Open wounds

by Peter Kerry Powers in the May 22, 2002 issue

Riot and Remembrance: The Tulsa Race War and Its Legacy.
By James S. Hirsch. Houghton
Mifflin, 358 pp., $25.00.

A photograph of a burning church ignites the cover of James S. Hirsch's book. The church is Mount Zion Baptist, spiritual cornerstone of the African-American community in Tulsa, Oklahoma, the photograph one of hundreds printed to record an act of racial violence. After a burning cross, a church in flames is perhaps the most indelible image of America's racial history. A burning photograph suggests both that we forget the past and that our haphazard efforts at remembrance sometimes stoke the fire.

This dynamic between the legacy of a destructive past and the sometimes destructive modes of our remembrance is Hirsch's topic. Formerly a reporter for the *New York Times*, Hirsch devotes the first half of his book to examining the Tulsa race riot of 1921. On the morning of May 31, 1921, the Greenwood section of Tulsa was a thriving symbol of African-American aspiration in the face of Jim Crow segregation. By the evening of June 1, Greenwood was a smoking ruin. Three hundred African-American lives were lost in the racial conflagration.

Hirsch is at his best in chronicling the ways in which black aspirations and white anxiety and rage combined in an explosive brew. By 1921 African-Americans had determined to take hold of their full rights as citizens, and for some, Oklahoma symbolized opportunities unchained from the old orders of the South and East. Ironically, the state was also by this era firmly organized along the lines of the Jim Crow South. According to Hirsch, Oklahoma in the 1920s was one of the Klan's strongest redoubts, with one in every ten Protestant males belonging to a klavern. The Klansmen were "more numerous than organized labor or any single political party."

When a young African-American man was accused of accosting a white woman in an elevator, these racial realities came into play. White newspapers printed

inflammatory editorials. White crowds gathered at the jail. A group of African-Americans entered white Tulsa with guns, determined that the usual racial story would not be repeated. As W. E. B. Du Bois put it, "[Black Tulsa] said, 'There shall be no lynching'; there was none. But there was war."

The second half of Hirsch's book lacks the vivid drama of the first, but it is in some ways more disturbing. It documents both the ways in which horrific events can be forgotten--by the '50s almost no younger Tulsans even knew that the riot had occurred--and the ways in which Americans disagree about the past. In the '90s, Tulsa began a very public process of attempting to remember the past and reconcile the races. But as Hirsch shows, reconciliation is routinely undermined as the politics of our memories give birth to cycles of blame and recrimination or to the self-serving insistence that it would be better to remember nothing at all.

Hirsch takes the stance of the balanced and neutral reporter observing the hopes and foibles of others. At its best, this method provides a clarifying window into racial rhetoric, and especially into the racial mind-set of otherwise well-intentioned white Americans. Nevertheless, this neutrality sometimes struck me as misguided, as when Hirsch seeks to understand the fears of white Tulsans who "honestly, but wrongly, believed that the blacks were trying to take over Tulsa." This rings too much of justification, as if it were possible to talk about honesty in reference to an act that led to the death of 300 people.

Hirsch reports latter-day Tulsans's debates about reparations as if they had a purely logical or rhetorical status, rather than taking place in a social context marked by enduring differences of power. In the end, I came away doubting that Hirsch's book is a more adequate form of remembrance than those he so rightly questions.

As I write, the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem is under siege. It would be foolish to equate the two events. The distance of oceans, cultures and histories is too great. But the similar images haunt me with a recurrent question: Where is the church in all this? It would be nice to believe that the church is a witness, a site of remembrance that maintains stories that redeem us. The story that Hirsch tells seems far less hopeful. The churches--or at least the churchmen--were in the streets, marching in white robes. Or shooting out the stained-glass windows. Or shooting back.