

Slavery, Resistance, Freedom

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Review

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Understanding Slavery

When in the 1950s mainstream historians rediscovered slavery as the prime cause of the American Civil War, African Americans nevertheless often remained absent in accounts of the war and its causes. Slavery might have been central to the conflict but only insofar as the institution created tensions and conflicts between whites; African Americans—enslaved and free—remained in the background. More recently, however, historians such as the prominent scholars represented in this volume of essays have argued that the war, its causes, and its aftermath cannot be understood apart from the actions of African Americans, not just as slaves, but as political agents who resisted slavery and discrimination and forced white Americans to live up to the rhetoric of their ideals of freedom, liberty, and equality. This collection of six essays by well-known historians including Ira Berlin, Edward L. Ayers, John Hope Franklin, and Eric Foner extends this trend by telling stories, as Scott Hancock writes in the introduction, of the difference that slavery and freedom made to African Americans, and how African Americans resisted slavery and responded when it crumbled (xiii).

Drawing upon examples from his *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery* (1998), Ira Berlin provides in the first essay, *American Slavery in History and Memory*, a thematic overview for the essays to follow. Historical memory, Berlin notes, concerns the way that people make use of the past—often an oversimplified, inaccurate, and selective version of the past—to make sense of the world today. History, on the other hand, deals in complexities that many white and black Americans prefer to ignore, but without historical memory, despite its faults, our sense of self, nation, and humanity falters and academic history seems irrelevant in contemporary life. Thus the two go hand-in-hand in helping to sustain the surprisingly high interest in slavery and

the Civil War.

All of the remaining essays to a greater or lesser extent touch on the way in which African Americans in the past interpreted their past to forge the mental and emotional defenses against slavery and discrimination. John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger's essay, extracted from their book *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation* (1999), puts to rest the notion recently current in some scholarly quarters that the paternalism of slaveholders mitigated the barbarity of the institution while at the same time underscoring the varied efforts and experiences of the runaways. Scott Hancock's essay *Tradition Informs Us: African Americans' Construction of Memory in the Antebellum North* explicitly elucidates the ways in which antebellum black people constructed a common memory of patriotic participation in the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812 to claim equality and full citizenship in the 1850s. Hancock notes that African Americans conveniently forgot the number of slaves who sought freedom by siding with the British during the wars because such historically accurate and understandable actions did not serve the needs of black people in the 1850s and 1860s. The defense of American freedom by black patriots provided antebellum northern African Americans with a rationale for claims to citizenship and equality while the shoddy treatment of those same black patriots provided a rationale for staying out of the fight during the early years of the Civil War.

Edward L. Ayers, William G. Thomas III, and Anne Sarah Rubin trace the Civil War experiences of African Americans who got into the fight and the families they left behind in two counties in Pennsylvania and Virginia—readers will recognize the Valley of Shadow setting. As the men of Franklin County, Pennsylvania, many of whom joined the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts, fought not only Confederates but also discrimination from white soldiers, their families endured repeated invasions by Confederate forces intent on kidnapping all the black people they could find back into slavery. Noah Andrew Trudeau's essay on the only black units to serve in the Union's Army of the Potomac—in the Ninth Corps during the Petersburg Campaign—also provides evidence of the valor of black soldiers in the Civil War and the persistence of racism and its deleterious effects on the war effort. The last-minute decision by George Meade, supported by U.S. Grant, to change the plan of attack at the battle of the Crater came about because Meade did not trust black troops to lead the attack. The hastily redrawn battle plan resulted in confusion, failure and the ugly spectacle of white Union soldiers bayoneting their black comrades out of fear of Confederate retribution against those captured along side African-American soldiers. In the aftermath of

defeat, white memory laid the blame at the feet of the black soldiers.

The concluding essay by Eric Foner briefly examines the lives of African Americans who held political office during Reconstruction and, like the essay by Hope and Schweninger, contrasts representations in white academic histories and mainstream memory of Negro domination by illiterate, inept, corrupt black puppets with the more historically accurate and complex picture of the African-American leaders who were sometimes far more educated than their white counterparts, strove to initiate progressive legislation, and never dominated southern politics to the extent portrayed by unreconstructed southerners.

Boritt and Hancock selected the essays in this volume from Gettysburg College's annual lectures commemorating the Gettysburg Address and from a week-long session of speakers celebrating the twentieth anniversary of the college's Civil War Institute. As such, the essays are not path-breaking contributions to the field as much as they are distillations of significant and often path-breaking book-length studies with which many readers will be familiar. Nevertheless, the editors' selections provide a valuable, cohesive introduction to recent scholarship on African American slavery, resistance, and freedom that will no doubt be useful in American history surveys, in courses on the Civil War era, and to non-academics.

Robert S. Shelton, an associate professor of history at Cleveland State University, has published articles on slavery, race, and labor in the antebellum and postbellum South.