The Dunning School: Prominence and Influence of Historiographic Racism at Columbia University and Beyond

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William Archibald Dunning is what we would call a tried-and-true Columbia man. He spent the majority of his academic career at Columbia University, both as a student and as a professor. Dunning earned his Bachelor of Arts in 1881, his M.A. in 1884, and his Ph. D in 1885, all at Columbia. He began teaching at his alma mater thereafter and steadily rose through the ranks of academic success and prestige, even being named as the first Francis Lieber Professor of History and Political Philosophy in 1913. He was a notable editor of *Political Science Quarterly* and a founding member of the American Historical Association. He became president of the latter in 1913 and was president of the American Political Science Association in 1922. This is all to say that, in his time, he was an extremely influential historian whose work and ideas were largely disseminated - especially throughout the former Confederate states - so much so that we can observe the impact of the Dunning School to this day. For, the Dunning School of historiographical thought helped prop up white supremacist ideologies of white intellectual superiority aligned with Neo-Confederate values and thus enabled the myth of the Lost Cause to spread so readily in the former Confederate South and beyond.

The Dunning School, named after its originator, refers to a particular historiographical approach to the Reconstruction Era in the United States that followed the Civil War. It is important to note that the Dunning School was not only comprised of the work of William A. Dunning, but also of his graduate students (although they all owed a great deal of their ideas and philosophies to Dunning himself). He and his graduate students together were the embodiment of the Dunning School. The graduate students who came to comprise the Dunning School "trained in Dunning's seminar at Columbia," and included "James W. Garner, Walter Lynwood Fleming,

¹Merriam, Charles E. "William Archibald Dunning." *American Political Science Review* 16, no. 4: 692–94. doi:10.2307/1943651. (1922).

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

J.G. deRoulhac Hamilton, Charles W. Ramsdell, C. Mildred Thompson, William Watson Davis, and Thomas S. Staples." Much of the knowledge Dunning disseminated to his pupils was closely aligned with Northern Democrats of the time as, Dunning himself was no Southerner. He was born in Plainfield, New Jersey in the summer of 1857. It is unclear to what extent Dunning's relatives influenced his views as he was growing up, however, it can be gleaned that his father likely had some influence on his interest in Reconstruction, as seen in Dunning's work *Reconstruction*, *Political and Economic: 1865-1877*, with the book opening with the following: "To the memory of my father whom I was first inspired with interest in the problems of Reconstruction." While Dunning's father set him on the path to explore the Reconstruction Era, this exploration was later fulfilled by John W. Burgess, Heinrich von Treitschke, and Leopold von Ranke, all scholars whose works largely influenced Dunning and his ideals and methodology.

Burgess was a political science professor and founder of the Columbia School of Political Science. As the historian Eric Foner has said, Burgess's influence on Dunning is clear in his views: He "taught William A. Dunning and helped build the foundations on which the [Dunning] school stood," and he "not only supported but gave intellectual credibility to a wide variety of racist views in Reconstruction histories." Burgess was a leader of Western academia at the time and had a reputation as an outstanding historian, with much of his work touching on topics such as scientific racism, the support and defense of colonialism, and support of voting inequality.⁶

⁴ William Archibald Dunning, *Reconstruction, Political and Economic, 1865-1877* (Franklin Classics, 2018), xi.

⁵ John David Smith et al., *The Dunning School: Historians, Race, and the Meaning of Reconstruction*, First Edition (University Press of Kentucky, 2013), 49.

⁶ Smith et al., *The Dunning School: Historians, Race, and the Meaning of Reconstruction*, 49-52.

Dunning and Burgess struck up a close relationship that would see Burgess offering his support to Dunning throughout his academic career. A watershed moment for William A. Dunning occurred after he received his Ph. D from Columbia, as, because of his well-established academic accomplishments and friendly status with John W. Burgess, Dunning received a job offer from Columbia. Before he took up that appointment as an associate professor of political science at CU, he spent one year in additional study at the University of Berlin at the urging of Burgess.

