This slim and tightly focused book sheds light on a puzzling question of late-nineteenth-century industrial development: why did Birmingham, with its exceedingly favorable location near to plentiful supplies of both coal and iron ore, not develop into a leading center of iron and steel production? One approach to this question points to the specific, low-grade character of the region’s raw materials. McKiven’s investigation points as well to the fractious nature of Birmingham’s social order, and specifically to the persistence of racial- and class-based antagonism. His study draws heavily on the class-and-community genre of recent labor history, adding a sensitive portrait of both the white and black communities of workers and the persistent mistrust and antagonism that poisoned relations between them. He revises previous accounts of Birmingham’s labor conditions, typically based on study of a single firm or industry, which have argued either that white employers unfairly manipulated white workers’ fears of economic competition with blacks or (alternately) that there were meaningful instances of interracial cooperation among workers. Racial animosity and class antagonism, he finds, persisted across the city. Far from creating a docile, segmented workforce, this situation instead resulted in a community plagued by mutual suspicion. Birmingham was thus hampered by a racially segmented community that lacked the necessary mix of skilled and semi-skilled workers necessary to prosper in the early twentieth century.

McKiven aims to trace the complex interplay between racial and class struggles that shaped Birmingham’s social and economic order. He identifies two phases, the first beginning with the city’s rapid expansion following the Civil War and the second beginning around 1900 with the coming of steel plants. In both phases he devotes chapters to the character of work and factory-level labor practices, union organizing, community life, and workers’ participation in city politics. And in both phases he builds on David Montgomery’s insight that working-class community dynamics emerged from and reflected the nature of industrial work. An analytical puzzle for McKiven, privileging neither race nor class in his analysis, is to assess the various and changing strengths of intra-class loyalties and inter-racial tensions.

The New South boosters desiring to exploit the Birmingham region’s riches in coal and iron ore played the race card early. In attracting skilled white workers to the city beginning in the 1870s, they offered the alluring vision of a “workshop city” that would dispel the “wage slavery” prevailing in the North. Skilled white workers, including puddlers at the core of wrought iron production, moulders and patternmakers at the heart of the foundry trade, and machinists across the city, would have no fear of being reduced to ill-paid unskilled work -- the province by design of black workers recruited from the region’s impoverished rural areas. From the 1880s forward, skilled workers were preponderantly whites from the North and Midwest while unskilled workers were overwhelmingly blacks from the local region. The city’s trade unions routinely excluded blacks from membership, an action that not only barred blacks from upward mobility but also reinforced skilled white workers’ leverage at the bargaining table with white
employers. The workplace segregation extended naturally into segregated residential areas and segregated community institutions. An unanticipated result for white workers was their surprising inability to dominate city politics, except in the early 1890s when two former puddlers built a political machine that briefly rewarded one of them with the mayor’s office. Black citizens, not yet fully disenfranchised, were not predisposed to vote for white working-class candidates and instead tended to back middle-class reformers who courted their votes.

A second phase in the city’s social and economic development, beginning around 1900, was the twin result of technical change and of the increasing scale of the city’s enterprises. Whereas in 1880 the county’s three iron firms employed an average of 66 workers, in 1900 its four iron and steel companies averaged 2,040 workers while sixteen foundries and machine shops averaged 873 workers (with further increases in scale to come). Gone were the days (as a letter to the Birmingham Labor Advocate nostalgically put it) when “every employee knew his employer” and when employers and employees sent their children to the same schools, attended the same churches, and shared in “each other’s sorrow.” (p. 89) Technical changes -- most dramatically with the coming of steel manufacture at Tennessee Coal and Iron in 1898 but more lastingly with the mechanization of cast iron pipe manufacture, an emerging specialty of the city -- fundamentally altered the labor system by reducing demand for skilled workers and increasing demand for a new category of semi-skilled workers.

Employers, cutting their dependence on skilled workers, successfully made Birmingham an open shop city but their problems were hardly over. Both U.S. Steel, which acquired Tennessee Coal and Iron in 1907, and Sloss-Sheffield Steel and Iron identified the city’s unskilled workforce as a major obstacle to successful industrial development. Efforts in welfare capitalism and, especially for blacks, industrial education attempted to respond to these persistent problems. The fact that semi-skilled work was situated at the racial divide proved particularly problematic for the maintenance of white supremacy in the workplace. McKiven’s analysis of World War I draft registration cards is particularly revealing. Overall, while whites dominated skilled work and blacks dominated unskilled work, semi-skilled work was split between blacks (64 percent) and whites (36 percent). Fully 100 percent of skilled rollers, patternmakers, heaters, open hearth helpers, and open hearth melters were white. The sample also reveals striking differences among six of the city’s leading firms. Except for TCI, which employed significant numbers of whites as semi-skilled and unskilled workers, Birmingham’s semi-skilled workers were preponderantly black. Skilled workers at the city’s four largest concerns were 97 to 100 percent white, but at two smaller firms skilled workers were four-fifths black. White workers, abandoned by white employers and perennially threatened by lesser-skilled black workers, proved tractable to politicians promising to uphold white supremacy and to protect white workers from predatory corporations. It is unclear that workers, whether black, white, skilled or otherwise, were the better for this divisive social order.

Given McKiven’s broad hint that “this combination of class resentment and racism would shape Birmingham politics for almost half a century more” (p. 165) I wished that he had expanded his brief concluding chapter to deal with the era of Bull Connor. Readers
intrigued by these themes will wish to consult W. David Lewis’s *Sloss Furnaces and the Rise of the Birmingham District* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1994), which deals fully with one Birmingham firm’s experience across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and which discusses the technical limits steelmakers faced in the Birmingham district, and to compare Dennis Dickerson’s *Out of the Crucible: Black Steelworkers in Western Pennsylvania, 1875-1980* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986).

Thomas J. Misa  
Illinois Institute of Technology  
Chicago IL 60616