

Posthumous Pardons and Progressive Era Injustices

Seligman, Scott D. *A Second Reckoning: Race, Injustice, and the Last Hanging in Annapolis*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2021. pp. 288. \$32.95 (hardcover), ISBN 978-1640124653.

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On May 31, 2001, Maryland Governor Parris Glendening issued a posthumous pardon of an African American man named John Snowden. “The search for justice has no statute of limitations,” the governor said.¹ Snowden had been hanged almost a century earlier, not by vigilante mobs but by the state of Maryland after his conviction of first-degree murder of a local white woman. The story that author Scott Seligman puts forth in *A Second Reckoning* traces the details of the case that led to John Snowden’s conviction and to the ultimately unsuccessful public work to save his life. But more central to Seligman’s narrative was the work of a community to push for a posthumous pardon and the power of posthumous pardons as a tool of national reconciliation around race and racism.

A Second Reckoning looks at the case of John Snowden, his legal hanging in 1918, and the community push for a posthumous pardoning in the city of Annapolis, Maryland. The hanging of Snowden was the last in that city. The book, like Governor Glendening’s statement on the posthumous pardon, does not ultimately grapple with the innocence or guilt of John Snowden, but rather whether the justice system had operated fairly in adjudicating Snowden’s case. Seligman examines the eight-decade odyssey of the Snowden case in the Maryland criminal justice and legal system, from the murder of Lottie May Brandon in 1917 to the public reaction after the 2001 posthumous pardon, to make two central arguments. First, Seligman argues that mock trials and vigilante justice are not the only ways a person can be wronged in the U.S. criminal justice system. Justice can be denied in many ways, with devastating consequences including life imprisonment and capital punishment. Second, Seligman shows that posthumous pardons are, while dealing with historical injustices, very much grounded in the contemporary moment and in contemporary lives, offering a powerful tool for racial reconciliation in the United States.

A Second Reckoning is at its best recreating a clear image of the events surrounding the trial as they occurred. Using resources that include local and national newspapers,

¹Office of the Governor, State of Maryland, News Release, May 31, 2001, Archives of Maryland [MSA SC 3520-13632], <https://msa.maryland.gov/megafile/msa/speccol/sc3500/sc3520/013600/013632/pdf/035021-0000a.pdf>.

trial records, and government correspondence, Seligman's work walks the reader through every step of the case, from the discovery of Lottie May Brandon's body in her home through to John Snowden's execution. With short, gripping chapters, Seligman captures the public angst and anxiety of the over the case and the conversations ginned up by the trial.

A *Second Reckoning* convincingly portrays the conflicting evidence that still shrouds the case in ambiguity, leaving the reader unsure as to Snowden's ultimate innocence but fully cognizant of many abusive missteps of power that ultimately led Snowden to the gallows. Such wrongs included compelling evidence that was nevertheless indirect and inconclusive, inconsistent testimony, prosecution and judges who abused the insinuation of sexual assault to color the case apart from any actual charges, and Snowden's insistence of innocence to his last moments. The individuals involved in Snowden's trial are three-dimensional characters, each driven by their own visions of justice and of right and wrong. In the end though, Seligman's book is concerned with the question of why this long ago case should still matter.

Seligman's book is a compelling example of the politics of narrative and the power of memory. The Annapolis community—and the African American community in particular—not only kept the memory of the case alive across the following generations, they recognized, while still embittered by the hanging itself, that the lack of public acknowledgment of perceived wrongs had meaning for them in their contemporary everyday lives. Seligman plainly makes a case for posthumous restorative justice, writing that “Where the judicial system has failed a group of citizens and where there is potential benefit in reexamining its sins, a strong argument exists for taking a second look” (213).

While the book itself is focused on the city of Annapolis and the state of Maryland, it is also a national story about racial reckoning, truth, justice, and reconciliation. As of the writing of this review, with the nation still grappling with its history of racial injustice and debating how to move forward on the issue of racist violence, both private and public, and battling to tell such stories in public schooling, this book offers a compelling intervention revealing the role posthumous pardons can play in contemporary society. Those interested in historical work dealing with race and criminal justice, restorative justice, or simply the politics of memory and narrative, would do well to read this book.