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Book Review: Slavery and Public History: The Tough Stuff of American Memory. Edited by James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton

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Book Reviews 170

Review of:

Slavery and Public History: The Tough Stuff of American Memory.

Edited by James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton. Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2006 [paperback edition, 2009]. Pp. xiv + 272, introduction, illustrations, notes, contributors, index. \$19.95, paper.

Slavery and Public History is a compilation of journal articles detailing the uncomfortable nature of the “peculiar institution” of slavery in the history of America. The target audience of this book is primarily academic due to the various journal articles that comprise the book. This book is not intended for the layperson because of the nature of academic writing within the several articles in the book. In addition, the over-arching subject matter of the book is the issue of slavery and its discussion about the historical issue of slavery on the national and state level in museums and parks. What the book reflects is the perceived problem that exists in how America can have an open and intellectual discussion about the most awkward institution in American history. That needed conversation is what the collective articles each remind the reader to critically think about.

Overall, there is one main point in this book, how do we as a country approach the dilemma of slavery in American history? Ira Berlin stated succinctly that “American history cannot be understood without slavery” (p. 2). He is correct, and the rest of the articles within the book follow from this main theme presented by Berlin. Whether it is David Blight recalling what Civil Rights leader Fred Shuttlesworth said about telling it like it was (p. 33), or a young man in Kentucky by the name of Eric Browning trying to incorporate the influence of slavery at Federal Hill in Kentucky to the people who tour the plantation home (p. 116). Different people want the same thing, and that is the truth of slavery recognized as it is in the history of America. Slavery is a dilemma in American historiography and this

book tries to explain how to approach the sensitive subject of slavery in American history.

The goal of the book was to show how public historians deal with the contradictory nature of a free nation who still held on to the institution of slavery after 1776 (p. vii). That is exactly what the articles did in this book. Whether it was a discussion on the Liberty Bell or the controversy in Richmond, Virginia over Abraham Lincoln, the individual authors of the articles each broached the sensitive subject of slavery in their own ways to show the incongruities of supporting both slavery and freedom in the antebellum and postbellum.

In transitioning from goals, the chance for inventive research within the book comes from the side of the people who believe the alternative theory known as the “Lost Cause.” Each author discounts and immediately marginalizes that philosophy as incorrect, and rightfully so, but it would be interesting for a scholarly article to explain how believers in the Lost Cause would explain how slavery should be discussed in national and state ran museums.

There was a deficiency in the collection of journal articles: the editors of the book left out articles from the Southern perspective. Not a perspective that is condoning or perpetuating or even sympathetic to the Lost Cause or its philosophical variances, but just an academic or two that has lived and taught within the South to give a more broad and multiregional perspective on the issue of slavery and its representation in history. That was both a weakness and something the editors left out of their compilation of articles.

To transition, *Slavery and Public History* brings to mind a book by the name of *Whitewashing America: Material Culture and Race in the Antebellum Imagination* by Bridget T. Heneghan, in which the issue of slavery and the place of slavery within the material culture of America is a difficult point in history. *Slavery and Public History* wonders whether the history of slavery has a place in the American

past; whereas, *Whitewashing America* made aware whether slaves or former slaves actually had a rightful place in American material culture. The reason why they are similar is the two books wonder where the rightful place is of the African-American in American history in a culture that was dominated by white culture and white historians. Both *Slavery and Public History* and *Whitewashing America* raise important questions of how to deal with minority history and culture in an American society that wishes to avoid “the tough stuff of American history” so to speak.

Finally, the weakness of *Slavery and Public History* is the lack of critical academic writing from professors in the South. Most of the academics writing the articles were located in Washington, D.C., a few from the West Coast, and one spent time in Richmond, the second capitol of the Confederacy (pp. 253-56). That was not enough to create a balanced book based on regional points of view. Now, of course, the book was not concerned about regional balance or anything of that nature; its focus was on slavery and how to discuss the sensitive issue in the academic world. However, it would be interesting to have Southern professors contribute to an article compilation such as *Slavery and Public History*.

In conclusion, what *Slavery and Public History* teaches the reader is slavery is still a sensitive issue in America and a taboo subject. Eventually, open and intellectual dialogues need to be held between academic and layperson to explain the peculiar institution of slavery. In the end, public history can serve as the intermediary between the tough stuff of American history and giving the general public an informed, educated, and insightful explanation of slavery in American history, while maintaining a sensitivity to the painful nature of the peculiar institution. That is what *Slavery and Public History* is about.

Matthew C. Fesmire