

The Price of Liberty: African Americans and the Making of Liberia

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Review

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Clegg III, Claude A. *The Price of Liberty: African Americans and the Making of Liberia*. University of North Carolina Press, \$19.95 ISBN 807855162

In the Heart of Darkness

The foundation of a republic

The story of Liberia—the world's second black-ruled Republic—is both fascinating and complicated. Founded largely through the efforts of the American Colonization Society (ACS) as a refuge for both free African Americans and freed slaves who wished to return to Africa, the country's history is a collection of paradoxes. Its very creation was dependent on the progressive belief that slavery was wrong, and yet also on the conservative belief that black people were unfit to live among whites. Its existence inherently critiqued slavery, and yet at the same time strengthened the "peculiar institution" by draining the United States of free blacks who might serve as a catalyst for insurrection. For Africans who traveled to Liberia, the country offered freedoms they had never known, but also hardships unheard of in the United States.

The Price of Liberty examines its subject matter from both sides of the Atlantic, beginning with the roots of slavery in the 1600's and continuing through 1900, with a brief epilogue on modern Liberia. The book's main focus is on the period from 1816—when the ACS was founded—until the 1890s—when the last colonists left the United States for Africa. The author is Claude A. Clegg III, who previously wrote a widely-praised book on Elijah Muhammad. Here he shifts his focus backward by about a century, but retains his penchant for meticulous research and copious footnotes. In his telling, Clegg particularly focuses on the state of North Carolina as a case study. Clegg does not explicitly defend this choice—surely North Carolina, with its large number of slaves and its significant Quaker population, is not a typical Southern state. Nonetheless the focus on North Carolina generally works, as the author seamlessly weaves national and local events together into one cohesive narrative

Clegg's greatest success in his book is in bringing order to his complicated subject matter. The colonization movement drew together a number of groups with very different agendas. Slave owners wished to be rid of troublesome freedmen who might spark a revolt, or might inspire slaves to escape. Religious groups, particularly the Quakers, saw slavery as inconsistent with the teachings of Jesus, even though they could not entirely come to accept African Americans as equals. Moderate politicians like Henry Clay were interested in freeing the country of the wedge that was driving the North and South further and further apart. Clegg does an excellent job of illustrating how the many different agendas gave particular shape to the ACS, and how the ACS went into decline once national events dictated that the various perspectives could no longer be reconciled with one another.

The author also deals effectively with the complex story that unfolded on the other side of the Atlantic. For those African Americans who chose to settle in Liberia, life was full of perils. Malaria claimed the lives of a frighteningly high number of settlers, sometimes as much as 30% in the first year. Hostile local tribes were a constant cause for concern, as was the fact that much Liberian land was not arable. Still, those who persevered were able to create a life for themselves, putting as much land under cultivation as possible while also profiting from a role as middleman between European traders and African natives.

Clegg is less effective in exploring his assertion that the settlers in Liberia formed a "modern colonial regime." Although this is presented as a core argument of **The Price of Liberty**, treatment of the issue is essentially limited to a portion of Chapter Four, and to the epilogue at the book's end. Clegg devotes no space to what his notion of what colonialism is, and he offers no substantive comparison to other colonial powers.

The book is also unpersuasive when it comes to the argument promised by its subtitle, **African Americans and the Making of Liberia**. This seems to assign almost all responsibility for the shaping of Liberia to African Americans, an assertion that is echoed in the book's introduction. In fact, the evidence presented by Clegg suggests that Liberia was created by a whole host of forces—Native Africans, white ACS Officials, African climate and geography—among which African Americans were only one of the players.

Liberia has been a popular subject for historians since the 1960s, and those familiar with the work on the subject will likely find little new in **The Price of Liberty**. For the reader with more general knowledge, however, the book will serve as a well-written and useful primer on one of the trickiest chapters in both American and African history.

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