

Book Review: Wilmington's Lie: The Murderous Coup of 1898 and the Rise of White Supremacy by David Zucchino

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David Zucchino. *Wilmington's Lie: The Murderous Coup of 1898 and the Rise of White Supremacy*. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2020. Xxii + 426 pages. Hardcover, \$28.00.

Wilmington is a quaint city located in southeastern North Carolina, just a few minutes drive from picturesque beaches. It seems to be a small, bustling town in the center that then sprawls out to beach shops, restaurants, and shopping centers; it is today a cosmopolitan municipality where all races seem to work in harmony in local government, colleges and universities, and the local bohemian cultural scene. It is also the city that this reviewer has called home for the last fourteen years.

However, Wilmington has always had a dark history of hatred, racism, oppression, and violence. In his work *Wilmington's Lie: The Murderous Coup of 1898 and the Rise of White Supremacy*, David Zucchino documents the narrative of the only successful coup d'état in American history: The Race Riots of 1898.

His work's prologue briefly describes the events of November 10, 1898, as a foreshadowing of this brilliant narrative's later contents. He casts the events as the denizens of Wilmington at the time must have seen them: the prologue insinuates that the riot was a spontaneous uprising that naturally rose from the months of racial strife that had plagued the city, and all of the American South. Yet, at the onset of the very first chapter of his thirty-eight relatively short chapters, Zucchino puts this notion to rest. He describes the actual situation in 1865 in Wilmington: this was a city where "any civil liberties envisioned by the Emancipation Proclamation had not materialized by the summer and fall of 1865" (p.5). He documents many acts of violence against the Black population. This gives an effective backdrop for his introduction of the later leader of Wilmington's white supremacists: The Confederate "Colonel" (a position he never actually attained) Alfred Moore Waddell.

As a counterpoint to the actions of the white supremacists and their organizing efforts throughout the Reconstruction period and beyond, Zucchini also introduces Abraham Galloway, one of Wilmington's most acclaimed Black civil rights leaders of Reconstruction Wilmington. Through these two characters, he documents the rising strife between the races in Wilmington. Even though Abraham Galloway died in 1870, Waddell lived to become the main coordinator of the white supremacists until the early twentieth century.

Wilmington, interestingly, became a model city in the Reconstruction South; its aldermen were both African American and white, many African Americans were literate and college-educated, and many owned successful businesses. The Fusion Party, a joint party of Republicans and Populists, held many seats in local government; many of those politicians were prominent Black men. Wilmington had *The Daily Record*, a Black newspaper, which not only demonstrated the remarkable racial situation in Wilmington in the 1890s, but, as Zucchini points out, became a target for the race riots that would plague the city's psyche even to this day.

It is this atmosphere that Zucchini adroitly recreates for the reader, and his research on the Secret Nine, a group of white supremacists who coordinate the removal Fusionists and African Americans from prominent places in Wilmington's government, is exquisite. His documentation of the membership of the Secret Nine, though incomplete, avoids the mistake of adding Waddell to their ranks. Zucchini, however, is much more complete in documenting Waddell's infamous "choke the Cape Fear with carcasses" speech (146-148).

It is because of his extensive research on Reconstruction Wilmington that Zucchini makes the reader feel the methodical planning and execution of the riots. He not only documents the planning of white supremacists, the political reactions of Fusionists and their sympathizers, and the elusive preparations of the Secret Nine, but his narrative of the news stories of the day, from

Rebecca Latimer Felton's editorial to Alex Manly's reply in the *Daily Record* draws the reader into the political melee of 1898 with all of the vitriol that both sides must have experienced.

Zucchini also makes it a point to document the inaction of President McKinley after the coup d'état, as well as to document the development of Wilmington after the race riot to the present day. While the book is an adroit narrative, it is the Epilogue where the book begins to disappoint. Zucchini documents that he interviewed many of the descendants of the main characters in this dark chapter of Wilmington, North Carolina. He reminds the reader that the history of the 1898 riots is only now coming to full light. Before the 1990s, white supremacists had whitewashed the narrative of the horrific events, even blaming the Blacks themselves for the uprising of the white supremacists. He even documents his interview with George Rountree, whose grandfather played a prominent role in the 1898 race riots. Even though Rountree acquiesces that his grandfather's role was, "compared to today's notions of propriety and lawfulness," certainly wrong, Rountree refuses to "criticize my grandfather a hundred and twenty years later" (339). However, Rountree does point out the lasting pain of this event: "I think people under forty have basically moved on. I think people my age, eighty-five might think they have but they haven't, not totally. I'm talking about whites *and* blacks. They haven't forgotten" (340). However, as a resident of Wilmington, I also found myself completely disagreeing with Rountree—those under forty have actually pushed for more awareness of the 1898 riots.

Yet, it is here where the book shows that it is more of a popular narrative rather than an academic historical inquiry. Zucchini does not delve into the oral histories he may have collected; instead, he relies on quotes to create a sense of nostalgia rather than historical interpretation. One can only wonder if the notes Zucchini has would not spur a very interesting academic historical work; rather, the book then feels more like a Ken Burn's documentary.

It is evident, from the lack of footnotes or endnotes, that this is a popular history. While it is a wonderfully researched narrative complete with an extensive bibliography, a student of history would find it very hard to re-document the narrative as it lacks precise referencing. The narrative is comprehensive, but the work lacks true interpretation of these horrific events. Therefore, this work is wonderful for all historians interested in the history of the American South, race relations, or even the local Wilmington historian, but it lacks the robust scholarship one would demand for a scholarly setting. The last line of the work, making use of Lewin Manly Jr.'s (a descendant of Alex Manly) devastating quote before his acknowledgements is telling: "If there is a hell, I hope they're burning in it, all of them" (352).

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