

Upheaval in Charleston: Earthquake and Murder on the Eve of Jim Crow

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Susan Millar Williams

The University of Georgia Press (June 2011)

Hardcover \$29.95 (392pp)

978-0-8203-3715-9

On August 31, 1886, the largest earthquake ever centered in the eastern United States, destroyed much of Charleston, South Carolina. Tremors were felt as far north as Maine and west of the Mississippi River; it was stronger than the 2010 Haiti earthquake that killed hundreds of thousands. Williams, who previously wrote *A Devil and a Good Woman Too: The Lives of Julia Peterkin*, and Hoffius, the author of *Winners and Losers*, vividly describe the earthquake's immediate impact—"Gutted buildings smoldered. Mills and warehouses sprawled along the wharves like broken toys. A white dust shrouded everything. Feet, legs, and arms were so crushed that often the only treatment was amputation"—and its tragic legacy of forging the Jim Crow South.

This skillfully woven book of environmental and political history is also the story of Francis Warrington Dawson, "the hero of the earthquake" and the editor of the city's largest newspaper, *Charleston News and Courier*. Dawson was considered a moderate on most racial issues; his columns promoted equal pay and desegregation. However, he inexplicably concluded that the rape of a white woman by blacks was a serious crime, while the rape of a black woman by whites wasn't. Ultimately, these positions cost him the support of both races.

Following the earthquake, Dawson worked tirelessly to establish order, seek relief, and rebuild the city. The authors portray Dawson sympathetically, claiming that creating a more tolerant Charleston was too large a task for any one person. A backlash against black laborers for earning too much money repairing the city, anger at blacks for receiving too much relief, and a spreading populist, anti-black movement, inflamed by governor then senator Ben Tillman, pushed blacks back into the slavery-like conditions predating Reconstruction.

In 1889, Dr. Thomas McDow, an unstable neighbor, killed Dawson when he tried to stop McDow's advances toward Marie Burdayron, the Dawson's au pair. A jury of blacks and whites found McDow not guilty of murder due to self-defense. The trial's retelling will rivet readers. This story of nature and man conspiring to deprive African Americans of their constitutional rights—a miscarriage of justice that reverberated long after the earthquake's devastation ended—will engross its readers.

KARL HELICHER (July / August 2011)

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