

Evil Necessity: Slavery and Political Culture in Antebellum Kentucky

Robert E. May

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Review

May, Robert E.

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Freedom fight

Historian deciphers complex and conflicting attitudes toward the peculiar institution

Historians have long acknowledged that fissures in antebellum southern society regarding the slavery question lasted long after positive good pronouncements displaced necessary evil rationalizations in southern political commentary in the 1830s. As Carl Degler put it on page 79 of his 1974 work, *The Other South*, it is a myth to assume that a blackout descended like a pall upon the South, killing off anti-slavery dissent following the debate about the institution that occurred in the Virginia House of Delegates in 1832 in the wake of Nat Turner's rebellion. Moreover, scholars have long known that anti-slavery sentiment waxed much stronger in the Upper South than the Deep South for a variety of economic, demographic, and geopolitical reasons. In his recent works, William W. Freehling has even suggested that the secession movement in the Deep South was in no small measure a preemptive strike designed to ward off the probability of general emancipation in the Upper South. In addition, scholars particularly point to Kentucky for evidence of southern anti-slavery. As Clement Eaton declared on page 177 in his classic *The Freedom-Of-Thought Struggle in the Old South*, published in 1940, Kentucky was the most liberal state in the South on the slavery question in the 1830s.

In **Evil Necessity**, Harold Tallant provides a thoughtful, trenchant, and impressively textured microscopic analysis of Kentucky anti-slavery in a work of intellectual, social, and political history that has implications for all students of liberalism in the Old South. Tallant, a history professor at Georgetown College in the Bluegrass State, follows Kentucky antislavery chronologically through its advances and setbacks from the founding of the Kentucky Colonization Society

in 1829 through the guest appearance of Kentucky abolitionist John Gregg Fee at Henry Ward Beecher's pulpit in Brooklyn, New York on November 13, 1859. On the latter occasion, Fee outraged public opinion in his home state by seeming, in words that were taken out of context by Kentucky newspapers, to endorse John Brown's recent raid on Harpers Ferry, Virginia. Along the way, Tallant ruminates on the philosophy and initiatives of a kind of who's who of Kentucky anti-slavery û including such prominent figures, besides Fee, as James Gillespie Birney, Robert Jefferson Breckinridge, and Cassius Marcellus Clay.

Tallant contends on page 3 that white Kentuckians shared a nearly universal agreement...that slavery was a necessary evil. His early chapters explain in meticulous detail just what white Kentuckians meant when using that phrase; and these chapters also thoroughly explore the gradualist emancipation philosophy and program û African colonization and a longstanding ban on slave importations û that necessary evil thinking engendered. Paradoxically, Tallant argues, such conflicted views both fostered and constrained Kentucky anti-slavery, because they were not strong enough to overcome countervailing concerns about the presumed dangers of emancipation. Later chapters emphasize Cassius Clay's role in a radical antislavery movement that swept across Kentucky in the 1840s, the crushing defeat of antislavery in the Kentucky constitutional convention of 1849, and John Fee's progression through an anarchic variant of the religious creed of come-outerism, which seized on the biblical demand that Christians secede from unclean religious fellowship, to a radical, natural-law egalitarianism that eventually embraced not only emancipation but even racial intermarriage and black political equality.

Less dismissive of slaveholder assertions of anti-slavery beliefs than some prior scholars, Tallant observes that over one half of the delegates to the Frankfort Emancipation Convention of 1849 owned slaves. His most historiographically significant passages confirm the sincerity of self-professed anti-slavery slave owners such as Henry Clay and legitimize the intentions of Kentucky's colonization movement by arguing that it truly envisioned ending slavery rather than merely ridding the state of its free black population. He also affirms the continuing presence of radical abolitionism in Kentucky after the 1849 defeat, which he notes on pages 133-134 was the last time that southerners seriously debated emancipation until the waning days of the Confederacy. As conservative anti-slavery figures lost faith in the cause, what remained were a small group of radical abolitionists like Fee, Cassius Clay, German refugees from the 1848 Revolution, and William S. Bailey, a Newport

workingman-turned-newspaper publisher.