At the University of Berlin, Dunning would familiarize himself with the views of Heinrich von Treitschke and Leopold von Ranke and would eventually come to adopt certain elements of their views. Treitschke was a vehement German nationalist who often voiced favoritism to colonialism, imperialism, and social darwinism such that he claimed: "All great nations in the fullness of their strength have desired to set their mark upon barbarian lands. All over the globe today we see the peoples of Europe creating a mighty aristocracy of the white races." Meanwhile, Leopold von Ranke founded a source-based approach to history that had roots in the scientific method. So, Dunning was infused with ideas from Burgess and Heinrich von Treitschke of colonialism and white intellectual superiority. Then, when Dunning propagated his historiographical views he did so in the scientific historiographical way of von Ranke, meaning he believed his views were scientifically and empirically accurate and defensible and tried to demonstrate them as such, as was common with the rise of scientific racism in Dunning's time.

⁷ Philip Quincy Wright and Louise Leonard Wright, *A Study of War* (The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1983), 288.

⁸ Wilfred M. McClay, "John W. Burgess & the Search for Cohesion in American Political Thought," *Polity*, no. 1 (1993), 52; Spiegel, "A Modest Proposal."

Dunning's work, *Reconstruction, Political and Economic: 1865-1877*, shows both his views and his methods plainly, in particular, multiple passages from Chapter IV have been selected that provide a good overview of some of the core tenets of the Dunning School as well as its ideals and methodology. Dunning claims that: "The fundamental characteristic of the legislation [in reference to the black codes] was that it set off the hitherto servile race as a distinct class, designated generally as 'persons of color,'" wherein he clearly designates people of color, particularly African Americans, as the so-called "servile race." He goes on to further reference black people as the "inferior class." Dunning claims all of this with the belief that his views are scientifically sound and well-established, as will be further shown in his writings.

Additionally, Dunning describes the way in which the black codes discriminated against people of color, noting that in Mississippi freedmen could not be landowners, in Louisiana every black person was required to regularly serve a white person, and in South Carolina job opportunities were snuffed out at every turn for people of color and they were left with only animal husbandry and farming for work. To this, he immediately claims that: "To a distrustful northern mind such legislation could very easily take the form of a systematic attempt to relegate the freedmen to a subjection only less complete than that from which the war had set them free. The radicals [abolitionists] sounded a shrill note of alarm."

Dunning appears to almost mock the "radicals" by claiming that the black codes were a necessity that did little in the way of inequity. For, in Dunning's view, black people were intellectually inferior to whites in a scientific sense and thus an African American suffering

⁹ Dunning, Reconstruction, Political and Economic, 1865-1877, 55.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid, 56.

¹² Ibid, 55-57.

¹³Ibid, 57.

nequity was instead equity, for, to treat people of color as lesser is equality since, according to Dunning, people of color are factually lesser intellectually. Furthering this, Dunning declares that: "The freedmen were not, and in the nature of the case could not for generations be, on the same social, moral, and intellectual plane with the whites; and this fact was recognized by constituting them a separate class in the civil order." Dunning further notes that the black codes were needed and justified because they generally helped deter "well-established traits and habits of the negroes" such as "problems of destitution, idleness, and vice of which no one not in the midst of them could appreciate the appalling magnitude and complexity." In reference to the Civil Rights bill, Dunning claims that it was "a plain announcement to the southern legislatures that, as against their project of setting the freedmen apart as a special class, with a status at law corresponding to their status in fact, the North would insist on exact equality between the races in civil status, regardless of any consideration of fact." Dunning's continual use of the word "fact" in regards to intellectual inferiority of black people furthers the use of his scientific "fact-based" methodology he adopted from Leopold von Ranke's studies.

Dunning also claims that the black codes were not at all in bad faith and that the Northern Republicans were being overdramatic in their vehement dislike for the aforementioned legislation. For, he insists that the black codes were "far from embodying any spirit of defiance towards the North" and were instead an "attempt to bring some sort of order out of the social and economic chaos which a full acceptance of the results of war and emancipation involved."¹⁷In the information Dunning puts forth, the influence of John W. Burgess and Heinrich von Treitschke can clearly be seen in Dunning's extrapolation of white intellectual superiority in

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Ibid, 63.

