

The Book That Could Change Alabama

Susan Pace Hamill

“The past is never dead. It’s not even past.” William Faulkner

The one year anniversary marking the defeat of Governor Riley’s tax and accountability plan raises troubling questions. Why are so many church-going, good moral middle and upper-middle class people tolerating the terrible injustice inflicted by the state and local tax structure and the 1901 Constitution? Why did poor and lower-middle class Alabamians, the very people who would have enjoyed lower taxes and greater educational opportunities for their children, vote against Riley’s plan in droves? And finally is there any hope that the state will ever get off the bottom in virtually all areas measuring quality of life?

The answers lie buried in the depths of history.

Hardy Jackson’s most recent book, *Inside Alabama: A Personal History of My State*, could help break the powerful chains that defeated Riley’s plan and are still holding the state back. In a easy-to-read, user friendly format Jackson takes you on a 300 page journey over the course of Alabama’s history starting with the first Indian inhabitants and ending with Riley’s election. Jackson honestly confronts the darkest corners, especially the disenfranchisement of African-Americans and poor whites by the 1901 Constitution and segregation. He also explores how historical myths surrounding the antebellum, Civil War and Reconstruction periods made it easy for otherwise good respectable moral people to believe excuses justifying what we now acknowledge as indefensible injustice.

Jackson’s blunt and blistering evaluations of Alabama’s lowest points will be uncomfortable for many to swallow but will also be difficult to ignore. Despite his substantial professional qualifications as a distinguished professor and scholar of southern history and culture for over forty years, Jackson does not come across as an aloof and judgmental academic locked up in the ivory tower at Jacksonville State University where he currently teaches. Rather, his affectionate tone clearly expresses unconditional love for the state. A native of Grove Hill with ancestral family roots going back before statehood, that include slaveholders and Bourbon Democrats who supported the 1901 Constitution, Jackson is very much connected with Alabama’s mainstream population – the very people who tolerated the terrible injustice dominating our past and who are currently allowing it to continue. In his coverage of segregated Alabama Jackson not only recaps the historical events but also ponders regretfully why so many good moral citizens, including himself, his own family and friends as well as others in his community accepted what we now understand was clearly wrong. Jackson’s style will remind you of a wise grandfather telling stories that not only provide solid and credible historical background but also invite you to discover why the 1901 Constitution continues to lock in the unfair and inadequate tax structure that still oppresses poor and lower middle-class Alabamians. Jackson’s book has the powerful potential to help us see that our excuses justifying this injustice are really carbon copies of the excuses of our past and therefore are not legitimate.

Jackson concludes his book with a touching story of citizens in a small town struggling with their

uncomfortable segregated past when they decided to replace an original segregated memorial honoring their World War I dead with a new marker making no racial distinctions. If in a similar manner Alabamians from all walks of life read Jackson's book and in small groups within communities all over the state honestly discuss the sins of our past, this process could raise our collective consciousness on a mass scale towards recognizing the sins of our present and also could motivate many Alabamians, who have never had much interest in the state's history, to read other excellent, more detailed, books, such as *Alabama: The History of a Deep South State, Cradle of Freedom: Alabama and the Movement That Changed America* and Wayne Flynt's most recent book, *Alabama in the 20th Century*.

A large-scale rediscovery of Alabama's history would also offer us a chance to understand the historical origins of the most insidious barrier to progress, which also is the most important reason why Riley's plan failed - the lack of trust in our state government. This could inspire large numbers of currently apathetic and unengaged Alabamians to demand that our government leaders earn back our trust.

The clichés stating in one way or another that those who do not know their own history are condemned to repeat it are really true. We cannot defeat the powerful forces of special interest groups determined to maintain Alabama's 21st century version of injustice from the past until a critical mass of our population confronts this history honestly at a deeply moral and spiritual level. Jackson's book provides each and every one of us an opportunity to do this and free ourselves from the chains of the past without giving up our cultural heritage created by that very same past.

Susan Pace Hamill, a Professor of Law at the University of Alabama, will publish a review essay of Hardy Jackson's book in the Fall 2004 edition of the Alabama Law Review and is currently working on a review essay of Wayne Flynt's most recent book. She can be reached at shamill@law.ua.edu