Throughout the book, Tallant effectively employs biographical vignettes to illustrate his points. Regarding Kentucky's more conservative antislavery types, for instance, he highlights politico Joseph R. Underwood, slaveholding Methodist minister A. H. Triplett, and Centre College president John Clarke Young. How can one doubt the sincerity of Underwood's commitment to emancipation, as Tallant puts it on page 39, since he not only liberated and colonized slaves that he owned, but also came up with a plan designed to end slavery over a fifty-year period by sending all slave women to Liberia when they reached child-bearing age. Too poor to finance his slaves' colonization in Africa, Triplett proposed that the American Colonization Society do it with his reimbursing the Society over a three-year period. Young agonized that he sinned by slave owning, pondered coming out as an abolitionist, wanted something done immediately to end the institution, and authored a letter to the *Cincinnati Journal*, widely circulated, in which he called upon masters to prepare their slaves for freedom. Still, Tallant by no means romanticizes these men, and carefully marks the boundary between ineffective gradualists like Young and radical abolitionists. The former, he emphasizes, crippled their own reformism by prioritizing societal order over morality. Pulled in different directions, anti-slavery Kentuckians, as Yankee critics wryly observed, paid dearly for trying to reconcile Mammon with God, defying biblical injunctions against serving two masters. Tallant notes the irony that for all its agitation against the peculiar institution before the Civil War, Kentucky, by virtue of its rejection of the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth constitutional amendments after the war, became one of America's last states to end slavery.

What is a little hard to decipher is whether Tallant is arguing that the defeat of antebellum anti-slavery in Kentucky was unavoidable or whether the emancipationists bungled a shot at carrying the day. Tallant contends that, given the sheer number of slaves in Kentucky by the 1840s, constitutional reform rather than colonization schemes offered the only practical way for Kentucky to divest itself of the peculiar institution. Though he points out that anti-slavery advocates were horribly divided among themselves going into the election campaign for delegates to the 1849 Kentucky Constitutional Convention, he leaves open the question of whether they could have carried the state had they united behind a single emancipation program. Might things have turned out differently had not a mass escape of Bluegrass area slaves in 1848 triggered slave insurrection panics? Did it make a difference that the 1849 cholera

epidemic significantly undercut voter turnout for the delegate elections in centers like Lexington and Louisville, which had sizable anti-slavery populations? Are we dealing, in other words, with inevitability or contingency? Given the border states' disinterest in Abraham Lincoln's Civil War proposals for compensated emancipation, when they had every incentive for jumping on the emancipation bandwagon, it seems to this reviewer unlikely that Kentuckians would have been ready to pass effective anti-slavery measures in 1849, no matter how propitious the circumstances. I also found myself ruminating on the marginalized role of women in Tallant's text. Tallant references a Female Colonization Society of Lexington and the experiences of Harriet L. Smith, who attended an American Anti-Slavery Society meeting in New York City. But for the most part, women are invisible in these pages. Cassius Clay's wife emerges for her interest in shutting Clay's paper down. Given the vitality of female antislavery in the North, Tallant might have said more on this matter. How did the processes of Southern patriarchy quash female anti-slavery just across the Ohio? Elizabeth R. Varon, in an essay about antebellum Virginia in the 1998 work *Religion and the Antebellum Debate Over Slavery*, edited by John R. McKivigan and Mitchell Snay, positions Anne Rice, Mary Blackford, Louisa Cocke, and other evangelical women at the heart of vibrant gradual emancipation and colonization movements in Virginia. Why would female anti-slavery be more stifled in Kentucky?

Gracefully written in jargon-free prose, exhaustively documented in manuscripts, diaries, newspapers, public documents, and other primary sources, and excellently indexed, **Evil Necessity** is a convincing work that makes a significant contribution to the historiography of the Bluegrass State, the Old South, abolitionism, and the coming of the Civil War. Tallant's exegesis of how antislavery waxed and then waned in Kentucky offers insight into the increasing vitality of political anti-slavery in the antebellum North. How frustrating it must have been to witness, just across the Ohio, such insistent anti-slavery discourse amount to so little!

Robert E. May, Professor of History at Purdue University (rmay@sla.purdue.edu), is the author of The Southern Dream of a Caribbean Empire, 1854-1861 (1973; paper ed., University Press of Florida, 2002) and Manifest Destiny's Underworld: Filibustering in Antebellum America (University of North Carolina Press, 2002). Many of his publications address the issue of antebellum slavery.