

Command Performance: Actress Turned Plantation Mistress Decried Horrors Of Slavery

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Review

COMMAND PERFORMANCE

Actress turned plantation mistress decried horrors of slavery

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Dusinberre, William *Them Dark Days: Slavery in the American Rice Swamps*. University of Georgia Press, 2000-04-01. ISBN 820322105

This review is also available under the following titles:

Fanny Kemble's Civil Wars: The Story of America's Most Unlikely Abolitionist

Fanny Kemble's Journals

Them Dark Days is the first of several volumes on the history of slavery in the United States that William Dusinberre is currently preparing. First published by Oxford University Press in 1996, its reissue this year by the University of Georgia Press in softcover is a noteworthy event. It marks the emergence of an American social historian of major importance.

William Dusinberre did his graduate work in history at Columbia University. Subsequently, when the University of Warwick was founded in England in 1965, he took a job there and met Edward P. Thompson, the famous British social historian. Thompson's influence in shifting Dusinberre's attention to social history was a decisive one.

Them Dark Days focuses upon the rise and fall of the Rice Kingdom in South Carolina and Georgia from 1790 to 1865. Rice production in South Carolina expanded rapidly in the middle of the 18th century when production moved into the swamplands in and around the tidal rivers. Slaves were imported from West Africa, and American agricultural innovators adapted Dutch polderland (swampland) technology. To conquer the swamps and bring them under cultivation took as much human effort as was needed to build an Egyptian pyramid. Dikes were thrown up by gangs of slaves armed with spades,

floodgates were installed, and conduits laid down to channel water to the fields. The swamplands were crisscrossed with irrigation ditches that could be filled with fresh (as opposed to salt) water when the tide was high. This water would be released back into the river days or weeks later, when the tide was out.

By 1860, rice production in the Georgia and South Carolina polderlands had grown into a highly profitable business concentrated in the hands of a tiny group of wealthy planters. These men were agricultural capitalists driven by a passion for profit. Twenty-four families, with 300 or more slaves each, together owned one-half of the 48,000 slaves who toiled on the rice plantations. The big rice planters, Dusiñberre points out, were also rulers of the South. They championed secession and war as the best way to protect their vast investment in ricelands and slaves.

Dusiñberre centers his attention on three of the biggest Lowcountry rice plantations: Charles and Louis Manigault's Gowrie, a Georgia plantation eight miles upstream from Savannah; Robert Allston's Chicora Wood plantation in the Waccamaw-Pee Dee peninsula area; and Pierce Butler's Butler Island, a diked swamp in the Altamaha River, ten miles upstream from the Atlantic beaches.

Fortunes were amassed from rice at a high cost in human life. On all three plantations, the child mortality rate was as high as 90 percent for children up to age 16. Mothers, having undergone many confinements and miscarriages, often ended up with no more than one or two children who survived past adolescence. Adult slaves in the prime of life died of sunstroke, exhaustion, malarial fevers, tuberculosis, and pneumonia. Slave marriages were destroyed constantly by the death or deportation of one of the partners.

The black captives were driven to daily labor by the lash. They resisted their tormentors in various ways, but rarely resorted to open violence against them: the military balance of power, as Dusiñberre points out, was overwhelmingly against them. They lamed animals, "bogged mules," broke ploughs, untied the tethers of boats, and botched repairs. Above all, they sought relief by fleeing, at least for a short while, to surrounding swamps, islands, and woodlands. "The slaves," as Dusiñberre sums up on page 201, "were locked into a class conflict of epic proportions, pitting a largely homogeneous class of slaves against profit-seeking masters. . . ."

Where Gowry and Chicora Wood are concerned, the Manigault and Allston papers provide the core evidence on which Dusinberre bases his story. Frances Anne Kemble's *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation in 1838-1839* provides the evidence for Butler Island and Butler Point on St. Simons Island. Kemble, a celebrated stage actress turned wife of Pierce Butler, Jr., and mistress of the Butler plantations, compiled a record of the slavery experience as voiced primarily, though not exclusively, by black slave women. In devoting one whole section of his book to Kemble's record, Dusinberre writes, "I have sought to listen carefully to the testimony of black witnesses." He sets Kemble's *Journal of a Residence* into the wider context of the Rice Kingdom as a whole. This is a contribution that serves both to highlight the significance of that record and also to substantiate it.

Catherine Clinton, author of *The Plantation Mistress: Woman's World in the Old South*, and visiting professor of history at Baruch College, now comes with two books on Kemble. The first of these, **Fanny Kemble's Civil Wars**, focuses primarily on Kemble's unhappy domestic life. Clinton devotes barely one-third of a chapter, or 200 lines in a book of 268 pages, to Kemble's Georgia experience and to the creation of her *Journal of a Residence*. She has little to say about the *Journal of a Residence* itself, limiting herself to the remark, on page 178, that it is "a haunting diatribe against human bondage." A diatribe, according to my dictionary, is "a piece of wearisome denunciatory rhetoric."

This study does underline a point which, to be sure, others have made before Clinton. Frances Kemble arraigned American slave masters for high crimes against humanity. For this she paid a heavy price: a shattered marriage, a long separation from her children, and ultimately a permanent estrangement from her younger daughter, Frances Butler Leigh.

It would seem that Clinton was not entirely satisfied with **Fanny Kemble's Civil Wars**. Was it not weakened by its failure to explore Kemble's literary heritage, and in particular to examine and evaluate the *Journal of a Residence*? And what about Kemble's service in bringing African-American women to the forefront of our history: does that not deserve recognition?

To answer such questions, Clinton offers a second book, entitled **Fanny Kemble's Journals**, presenting a chronological narrative of Kemble's life in her own words. Here the *Journal of a Residence* is given pride of place. Selections from the *Journal of a Residence* take up no less than one-third of the entire book.

The balance of the work is filled out by selections from the travel journal that Kemble published in 1835, and by letters from Kemble's voluminous published correspondence.

It is regrettable that **Fanny Kemble's Journals** has few maps and illustrations. It would have been strengthened in particular by drawing more exhaustively on the work of Alice Ravenel Huger Smith. Smith, daughter and granddaughter of rice planters and outstanding American watercolorist, created during the 1920s a number of marvelous paintings of the old Rice Kingdom. But, leaving aside the shortcomings of book design, **Fanny Kemble's Journals** is a useful introduction to the story of Kemble's life in the United States, especially during the period 1832 to 1865.

Although the two books have been published simultaneously, **Fanny Kemble's Journals** supplants rather than supplements **Fanny Kemble's Civil Wars**. The *Journal of a Residence* is no longer a "haunting diatribe" but a "searing indictment of slavery" and Kemble's "most enduring literary contribution." It is rendered more powerful, Clinton points out, because it "is interlaced with [Kemble's] own struggle over her marriage, her future, and her children." These are wise words. The struggle against slavery was central to Kemble's life; this was the moral force that created a chasm between Kemble and her husband and resulted in the disintegration of her family.

John Anthony Scott is the editor of the definitive modern edition of Frances Anne Kemble's Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation in 1838-1839 (1961, reissued 1984) and author of Fanny Kemble's America (1973).