¹⁷Ibid, 58.

comparison to that of people of color, for both Burgess and von Treitschke held deeply racist and nationalistic views, the latter view seeing greater articulation in the Lost Cause myth.

Furthermore, Dunning's views consist of a methodological scientific approach to history, inspired by Leopold von Ranke, that turns into scientific racism. The nationalistic views of Burgess and von Treitschke transferred to Dunning's work in such a way that he appears to take a certain pride in the Confederate South, to feel a kinship of ideals, so much that he declares the Reconstruction Era was a time where "southern whites, subjugated by adversaries of their own race, thwarted the scheme which threatened permanent subjection to another race." In this, it is clear how the Dunning School helped lay the foundation for the myth of the Lost Cause, the idea that the Civil War was a war of Northern aggression against the South and that the Confederates fought for state's rights in the face of Northern oppression. In reality, the Civil War was about slavery, and to frame it as an honorable war fought by the Confederacy against the oppressive Union is a myth. The development of the Lost Cause myth was largely aided by the Dunning School and its teachings were widely spread and even standardized by The United Daughters of the Confederacy, whose contribution to the Lost Cause and the Dunning School will be explored later.

After examining one of Dunning's works, it is important to give context to the time Dunning wrote in, as scientific racism was at its height in the United States so his historiographical approach was largely normal for the time. However, critics of the Dunning School and the Lost Cause myth did exist, notable among them being W. E. B. Du Bois, an African American scholar. Du Bois noted that "the facts of American history have in the last half century have been falsified because the nation was ashamed. The South was ashamed because it

¹⁸ Smith et al., *The Dunning School: Historians, Race, and the Meaning of Reconstruction*, 230.

fought to perpetuate human slavery. The North was ashamed because it had to call in the black men to save the Union, abolish slavery and establish democracy."¹⁹ Of the Dunningite historians, W. E. B. Du Bois regarded James W. Garner's dissertation of Reconstruction to be the most reasonable and fair.²⁰

Garner, after studying as a graduate student under Dunning, went on to become a professor of political science at the University of Pennsylvania in 1902 to 1903 and eventually a professor of political science at the University of Illinois. Additionally, he also became editor in chief of the *American Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* in 1910. Garner's methodology was similar to Dunning's in its focus on primary sources and scientific method. Garner's *Reconstruction in Mississippi* includes a massive focus on primary resources, including personal testimonies and reports. Du Bois's point of Garner's work being the most permissible of the Dunning School, Garner voices strong criticism to the brutal supplantation of Republican authority in Mississippi. However, Garner still held the beliefs that populated the Dunning School, "that African Americans were unsuited for democratic government and that granting suffrage to Black men invited corruption and profligacy." Ultimately, "Although more temperate in his approach, Garner joined his colleagues in offering scholarly legitimation for the view that Reconstruction had been a horrific blunder that fully justified the resentment of white southerners."

¹⁹ W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America*, 1860–1880 (Free Press, 1999), 711.²⁰ James Lloyd, *Lives of Mississippi Authors*, *1817-1967*, First Edition (University Press of Mississippi, 1981), pp. 190–193.

²¹ William Bland Whitley, "James Wilford Garner," Mississippi Encyclopedia, November 4, 2020, https://mississippiencyclopedia.org/entries/garner-james-wilford/.

²² William Whitley, "James Wilford Garner."

²³ James Garner, *Reconstruction in Mississippi* (LSU Press, 1968).

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵ William Whitley, "James Wilford Garner."

²⁶Ibid.

Another one of Dunning's students, Walter Lynwood Fleming went on to become a historian and prolific scholar of the South, with "approximately five thousand printed pages of scholarly writings," organized in more than 10 books and 166 articles that had a particular focus on the Reconstruction Era.²⁷ He was one of the leading 20th century voices perpetuating the Dunning School ideas. His familial background as the son of a plantation owner who served in the civil war,²⁸ as well as the course of his education at the Alabama Polytechnic Institute and Columbia, made him a strong proponent of Dunningite ideology. He even dedicated one of his seminal works, *Documentary History of Reconstruction*,²⁹ to Dunning. His influence was furthered by his career as a professor and administrator at Vanderbilt university, where, alongside his professorship, he held the positions of Dean of the School of Arts and Sciences, and Director of the Graduate School. He was deeply influential to many of his students and colleagues, some of whom dedicated a book to him.³⁰

