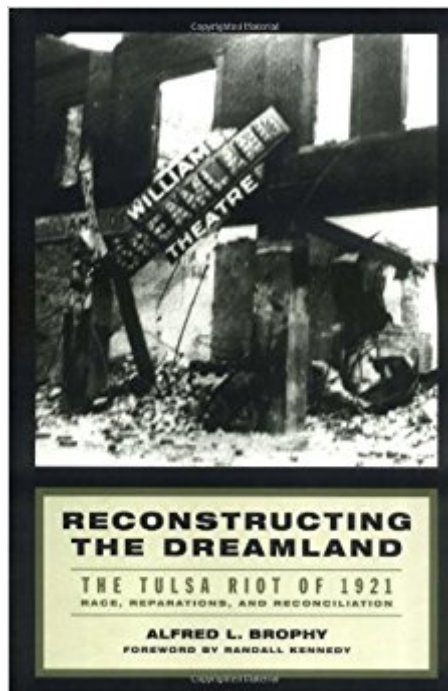




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# Reconstructing The Dreamland: The Tulsa Race Riot Of 1921, Race Reparations, And Reconciliation



## Synopsis

The 1921 Tulsa Race Riot was the country's bloodiest civil disturbance of the century. Leaving perhaps 150 dead, 30 city blocks burned to the ground, and more than a thousand families homeless, the riot represented an unprecedented breakdown of the rule of law. It reduced the prosperous black community of Greenwood, Oklahoma, to rubble. In *Reconstructing the Dreamland*, Alfred Brophy draws on his own extensive research into contemporary accounts and court documents to chronicle this devastating riot, showing how and why the rule of law quickly eroded. Brophy offers a gut-wrenching portrait of mob violence and racism run amok, both on the night of the riot and the morning after, when a coordinated sunrise attack, accompanied by airplanes, stormed through Greenwood, torching and looting the community. Equally important, he shows how the city government and police not only permitted the looting, shootings, and burning of Greenwood, but actively participated in it. The police department, fearing that Greenwood was erupting into a "negro uprising" (which Brophy shows was not the case), deputized white citizens haphazardly, gave out guns and badges with little background check, or sent men to hardware stores to arm themselves. Likewise, the Tulsa-based units of the National Guard acted unconstitutionally, arresting every black resident they could find, leaving Greenwood property vulnerable to the white mob, special deputies, and police that followed behind and burned it. Brophy's revelations and stark narrative of the events of 1921 bring to life an incidence of racial violence that until recently lay mostly forgotten. *Reconstructing the Dreamland* concludes with a discussion of reparations for victims of the riot. That case has implications for other reparations movements, including reparations for slavery.

## Book Information

Hardcover: 208 pages

Publisher: Oxford University Press, USA (February 14, 2002)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0195146859

ISBN-13: 978-0195146851

Product Dimensions: 6.2 x 0.8 x 9.5 inches

Shipping Weight: 15.2 ounces

Average Customer Review: 5.0 out of 5 stars 3 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #831,112 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #89 in [Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Sociology > Race Relations > General](#) #373 in [Books > Law > Constitutional Law >](#)

## Customer Reviews

In the spring of 1921, black Oklahomans seeking economic and political equality collided with a white society bent on keeping them down. The result was a devastating attack on the African American quarter of Tulsa called Greenwood, in which hundreds of buildings were destroyed and unknown numbers of people were killed. Legal scholar Alfred Brophy pieces together some of the puzzles surrounding this event, which many Oklahoma officials did their best to hide from history. Indeed, as he remarks, "Tulsa has denied the tragedy for so long that it is easy to forget it ever happened." Brophy examines the role of the police and National Guard in assisting the white attackers, that of the courts in exonerating them and instead attaching blame to the victims, and that of the media in whipping up ethnic hostility. He also asks what can be done, so many years after the fact, to redress past wrongs and "the complete breakdown of the rule of law," and he concludes that reparations are in order. Students of modern American history and of civil rights law will find much to ponder in Brophy's measured account of this shameful episode. --Gregory McNamee

