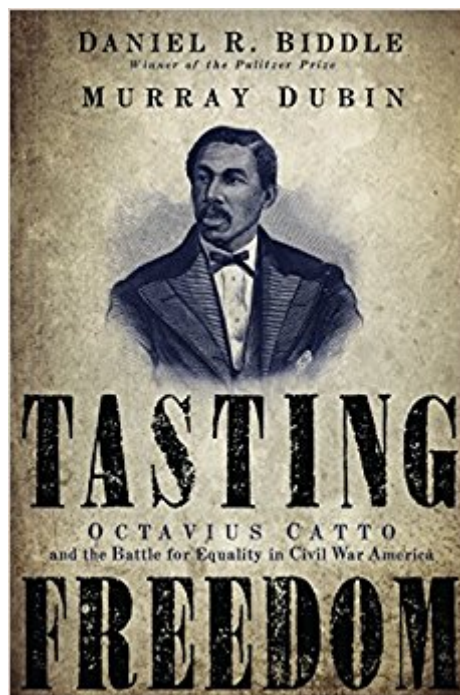




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Tasting Freedom: Octavius Catto And The Battle For Equality In Civil War America



Synopsis

Octavius Valentine Catto was an orator who shared stages with Frederick Douglass, a second baseman on Philadelphia's best black baseball team, a teacher at the city's finest black school and an activist who fought in the state capital and on the streets for equal rights. With his racially-charged murder, the nation lost a civil rights pioneer—one who risked his life a century before Selma and Birmingham. In *Tasting Freedom* Murray Dubin and Pulitzer Prize winner Dan Biddle painstakingly chronicle the life of this charismatic black leader—a “free black whose freedom was in name only. Born in the American south, where slavery permeated everyday life, he moved north where he joined the fight to be truly free—to vote, go to school, ride on streetcars, play baseball and even participate in July 4th celebrations. Catto electrified a biracial audience in 1864 when he proclaimed, “There must come a change, calling on free men and women to act and educate the newly freed slaves. With a group of other African Americans who called themselves a “band of brothers, they challenged one injustice after another. *Tasting Freedom* presents the little-known stories of Catto and the men and women who struggled to change America.

Book Information

Paperback: 632 pages

Publisher: Temple University Press; 1 edition (October 2, 2017)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1592134661

ISBN-13: 978-1592134663

Shipping Weight: 1.1 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.7 out of 5 stars 14 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #371,093 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #179 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Regional U.S. > Mid Atlantic #208 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Sports & Outdoors > Baseball #325 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Leaders & Notable People > Social Activists

Customer Reviews

"Daniel Biddle and Murray Dubin have brought to life a leader of the Civil War-era struggle against slavery and for equal rights for blacks. This dramatic book not only rescues the intrepid Octavius Catto from obscurity but reminds us that this struggle—and the violent opposition to

it" — Eric Foner, DeWitt Clinton Professor of History, Columbia University "[A] marvelous historical feast for lovers of Afro-American, Philadelphia, and American history alike.... The book's particular magic is that it shows how real people, black and white, rich and poor, were tossed about in the historical currents that flowed through Philadelphia.... One would have to search far and wide to find a better-researched and more compellingly readable biography." — The Philadelphia Inquirer "This is a great story and a compelling history of the original civil rights movement — with its own Dr. King. In Tasting Freedom, Biddle and Dubin bring to light a hero whose footprints helped lead America through the challenges of racial injustice: Octavius Catto. The story is both riveting and elucidative" — Juan Williams, author of Eyes on the Prize and Thurgood Marshall "Tasting Freedom is masterfully researched and cogently written. Biddle and Dubin transport us to yesteryear, profiling some of the central figures of the Civil War era and revealing the birth and rise of the black intelligentsia in this country. Tasting Freedom is a valuable triumph — and a work of importance." — Elijah Anderson, Yale University "Tasting Freedom is required reading for anyone who thinks the civil rights movement started in the 1950s, with Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks (hint: you're off by a full century). This is a revelation for those of us who grew up being fed morality tales about righteous Northern free staters standing against Southern slaveholders (hint: neither offered real freedom). Biddle and Dubin's book is for all of us who love a story about baseball and war, about race and the making of America." — Larry Tye, author of Satchel: The Life and Times of an American Legend "If you fancy knowing about growing up black in mid-nineteenth-century Philadelphia, there is no better place to start than with Biddle and Dubin's powerful and poignant biography of Octavius V. Catto. For those who believe that post-Civil War Reconstruction was only a Southern affair, this book is an eye-opener." — Gary B. Nash, Director of the National Center for History in the Schools, UCLA, and author of The Liberty Bell "An entrancing portrait of a leading Renaissance man for equal rights. . . . Nothing matches it at the moment as a prequel to Thomas J. Sugrue's much-noted Sweet Land of Liberty." — Library Journal "This rich biography...restores Catto to his important place in the pantheon of civil rights heroes." — ForeWord

The life and times of the extraordinary Octavius Catto, and the first civil rights movement in America

Well written, very detailed account of history in 19th Century Philadelphia for African-Americans

Excellent, well researched piece of lost history. Good read.

A good treatment of complex material. But it bogs down in details that could have been treated in a shorter way enhancing readability.

