, although those gathered represented the real but unrealized potential for mass protest, the fallout from that day "did away with the belief that mass protests based on broad alliances could challenge economic injustices" (103). Indeed, given the broader trends examined, it seems just as likely that the fate of the labor movement would have been the same had the massacre not happened at all.

That said, Dennis encourages readers to engage with the broad questions surrounding mass protest and the working classes "that have occupied advocates of social justice since the Gilded Age" (114), and I read *Blood on Steel* in late 2014, as outrage over the grand jury decision in Eric Garner's Staten Island death at the hands of the NYPD peaked, the Black Lives Matter movement ebbed and flowed, and some ideological remnants of 2011's Occupy Wall Street movement seemed to have made their way into the nation's political discourse concerning income inequality and the one percent. It is difficult to avoid

seeing parallels between 1937 and 2014, from the ways in which nascent social movements attempt to sustain themselves in order to effect change to the ways in which lethal police force was—and is—leveled against racial minorities and the working classes with relative impunity (not to mention the role video evidence might play in stoking outrage and spurring reform). Although *Blood on Steel* does not add much to Dennis's earlier work, it is a testament to the book's success that it raises these sorts of broad historical questions, and one can easily envision the book inviting productive discussion amongst undergraduates in courses on labor history; social movements; and, more broadly, twentieth-century American history. It is also suitable for the more general adult reading audience with interest in these areas (and a bibliographical essay helpfully contextualizes the work and suggests further reading).

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Holloway, Jonathan Scott
Jim Crow Wisdom: Memory and Identity in Black America since 1940

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 Publication Date: October 2013

Jonathan Scott Holloway's *Jim Crow Wisdom: Memory and Identity in Black America since 1940* offers readers a useful analysis of the politics of memory, forgetting, editing, and silence in the African American community. Using museums, magazines, social science, and a trip to slave castles on the Gold Coast, Holloway articulates the importance of memory in understanding a complex black historical narrative. This concept of memory in the black experience is thought-provoking and can be expansive; however, *Jim Crow Wisdom*