One of America's bloodiest civil disturbances is also one of its least known. On May 31, 1921, Tulsa's African American community of Greenwood was the site of a violent riot that left more than 30 city blocks burned, thousands homeless, and up to 300 dead. Fearing that a young man was going to be lynched for assaulting a young white woman, members of Tulsa's African American community rallied at the courthouse. Seeing the large body of African Americans, some of whom had guns, in their part of town, whites armed themselves with all the weapons they could muster. A hail of fire erupted, and by the next day the National Guard and a mob of hastily deputized white citizens stormed the African American neighborhood of Greenwood, laying it to waste and incarcerating its residents in camps. These two works each seek to clarify what happened, but they take quite different approaches. Law professor Brophy served on the Tulsa Race Riot Commission, which was charged with determining exactly what happened and whether survivors should receive restitution. His book reflects his work on the commission, focusing on the legal issues surrounding the incident. He asserts that the riot was government-assisted and as such that the victims and their heirs are due compensation. This work fits very well into the growing national debate on reparations. Hirsch, the author of the best-selling *Hurricane*, seeks a broader audience in his book, which emphasizes events following the riot, including the thwarted attempts to rebuild Greenwood and

how Tulsa and Oklahoma sought to come to terms with the riot. Although different in tone and approach, both books are very solid in their research and writing. Each is highly recommended, although Brophy's account will appeal to the more serious reader. Daniel Liestman, Florida Gulf Coast Univ., Ft. Myers Copyright 2002 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Great book

Professor Brophy has performed a great public service by writing a powerful, yet concise book about one of the most deadly race riots in United States history. On May 31, 1921, whites attacked black residents of the Greenwood addition of Tulsa, Oklahoma, burning, looting, and murdering. This book is absorbing, upsetting and fair. Professor Brophy's work is meticulously researched and heavily footnoted. In addition to investigation of the riot by in-depth research of the available legal materials that were generated by the riot, Professor Brophy has relied heavily upon the news accounts and editorials of the two largest black newspapers in Oklahoma at that time, the Black Dispatch in Oklahoma City, and the Tulsa Star in Tulsa. These two newspapers displayed stunning activism and fearlessness in criticizing the actions of whites who committed criminal acts against blacks during the riot, and at other times during that time period. It is interesting that blacks, who had been aroused by recent lynchings of blacks in Oklahoma City and Tulsa, had vowed to forcibly resist further lynching. The Tulsa Riot itself was set in motion by black concern over the arrest of a black who had been arrested for allegedly attempting to rape a white female elevator operator, and was accelerated by white violence in response. If this murderous event had occurred today, the City of Tulsa would have been liable under civil rights laws. The city issued special deputy badges to virtually anyone who asked for it, regardless of background or qualifications. Some of these "special deputies" were undoubtedly the main criminal actors in the riot, and city law enforcement officials did little, if anything, to stop their crimes. The city's use of these unqualified whites as law enforcement officers, who burned, looted and shot black residents of Greenwood, make an excellent case for reparations for those victims of the criminal activity in Tulsa who are still living and who were affected by the riot. This book sheds great light on a terrible event, and is highly recommended. David W. Lee Edmond, OK

"At once meticulously factual and riveting, Alfred Brophy's moving account of a 1921 race riot that destroyed an economically self-reliant, vibrant African-American community clarifies why political action and enforcement of legal and human rights are indispensable prerequisites for black

economic opportunity and material progress. Brophy also clarifies why Americans need to find the courage to acknowledge injustices of the recent past and contrive amends to help heal still-unresolved consequences scarring both victims and perpetrators." --Jane Jacobs"A timely contribution to a variety of important and contentious discussions involving American history, African-American culture, and the problems encountered in attempting to right past wrongs...Brophy reminds us that deadly, cruel, racial violence is not something that only happens 'out there' in the rest of the world but is something that has also happened here in the United States on a massive scale and that just as others out there have fallen short in reckoning with their pasts, so too have Americans." --Randall Kennedy, from the Foreword"In his timely, well documented and powerfully written book, *Reconstructing the Dreamland*, Professor Al Brophy vividly illustrates a chapter of America's sordid racist past by focusing on the Tulsa Race Riots of 1921. If we are to transcend the barriers to racial progress, we all must read Brophy's compelling work and use it as a seminal case in our path to avoid conflicts at all costs. Simply put, Professor Brophy's book is the best-written account of the Tulsa riots, and captures the people of Tulsa's resolve to never allow a similar travesty to occur again. Every person interested in racial justice should have this book at his or her disposal." --Charles J. Ogletree, Jr., Jesse Climenko Professor of Law, Harvard Law School

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