Joseph Grégoire de Roulhac Hamilton, described as "a racist character who may be the most problematical of all the students of William Archibald Dunning," was a historian of the South who, like most Dunningites, focused on the Reconstruction Era. He was a professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, as well as the initiator and main archivist of the Southern Historical Collection, to which he dedicated the rest of his career after its opening in 1930.³² His views and writings were rooted in racism, white supremacy, and Lost Cause apologetics. In notable Dunning-like fashion, he believed that "black people simply lacked the

²⁷ William C. Binkley, "The Contribution of Walter Lynwood Fleming to Southern Scholarship," *The Journal of Southern History* 5, no. 2 (May 1939): 143, https://doi.org/10.2307/2191580, 150.²⁸ Fletcher M. Green, "Walter Lynwood Fleming: Historian of Reconstruction," *The Journal of Southern History* 2, no. 4 (November 1936): 498, https://doi.org/10.2307/2192035. ²⁹ Walter L. Fleming, *Documentary History of Reconstruction* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966). ³⁰ Green, "Walter Lynwood Fleming: Historian of Reconstruction", 503.

³¹ Smith et al., *The Dunning School: Historians, Race, and the Meaning of Reconstruction*, 180. ³² "About SHC – UNC-Chapel Hill Libraries," n.d., https://library.unc.edu/wilson/shc/about/.

intellect to enter into contracts, serve on juries, and conduct complex business, and they were much more disastrous if involved meaningfully in politics."³³

A professor of history at the University of Texas, Charles W. Ramsdell believed that the development of reputable graduate programs in history meant that a "rewriting of American history" could occur, a belief that was in line with Dunning's own opinions: he believed that the Reconstruction in particular required this rewriting. Ramsdell answered the call, reportedly acknowledging that, like him, many rewriters of Civil War and Reconstruction history would be Southerners eager to overwrite "northern-biased historians." Trained in the Dunning tradition, Ramsdell helped perpetuate the Lost Cause as an educator, as he "spent his entire academic tenure at the University of Texas influencing generations of soon-to-be public school teachers and university professors and in them perpetuating ideas that had matured in the American South well before they were born."

Clara Mildred Thompson, who outlived all other Dunningites, also focused her work on Reconstruction, albeit on a local scale, particularly in her work *Reconstruction in Georgia: Economic, Social, Political, 1865–1872*, ³⁸ which, according to one historian, "revealed little antiblack bias." Despite her being arguably less forward in her racism than other Dunningites, Thompson's work is still clearly informed by the Dunning School. Thompson not only considered the Ku Klux Klan to be "the old ruling class" attempting to "bring some order out of the social chaos," ⁴⁰ but she also believed black people to be unfit lawmakers (though she thought

³³ Smith et al., *The Dunning School: Historians, Race, and the Meaning of Reconstruction*, 186³⁴ Smith et al., *The Dunning School: Historians, Race, and the Meaning of Reconstruction*, 230 ³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 230-231

³⁸ Mildred Thompson, *Reconstruction in Georgia: Economic, Social, Political, 1865-1872*, (Books for Libraries, 1971).

³⁹ Smith et al., *The Dunning School: Historians, Race, and the Meaning of Reconstruction*, 92 ⁴⁰ Ibid., 288.

their removal from office to be unfair),⁴¹ and she claimed black suffrage to have been a mistake.⁴² Indeed, the preface of her thesis further underlines Dunning's personal connection and intellectual guidance of Thompson, as well as his general influence: "Anything of fairness or wisdom or truth that [this book] may contain must be ascribed to Professor William Archibald Dunning of Columbia University, in whom many students of Reconstruction History have found their guide and inspiration." Thompson's influence was far-reaching as well. She was the chair of history and dean of Vassar College,⁴⁴ as well as a professor at the University of Georgia, a close personal friend of Eleanor Roosevelt,⁴⁵ which granted her access to the country's highest offices, a dean at the Free Europe University in Exile,⁴⁶ and an educational delegate to Europe and the United Nations.⁴⁷

Continuing the series of Dunningites studying Reconstruction on a local scale, William Watson Davis published a well-acclaimed book based on his doctoral dissertation, titled *The Civil War and Reconstruction in Florida*. Davis went on to become a professor of history at the University of Kansas. The "proud descendent of Christian, slave-owning settlers," Davis followed a similar path to Fleming, studying at Alabama Polytechnic Institute under Professor George Petrie, who aided his graduate admission to Columbia, where he became a Dunningite.

