

Denmark Vesey's Garden: Slavery and Memory in the Cradle of the Confederacy

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Review

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Kytle, Ethan J. and Roberts, Blain. *Denmark Vesey's Garden: Slavery and Memory in the Cradle of the Confederacy.* New Press, \$28.95 ISBN 978162973653

In the wake of Dylann Roof's murders at a Charleston church and another death during the violence at the Lee Monument in Charlottesville, a public debate over taking down Confederate monuments has intensified. The resulting discussion of the meaning of the Confederacy and the use of Confederate symbols can help Americans better understand their racial past. In coming to terms with that past, however, it may be even more important to address how Americans remember and present the history of slavery. If so, Ethan J. Kytle's and Blain Roberts' fascinating study of how one city, Charleston, South Carolina, remembered slavery becomes particularly timely and important.

Kytle and Roberts rightly argue that their story is a national one, but their focus remains on the city that they consider the "capital of American slavery," (6) "the Cradle of the Confederacy," and the "Cradle of the Lost Cause" (114). Kytle and Roberts succinctly summarize Charleston's treatment of the history of slavery: Since the Civil War "generations of whites and blacks in Charleston have forged two competing visions of slavery. On the one hand, former slaveholders, their decedants, and others have promoted a whitewashed memory, one that downplayed or even ignored slavery at times, only to cast it as benevolent and civilizing at other moments. On the other hand, former slaves, their progeny, and some white and black allies have advanced an unvarnished counterpart. They insist that slavery must be recognized and commemorated as a brutal, inhuman institution that has shaped who we are as a nation" (4). The authors do an excellent job of tracing and exploring those competing visions through a chronological survey based on extensive research and enriched by insightful analyses of various individuals, groups, monuments, and events.

Their book begins with a look at antebellum slavery, but quickly moves on to the African American response to emancipation and subsequent celebrations of the 4th of July, rituals in which the freed people mocked the pretenses of their former masters. The Lost Cause, Kytle and Roberts argue, represented a response to the African American emancipation celebrations with their critique of slavery. As the Lost Cause developed, though, white Charleston maintained a "conflicted position on slavery," at once portraying it "as incidental to the Confederate struggle" and yet "highlighting the centrality of slavery in the Old South" (123) and, at times, "defending its merits." (124) Its nostalgic white memory of slavery intertwined with the Lost Cause and supported the creation of Jim Crow segregation.

Throughout the book, Kytte and Roberts emphasize the role of the Lost Cause. They perhaps go too far in claiming Charleston served as the “Cradle of the Lost Cause”; New Orleans or Richmond probably played a more significant role. Through much of the twentieth century and even today, as they acknowledge, Charleston itself emphasized not its Civil War but its colonial past. They rightly see that as part of sectional reconciliation and observe that the emphasis on the colonial era “served to nationalize Charleston’s history” (185). But the book returns repeatedly to the context of the Civil War and the Lost Cause; the city’s own choice to emphasize its colonial past deserves more attention and analysis.

Even before 1900, the authors show, Charleston served as a “preindustrial refuge from modern life” (169) for many northern visitors, who found slavery interesting and even created a market for real (and fake) antebellum slave badges. At the turn of the century, Charleston’s white leadership began to promote tourism, and Kytte and Roberts explore how slavery did and did not become part of the past Charleston presented to its visitors. As the tourism industry grew after World War I, the city did not ignore slavery. With considerable subtlety and insight, the authors interpret the city’s preservation movement, music and literature coming out of interwar Charleston, white (and one black) organizations that sought to preserve slave spirituals, white Gullah impersonators, and even the operation, by conservative whites, of a museum in a former slave-market. Together, they conclude, these activities promoted a romanticized and “sanitized memory of slavery” (223). Exceptions did arise, however, in historian Frederic Bancroft’s work on the slave trade and the efforts of WPA’s Federal Writers’ Project.

During the Jim Crow era, African Americans preserved their own contrasting and critical memory of slavery in emancipation day celebrations and in all black schools, although there, the authors add, some descendants of free people of color sought to distance themselves by maintaining that their ancestors had never been slaves. In the twentieth century, African American tourism also played a role in helping preserve slavery as part of the city’s past. After World War II, the civil rights movement drew power from the memory of slavery and also spurred significant changes in Charleston and its portrayal of slavery.

Ft. Sumter incorporated slavery into the presentation of its history, and slavery’s treatment in official tourist guidebooks and on nearby plantations improved. In 1976, the city first hung a portrait of Denmark Vesey, the leader of an 1822 slave insurrection in Charleston, whose name forms part of the book’s title. Someone soon stole the portrait, although it was later recovered and displayed again. In 2004, after a twenty-two year campaign, Charleston even erected a statue to Vesey. In the meantime, the city’s African American community and its white establishment had begun to incorporate a more critical view of slavery into the public presentation of the city’s history, a development that perhaps culminated in Charleston’s complex celebration of the Civil War’s sesquicentennial that highlighted slavery’s role in the Confederacy.

Kytte and Roberts completed their research at about the time Roof—who had visited Charleston and its surrounding plantations—murdered nine people in Charleston’s Bethel A.M.E Church, where Vesey had worshiped. The authors, who make very clear that they seek not just to show how slavery has been remembered but to change that presentation by pointing out its errors, found it very discouraging, understandably, that altered public presentations of slavery

have not done more to alter public attitudes. The nation, they lament, remains fundamentally divided in how it remembers slavery. They are right, of course. Yet the fact that Charleston, “the capitol of American slavery” and “Cradle of the Confederacy,” seems to be slowly changing, provides some hope for a new public understanding of slavery. So too does the possibility that *Denmark Vesey's Garden* will find a large readership, and that those who read it will not just learn how the institution has been remembered but also wrestle with the ramification of America's slave past for its present and future.

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