Received in good condition

Great book

As a late comer, I have nothing to add to the comments on content except for a few notes to explain my 5 star rating. Tasting Freedom is a magnificent book which should be required reading not only for Philadelphia students but for everyone who wants to revisit the history of Philadelphia in the context of civil rights. Philadelphia regains its mythic character of Revolutionary times as it turns into a new center of history in the making. Its geographical situation is a source of power and conflict. It shares the progressive mindset of the north but can be caught in the commercial interests of the south. This borderline position builds dramatic tension and psychological ambiguity in a passionate yet flawed city. To Philadelphians, the book is a testimony that there is no place like home to learn history on a grand scale. The city comes to life with the vibrancy of a period piece. The book is a stage at times violently, at times dimly illuminated. Indeed, light figures prominently in various forms. Fire, torches, and candles can be evil, brilliant, intimate or have a sinister meaning that makes your skin crawl. The book espouses various shapes without losing its seamless coherence. It can read as an epic where populations are both fighters and chorus, as a saga as older generations let the younger take the lead for progress, as an adventure filled with picaresque moments. While many historical characters populate the book, each individual has a unique personality easy to recognize throughout the narrative. I particularly enjoyed the passing of the arms from the wise old men to the angry young men and the fearlessness of women leaders as flamboyant as La Liberté *à la tête* Guidant le Peuple in Delacroix's famous painting. Variety of tone adds to the feeling that this is not just one book. The allusions to romance and *mind-fidelity* add complexity and serve to refine character in both males and females. The flirtation and teasing, as reproduced in the language of the times is touching and funny. In such an intense book, all humor or elements of comic relief are welcome. The stealing of the boat would be a laughing out loud moment in a movie theater. It is easy to define the many cinematographic moments. One is the marches, with a few examples of true bravery on

the part of white abolitionists walking hand in hand with blacks. Another is the brutish mob attacks, especially during the heroic defense of the great Pennsylvania Hall set on fire in 1838, while police and firemen look on and firemen turn the hoses away from the fire. Most poignant is the struggle for equality in the streetcar fight. Education in the black community is a theme of great salience in the book. The demands for self-discipline, mastery of scholarly and scientific subjects, memorization and critical thinking seem unreal in our age and were the source of a state of grace in these very young men. Their gift is reflected in their oratory and inspirational powers which have been handed down through the generations. Not being a sports fan, the chapter on baseball was the most unpredictably joyful. The topic was not only perfectly clear but captivating. It is the true sunny chapter of the book where integration, equality and true friendship through baseball become real. Last but not least, *Tasting Freedom* never tastes preachy. Following the tradition of journalism, the authors let the facts speak for themselves. Their voice is loud and clear.

September, 2013 I wanted to update my review of *Tasting Freedom*, in light of this year's anniversary of the March on Washington. *Tasting Freedom*, as I say below, is dense with the accounts of little-known heroes and activists who marked the first trails of the Civil Rights movement with which we are familiar. So many, many of them deserve further attention and Biddle and Dubin have provided the stepping stones for more research and more books. I would urge any history teacher or student to break away from the tried, true and already familiar stories and use *Tasting Freedom* as a jumping off point for new directions. If you, or one of your students, is interested in baseball, pick a character from this book and write a paper, a book or even a Tweet. Same with feminism, abolition, transportation. I'm continually amazed at the nuggets I pick up just leafing through *Tasting Freedom*. This is such a valuable resource for imaginative teachers and ambitious historians. This is the perfect winter for reading *Tasting Freedom*. Build the fire, pour a glass of wine and dig in. It's not a fast read, but fascinating, especially in the revelation that so many of the civil rights struggles I thought of as 20th century contemporary--integration of public transportation and professional sports teams, to name two--were presaged in 19th century Philadelphia. The narrative centers around Octavius Catto but Catto's life is only the vehicle for what is both an exhaustive review and a cursory examination of the Civil Rights movement as it developed before and after the Civil War. Exhaustive because Dan Biddle and Murray Dubin unearthed an abundance of historical accounts and little-known facts that they use to create the context for Catto's story. For example, the account of 18-year-old Jake White--"a tall, thin Negro (who) stood up like an exclamation mark"--who questioned Pennsylvania's white governor in 1855 about the concepts of citizenship

and equality. A cursory examination because Biddle and Dubin introduce (at least to me) so many previously unknown players and events, that any one of them could have served as the subject of a book. At times, especially at the book's beginning, this made for challenging reading because it took a while for the pieces to knit together. (I felt the same way about the first third of the first and second Harry Potter books). My solution was to skip ahead from time to time and read chunks that focused on a specific aspect--for example, the impact of Philander Doestick's 9000-word account of a two-day slave auction (you'll have to read the book to find out more!). One "chunk" I found particularly interesting was the long push to integrate Philadelphia's street cars, a move that was resisted even as other cities integrated their own systems. Catto and others used a combination of legislative lobbying, civil disobedience and legal tactics to achieve their end. Another was Catto's success--however temporary--in bridging the gap between Negro baseball teams and their white counterparts.(Catto played second base.) The account of Catto's murder at the age of 32 is chilling. In this age of tweeting and texting, I fear we've lost our ability to burrow into a complex narrative longer than 127 characters. When it comes to Tasting Freedom, that would be a shame. The book is a primary resource for historians, educators and any others with interests in the Civil War, abolition, Civil Rights, baseball. Teachers, in particular, should grab up this book. Rather than assign yet another paper on Rosa Parks, set a student to researching the story of Mrs. Derry, a "colored" woman who sued because she was kicked off a non-integrated streetcar. Another theme that runs through the book is the desire of free Blacks to educate their children, and the firm reluctance to let them by the white establishment. The book is wonderfully footnoted, giving readers who want to explore further lots of good starting points. Tasting Freedom is not a summer beach read. But I found it to be a valuable piece of history that I'll delve into, I'm sure, many times in the future.

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