



# **A Right to Read: Segregation and Civil Rights in Alabama's Public Libraries, 1900–1965**

*Patterson Toby Graham*

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# A Right to Read: Segregation and Civil Rights in Alabama's Public Libraries, 1900–1965

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**This original and significant contribution to the historiography of the civil rights movement and education in the South details a dramatic and disturbing chapter in American cultural history.**

The tradition of American public libraries is closely tied to the perception that these institutions are open to all without regard to social background. Such was not the case in the segregated South, however, where public libraries barred entry to millions of African Americans and provided tacit support for a culture of white supremacy. *A Right to Read* is the first book to examine public library segregation from its origins in the late 19th century through its end during the tumultuous years of the 1960s civil rights movement. Graham focuses on Alabama, where African Americans, denied access to white libraries, worked to establish and maintain their own "Negro branches." These libraries—separate but never equal—were always underfunded and inadequately prepared to meet the needs of their constituencies.

By 1960, however, African Americans turned their attention toward desegregating the white public libraries their taxes helped support. They carried out "read-ins" and other protests designed to bring attention and judicial pressure upon the segregationists. Patterson Toby Graham contends that, for librarians, the civil rights movement in their institutions represented a conflict of values that pitted their professional ethics against regional mores. He details how several librarians in Alabama took the dangerous course of opposing segregationists, sometimes with unsettling results.

This groundbreaking work built on primary evidence will have wide cross-disciplinary appeal. Students and scholars of southern and African-American history, civil rights, and social science, as well as academic and public librarians, will appreciate Graham's solid research and astute analysis.

**Patterson Toby Graham** is Head of Special Collections at the University of Southern Mississippi. His research on library segregation has won four awards, including the ALISE-Eugene Garfield Dissertation Award.

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