

The Worst Passions of Human Nature: White Supremacy in the Civil War North

Andrew Turner

University of North Carolina, Greensboro, acturner@uncg.edu

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Review

Andrew Turner

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Escott, Paul D. *The Worst Passions of Human Nature: White Supremacy in the Civil War North.* University of Virginia Press, 2020. HARDCOVER. \$29.95 ISBN 9780813943848 pp. 248.

The New York City riots of July 1863 exhibited the potential of the violent tension that ran in a steady stream throughout the Northern states during the middle of the Civil War. As white New Yorkers rioted to oppose the Enrollment Act of 1863 imposed by the United States government, they quickly turned their ire toward African Americans, with deeply seated white supremacy and racially motivated fear prompting their deadly reprisals against innocent black New Yorkers. Sadly, as illustrated by Paul Escott's needed new book, *The Worst Passions of Human Nature: White Supremacy in the Civil War North*, the white supremacy that underlay the New York riots was the norm, not the exception. In a succinct style, Escott has captured the ubiquitous white supremacy in the Civil War North that often threatened to undermine the Union war effort and stood as an obstacle to the fulfillment of the promise of freedom. Escott's work is a necessary contribution to a Civil War historiography that sometimes overlooks the extent of white supremacy on the Northern home front. His work also proves that although ample strides were made by Northerners to secure freedom for African Americans, white supremacy was a cancerous obstacle to such efforts throughout the war and remained strong after the conflict.

Escott, an author of numerous Civil War era titles, including *"What Shall We Do with the Negro?" Lincoln, White Racism, and Civil War America* (2009) and *Lincoln's Dilemma: Blair, Sumner, and the Republican Struggle Over Racism and Equality in the Civil War Era* (2014), has crafted a tidy 248-page volume that will serve as an excellent primer on white supremacy that was a wide-reaching American problem in the nineteenth century, not merely a Southern phenomenon. Drawing largely on a systematic study of Northern newspapers, Escott examines the political currents that swept the North and which nearly all included white supremacist ideology. Escott does an excellent job of outlining the racist views that were crucial to the Democratic party's platform, and which sought to block the Republican aims of emancipation

and prosecution of the war against slaveholding Southerners. In a refreshing view, however, Escott does not merely portray white supremacy as limited to the ranks of the Democratic party in the North and emphasizes the fact that only a very small percentage of radical Republicans espoused views that should be considered approaching racially egalitarian. Instead, he points to Republicans' ardent support of African American colonization and expatriation as evidence (among other blatant white supremacist sentiments) that nearly all Northerners espoused views which would today be considered racist in the extreme. Nevertheless, as Escott states, moderate (and mostly prejudiced) Republicans like Abraham Lincoln were able to toe the line between Copperheads and abolitionists to prosecute emancipation as a war measure and to eventually pass the Thirteenth Amendment. Though white supremacy threatened to limit the Union war effort, Escott proves that gradually more conciliatory attitudes toward emancipation from Northern Democrats allowed progress to occur both legislatively and militarily, while supporters still maintained ardent ideas of white supremacy. As Escott states, white supremacy was "far more indestructible than slavery itself." (5)

Highlights of Escott's work include his discussion of Northern fears that the emigration of newly freed people threatened their financial and moral well-being. The discourse of white fear reached a boiling point in 1863, resulting in a series of race riots across the Midwest. In these sections, Escott includes a smattering of accounts from ordinary citizens who stated their white supremacist fears, but an inclusion of more such quotes would have contributed nicely to the book. While Escott effectively uses the Northern media to gauge the feelings of laypeople, more direct quotes from letters and diaries of Northern citizens would serve to illustrate his point that white supremacy was rampant among all portions of Northern society. Because of its heavy focus on white supremacy in journalism and amongst party leaders, Escott's book can at times feel slightly repetitive in its quotation of newspapers and political diatribes. Escott does not provide much background on the longstanding and inculcated tradition of white supremacy in the Civil War North that stemmed from years of Northern slavery, black codes, and white dominated societies, and the inclusion of a forward and afterward covering pre- and postwar white supremacist traditions would have complimented his work nicely. While Escott occasionally mentions the impact of Union soldiers on weakening white supremacist ideology on the Northern home front, a more in-depth treatment on the discourse between Northern soldiers and citizens regarding white supremacy is needed to fully grasp the extent to which the ideology of those

soldiering in the South and living in the North impacted one another. Nevertheless, Escott's book is an excellent treatment of racism in the Civil War North, and his politically centered examination reflects the feelings of most white Northerners.

White supremacy is an American pathology that tragically knew no borders during the Civil War, much as today. As Northern citizens and politicians grappled with how to suppress a slaveholding rebellion, they also grappled with the hypocrisy of their own white supremacist ideology in fighting such a war, even if they did not realize it. *The Worst Passions of Human Nature* is a needed treatment on the seemingly ever-present issue of white supremacy, and one which proves that such ideology only narrowly missed destroying Union victory. While perceptions that the Civil War was fought for idealist values of racial equality remain strong in public opinion, Escott proves that the war "could not completely realize the ideas of the Declaration of Independence" and "achieved, at best, only a partial repudiation of the idea of a white man's country." (179)

Escott's book is a valuable contribution to the historiography of American race, politics, and the Civil War. It will work well alongside books such as Gary Gallagher's *The Union War* (2011) to provide the full story of Northern war aims, ideology, and obstructions to an ultimate Northern victory that was not inevitable. Escott's book is a fine addition to the library of any student of American racial discourse, and one which is a poignant reminder of the deeply imbedded and wide-reaching white supremacy that continues to plague the United States.

Andrew Turner is a PhD student at the University of North Carolina-Greensboro. His work focuses on the Civil War soldier experience, North Carolina in the Civil War, and divided loyalty in Southern sectionalism. He can be reached at acturner@uncg.edu.