⁴¹ Ibid., 290

⁴² Ibid., 291

⁴³ Ibid, 289.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 284.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 285.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 284.

⁴⁸ Watson William Davis, *The Civil War and Reconstruction in Florida*, vol. 53 (Columbia University, 1913).

⁴⁹ Smith et al., *The Dunning School: Historians, Race, and the Meaning of Reconstruction*, 255 ⁵⁰ Ibid., 257.

⁵¹ Ibid., 258.

Although, in his writings, Davis maintained that slavery was the cause of the Civil War,⁵² he embodied many other Dunning School characteristics. For one, the portrayal of slavery in his book was "paternalistic" and benevolent: he maintained that the black slaves were an inferior race suited to servitude and well-treated by their owners.⁵³ His great support of the institution of slavery stemmed in part from his family history. Davis was a strong proponent of white supremacy, calling whites "the natural leaders of the Southern people."⁵⁴ Davis's book remained almost uncontested and highly cited for at least six decades,⁵⁵ compounding his influence alongside his career in education.

Little could be found about the last of Dunning's graduate students, Thomas S. Staples, however, what is known is that he became a professor of history at Hendrix College in Arkansas sometime after his dissertation, *Reconstruction in Arkansas, 1862-1874*. Falling in line with the rest of the Dunning School, Staples's dissertation includes racist views of black people and helps to propagate the Lost Cause myth, and while it is not for certain, it is likely that during his time as an educator at Hendrix College, he too taught the Lost Cause as fact. ⁵⁷

Overall, all of Dunning's graduate students went on to continue scholarly work as authors and educators in the South that helped to disseminate scientific racism and the Lost Cause as fact instead of myth. A group that furthered the public's understanding of the Lost Cause is the United Daughters of the Confederacy. The UDC is a Neo-Confederate group for women who are

⁵² Ibid., 261.

⁵³ Ibid., 265.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 268.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 274.

⁵⁶ Thomas Staples, *Reconstruction in Arkansas*, 1862-1874 (1923) [Leather Bound] (Generic, 2023).

⁵⁷ Staples, *Reconstruction in Arkansas*, 1862-1874 1923 [Leather Bound].

descendants of Civil War soldiers that fought for the Confederacy.⁵⁸ The UDC is responsible for the large number of Confederate monuments across the United States today as well as the continued teaching of the Lost Cause and its racist beliefs.⁵⁹ For, not only did the UDC help fund and erect Confederate monuments, but they are also responsible for placing a commemorative memorial to the Ku Klux Klan, which they praised and feted, in 1926.⁶⁰ So, what the Dunning School laid the foundation for, the United Daughters of the Confederacy expanded on and took to new levels.

The UDC, through the Lost Cause, protested racial segregation and defended white supremecist ideologies and views.⁶¹ They disseminated textbooks to young primary school age children that spread lies of slavery and Reconstruction, declaring that black people were content and joyful as slaves and would sing songs to show their happiness.⁶² Furthermore, after the Civil War and during Reconstruction, black people were said to be evil.⁶³ The UDC essentially had a monopoly on education in the South, for, in 1919, they created *A Measuring Rod to Test Text Books, and Reference Books in Schools, Colleges and Libraries*, which outlines what is permissible to teach to students.⁶⁴ Predictably, with the UDC's stronghold on education in the

⁵⁸ Angela Esco Elder, "United Daughters of the Confederacy," New Georgia Encyclopedia, February 8, 2022,

https://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/history-archaeology/united-daughters-of-the-confe deracy/.

