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Slaves No More: Letters from Liberia 1833-1869 (review)

Frank Allen Dennis

Civil War History

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REVIEW

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

280 CIVIL WAR HISTORY in three volumes, the first of which as appeared under the cryptic title, *The Deep Waters of the Proud*. After a running start, in which two chapters bring the narrative from 1492 to 1860, this volume devotes eighteen chapters to developments from the beginning of secession to the preliminary emancipation proclamation and its immediate consequences. Campaigns and battles naturally predominate, and they are recounted with considerable verve, but politics and diplomacy receive due attention. The many new truths, however, are not readily apparent. The book is not especially strong in interpretation, though the author does make a few contentions of a generalizing sort. He argues, for one thing, that the Battle of Antietam in no sense marked a turning point, military or diplomatic. The story is told, in part, through the careers of a few participants, most notably John C. Breckinridge, whose biography is one of the author's previous books. This procedure may make for readability, but it results in a certain imbalance, for Breckinridge gets more space than either Ulysses S. Grant or Robert E. Lee. Though a synthesis of much recent writing, in addition to Davis's own, the volume does not always reflect the most up-to-date scholarly

views. For instance, it presents President James Buchanan as a mere "jellyfish" and "moral coward." It fails to note the really significant differences between the Federal and Confederate constitutions—the differences in respect to slavery. It overlooks important aspects of the Sumter confrontation, among them the storm that delayed elements of Gustavus Vasa Fox's expedition. On the whole, the three volumes of *The Imperiled Union* (a title that Kenneth M. Stampp recently used for a book of essays) promise to be less moving as literature than the work of Shelby Foote or Bruce Catton, less dependable as scholarship than the old text by James G. Randall and David Donald or the new one by James B. McPherson. Richard N. Current

University of North Carolina at Greensboro *Slaves No More: Letters from Liberia 1833-1869*. Edited by Bell I. Wiley. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1980. Pp. vii, 349. \$21.50.) Bell I. Wiley spent most of his scholarly life vicariously experiencing the fears and hopes of people most other historians found too common or unglamorous to be worthy of much attention. In the minds of many, Johnny Reb and Billy Yank simply were not in the same league with Marse Robert, Uncle Joe, and William T. And Wiley's ground-breaking *Southern Negroes, 1861-1865* also showed his interest in and respect for those whom tradition and academic style often ignored. So, in a career devoted to these unsung heroes, it is not surprising that Wiley's last book (unless he left other manuscripts as yet unpublished) dealt also with people who lived on the fringe of scholarly interest—the [BOOKREVIEWS281](#) black Americans who settled in Liberia between 1820 and 1861 as beneficiaries of the American Colonization Society. This collection consists of 273 letters written from Liberia by former slaves. While some of these were written to officials of the American Colonization Society, readers will likely be interested most in those written to former owners and members of owners' families. The former slaves who wrote these letters were, as Wiley freely admitted in his introduction, "unrepresentative" (p. 8) of slaves as a class. Nearly all blacks who migrated to Liberia had been house servants, artisans, or recipients of various sorts of preferred status and treatment. As such, they reflected a level of learning, religious interest, and affection for their former masters which the field hand neither possessed nor could be expected to have. Thus, the sentiments expressed in these letters cannot be said to reflect accurately the feelings of all those kept in slavery, and Wiley did not intend that they be so taken. But they are an exhaustive and comprehensive account of virtually all that is known about how these transplanted Afro-Americans lived and thought as they adjusted to life on the continent of their ancestors. Every known extant letter written from Liberia to a former owner is contained in this volume. Thus, the mere encyclopedic nature of this work is staggering. Wiley grouped...

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