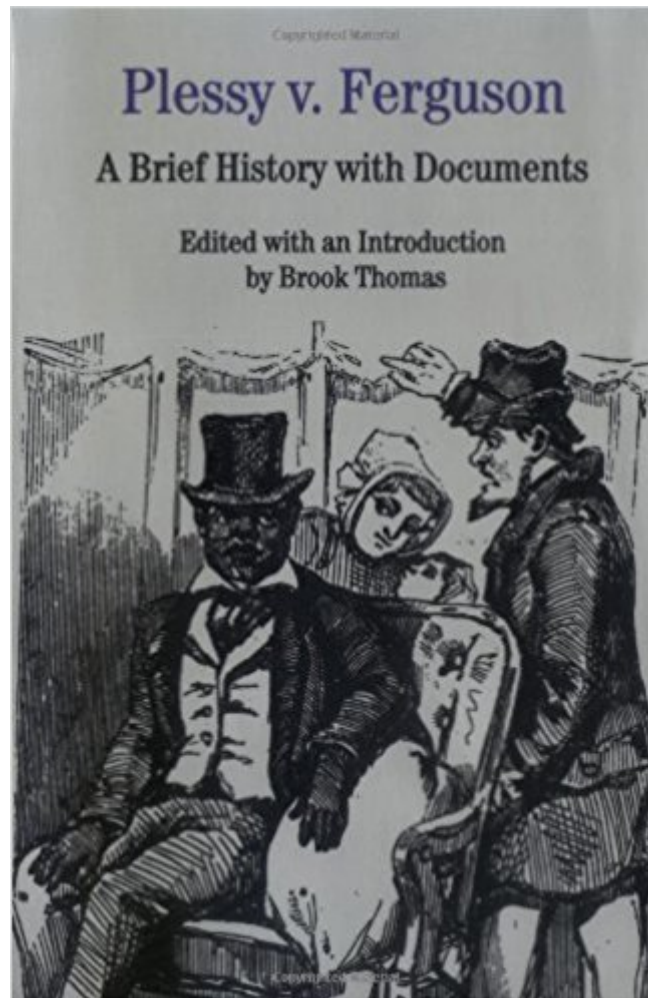


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Plessy V. Ferguson: A Brief History With Documents



Synopsis

In 1896, The Supreme Court's Plessy v. Ferguson decision made legal a system of "separate but equal" racial segregation not overruled until 1954. Using the full text of the Court's opinion, along with a selection of responses to the ruling, Brook Thomas allows students to re-create a context of the complicated debates and conditions in which the decision took place.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"This is an important case for undergraduate study, in large measure because it illuminates the modern debate over affirmative action. Brook Thomas recognizes this connection and helps the reader understand how the rhetoric of race used in Plessy remains influential. The narrative and accompanying historical documents provide a fresh and vivid look at one of the Supreme Court's most significant and controversial decisions."

Brook Thomas is chair of the English and Comparative Literature Department at the University of California, Irvine. After a book on James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1982), he turned his attention to the intersections of law, literature, and cultural history in the United States. He is author of *Cross-Examinations of Law and Literature: Cooper, Hawthorne, Stowe, and Melville* (1987); *The New Historicism and Other Old-Fashioned Topics* (1991); and *American Literary Realism and the Failed Promise of Contract* (1997). He has lectured on Plessy v. Ferguson to more than five thousand undergraduates over the course of several years.

The book contains a good analysis of the Plessy v. Ferguson case, decided by the United States Supreme Court, and establishing the doctrine of "separate but equal" that would remain the law of land until overturned in 1954. Minor criticism: the cover illustration shows a low-class white attempting to evict a well-dressed black man from his seat on a train. The picture has nothing to do with Plessy v. Ferguson. First of all, Homer Plessy was only 1/8 black, and it was not noticeable to the uninformed observer. Secondly, as material inside the book indicates, the picture depicts an incident that occurred in Pennsylvania in 1856 (40 years before the Plessy decision). Finally, strange as it may seem today, racial segregation was supported by all strata of Southern society (and a good many folks in the North too). It was just the way things were done, and no one really thought much about it. Except for the cover illustration, a great book, and all serious students of constitutional history should read it.

Gives you a good insight into how big of a sham this trial was. Very interesting history book for a better understanding.

Thomas has done yeoman service in his editing of this volume on the Plessy v Ferguson case. Sure, we all know "separate but euqal," but there was so much more, and Thomas covers it succinctly and completely. As part of the Bedford Series in History and Culture this volume looks at Plessy through a collection of original period documents with thoughtful, but to-the-point analytical introductions. Within a small number of pages is included not only the entire opinion of the Court, but also legal and social backgrounds for the case and race relations in America. Also covered in the volume are reactions to the case from general newspapers, the legal community, and African American intellectuals, and the impact of the case as seen from the first decade of the 20th century. It even has a wonderful timeline of pertinent events to help orient the progress of the case. It will probably not be fascinating to the casual reader of history-if your tastes tend more to the straight narrative, you may find this volume frustrating. But if you want to really understand Plessy's "separate but equal" argument and where it came from, this is the volume for you.

Brook Thomas is an English professor, not a legal scholar, and, although much of his work deals with intersections between law and literature, he tends to be more discerning as to literature and social issues than regarding the law. While his Plessy v. Ferguson gives a competent overview of the case and its context, this book is not his strongest work by a long shot. I have had success teaching this book in conjunction with Twain's Pudd'n'head Wilson, and its brief documentary history

works well to get students up to speed. But it has a distinctly text-bookish quality that would make it something of a drag in any but the classroom setting.

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