⁵⁹ Elder, "United Daughters of the Confederacy."

⁶⁰ Blanche Lucas Smith, North Carolina's Confederate Monuments and Memorials, Compiled by Mrs. S. L. Smith, Historian (1932-1933) N.C. Division, U.D.C. 1941 [Leather Bound] (Generic, 2023), 35.

⁶¹ Elder, "United Daughters of the Confederacy."

⁶² Joan Marie Johnson, "'Drill into Us... the Rebel Tradition': The Contest over Southern Identity in Black and White Women's Clubs, South Carolina, 1898-1930," *The Journal of Southern History* 66, no. 3 (August 2000): 525-562, https://doi.org/10.2307/2587867. ⁶³ Johnson, "'Drill into Us... the Rebel Tradition': The Contest over Southern Identity in Black and White Women's Clubs, South Carolina, 1898-1930." 525-562.

⁶⁴ Mildred Lewis 1852-1928 Rutherford and United Confederate Veterans, *A Measuring Rod to Test Text Books, and Reference Books in Schools, Colleges and Libraries* (Legare Street Press, 2021).

South and large parts of the Midwest, much of the information being taught to students in those two regions consisted of white supremecist ideologies with a heavy emphasis on the Lost Cause myth. To this day, bits and pieces of the Lost Cause myth are taught in schools in the South. I, for one, grew up in Southern Oklahoma and was taught in middle school that the Civil War was about states' rights and had nothing to do with slavery. This is all to say that the reach of the Dunning School and the UDC can still clearly be felt today.

More on the education of children by the UDC, the UDC also formed an organization called The Children of the Confederacy. The CofC even had to learn a creed that they often repeated which included the utterance of the Civil War being a war of states' rights and not of slavery, although this was finally amended in 2015. ⁶⁵It seems Dunning himself even had plans to reach children with his views, going so far as to write children's stories, although they were never published. Each story had racist undertones, notably *Cornfield Indians*, ⁶⁶ however, the children's stories that Dunning produced contain mild, if any, propaganda in comparison to the amount of falsehoods presented by the UDC in their textbooks and children's stories. The reach of the UDC circles all the way back to Columbia University. The UDC often hosted essay contests for students to participate in and win prizes. In 1907, a Columbia University student won, even though her paper denounced Robert E. Lee as a traitor and a coward. ⁶⁷ Of course, this essay does not align with UDC beliefs, so how was it chosen? Once the essay was widespread and the realization of what the essay contained set in, multiple chapters of the UDC went into immediate infighting, apparently those who voted on the essay never even bothered to read it,

⁶⁵ Elder, "United Daughters of the Confederacy."

⁶⁶ William A. Dunning. Folder, Children's Stories, Undated, Box 9, MS#0372, William A. Dunning Papers, 1781-1922, Rare Books and Manuscript Library, Columbia University. ⁶⁷ Karen Cox, *Dixie's Daughters: The United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Preservation of Confed (New Perspectives on the History of the South)*, 1st ed. (University Press of Florida, 2003).

which led to the massive blunder for the UDC.⁶⁸ For this embarrassment, the UDC severed all relations with Columbia University.⁶⁹

The Dunning School, the ultimate legacy of William A. Dunning, was developed and flourished within Columbia University. The University made Dunning a Columbia man, and provided resources for the production of Dunningite scholarly work, unaware of the long lasting impact on how the history of the Civil War and Reconstruction would be taught and studied for nearly a century. According to one historian, the Dunning School "produced studies of state-level Reconstruction" with work that focused on a "tale of carpetbagger and scalawag venality, black incompetence, and Democratic virtue and rightful triumph," a narrative that was adopted and disseminated by groups like the United Daughters of the Confederacy, which popularized Neo-Confederate white supremacist beliefs reliant upon the Lost Cause myth.

⁶⁸ Cox, Dixie's Daughters: The United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Preservation of Confed (New Perspectives on the History of the South).
⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Muller, Philip R. "Look Back without Anger: A Reappraisal of William A. Dunning." *The Journal of American History*61, no. 2 (1974): 325–38. https://doi.org/10.2307/1903952.

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