

The Fall of the House of Dixie

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Review

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Levine, Bruce *The Fall of the House of Dixie*. Random House, \$30.00 ISBN 978-1-4000-6703-9

Understanding the Transformation of a Region

Twenty years after Appomattox, in an 1885 Memorial Day speech, the Radical Republican Albion Tourgée said that Civil War veterans must of course be honored. But, he cautioned, “To dwell upon the hero’s sufferings and ignore the motive which inspired his acts is to degrade him to the level of the mercenary. Fame dwells in purpose as well as in achievement. Fortitude is sanctified only by its aim. Privation is merely pitiful, unless endured for a noble end.”¹ Tourgée believed that the Union cause in the Civil War had been just, in stark contrast to Confederate motivations for fighting. Bruce Levine’s brilliantly narrated *The Fall of the House of Dixie: The Civil War and the Social Revolution that Transformed the South* agrees with Tourgée’s analysis. Levine, a historian at the University of Illinois and the author of highly regarded works such as *Half Slave and Half Free: The Roots of the Civil War* (2005) and *Confederate Emancipation: Southern Plans to Free and Arm the Slaves during the Civil War* (2007), has produced a work that argues the fighting was “worthwhile, necessary, and even glorious” (298) in that it not only caused the end of slavery and overturned traditional racial hierarchies (at least temporarily), it also allowed for the possibility of a more egalitarian country than had heretofore existed. Such a result produced intense bitterness, not to mention violent resistance, from the formerly powerful – and white – “House of Dixie.”

Levine’s account begins by delineating the characteristics of the House of Dixie, one of magnificent wealth, political power, and social influence, all based upon cruelly exploiting the labor of millions of enslaved African Americans. His description of the antebellum South is especially clear that, at least from the perspective of those who owned other human beings, “slaveholding was not *simply* an economic necessity,” but also “the unique basis of the particular

outlook, assumptions, norms, habits, and relationships to which masters as a social class had become deeply and reflexively attached. It defined their privileges and shaped their culture, their religion, and even their personalities." (17). The first two chapters disprove the all too prevalent claims of those in American culture who hold that slavery was not, as Abraham Lincoln said in 1865, "somehow, the cause of the war."² American slaveholders were so devoted their peculiarly profitable institution and its associated status that they chose to fight to preserve it once Lincoln and the anti-slavery Republican Party won the 1860 presidential election. In establishing the dominant power of the white master class, indeed of all whites, over the relative societal weakness of blacks, slave or free, in the antebellum South, and how the fighting overturned this social order, Levine assists the reader in understanding more clearly the revolutionary nature of the American Civil War.

The Republican Party's ascendance, then, was a mortal threat to the antebellum slaveholding South and its way of life. Levine argues that the white South endeavored mightily not only to preserve their institution in the face of Lincoln's election but also to extend it. They either wanted "to overthrow it [the Union], or so to reconstruct it as to make it the instrument of extending the slave system and enlarging its powers." (47). It is here that Levine's work complements quite well recent books by Eric Foner, *The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery* (2011) and James Oakes, *Freedom National: The Destruction of Slavery in the United States, 1861-1865* (2012), both of which see Lincoln and the Republicans as political partners working to eventually eradicate the institution of slavery on the North American continent. As Levine puts it in his discussion of Lincoln's agonizing about reinforcing Fort Sumter: "This was not a petty, narrowly partisan, careerist concern. The Republican Party embodied the hope of wresting the nation and its government from the hands of slave owners and their allies. If that party now succumbed and broke up, the country's future prospects would be bleak indeed." (48) To be sure, Levine makes it clear that there were other reasons, both economic and political, that millions of northerners were willing to support Lincoln's forceful resistance to secession, but even here many of these reasons were not completely disconnected to the idea that slaveowners were breaking up a Union that many Americans loved and believed was one worth preserving.

Tragically, the country was split apart for four years as it endured a terrible and costly war leading to hundreds of thousands of casualties. But death was not the entire story of the fighting. Levine is particularly excellent at recounting how

military events related to the upending of the racial order in the South and thus constituted a second American revolution. He points out two of the more ironic aspects of the war: the slaves contributed, perhaps decisively, to the defeat of the Confederacy, and masters were incredibly stubborn in clinging to their human property and the associated idea of limited government in the face of Richmond's requests for the use of their slaves for the war effort. If Confederates were outraged that Lincoln used the former slaves to wage the war – a “degradation worse than death” Robert E. Lee exclaimed (137) - they were just as furious with their own government's intrusions into the Confederate war economy. “The road to liberty for the white man does not lie through his own slavery,” said Robert Toombs in complaining about Jefferson Davis's policies, while Alexander Stephens thought that “independence without constitutional liberty” was “not worth the sacrifice we are making.” (199) Levine contends that Lincoln scarcely remained a conservative president interested only in preserving the Union. Instead, he was a revolutionary on the order of “Cromwell, Robespierre, or South America's Simon Bolívar” (139) in emancipating the slaves and setting the United States on a course of freedom for all rather than some.

In his concluding chapter Levine offers the reader important reflections on why the war took place and what it meant for the country. He is particularly good on challenging the idea that the North fought the war “solely to save the Union and not to abolish slavery.” (284) Of course, he writes, on “one level that is quite true.” (284) But on another level, the “war to save the Union was necessary in 1861 only because a political party that denounced slavery and menaced its future in the Union had won the support of a clear majority of northern voters in 1860.” (284) Thus, to say that the war was “needless,” as so many historians and politicians have done since 1865, is not necessarily a tough-minded critique of the conflict, but as James Oakes has recently argued, something of an evasion of its serious moral and political issues and the difficulties the American democratic republic had in resolving them.

Once slavery had been eradicated, the United States then had to turn to the bedeviling issue of racial equality. Under the best of circumstances this would have been a difficult if not impossible problem to solve, but according to Levine it was made even more challenging because of the attitudes of southern whites toward their former foe: “most southerners mourned the Confederacy's death, sympathized with their former president, and reserved their hottest outrage for the North, the Republican Party, and treacherous freedpeople.” (291) So,

although the war ended slavery and led to citizenship for the ex-slave, the revolution brought on by the conflict was limited as whites resisted such positive changes with counterrevolutionary violence. Levine concludes his narrative by quoting the great W.E.B. Du Bois that “the slave went free; stood a brief moment in the sun; then moved back again toward slavery.” (297) Levine agrees, but he is careful to note that although the ex-slave was “forced back *toward* slavery” he was not forced “back *into* slavery.” (298) If the antebellum South’s racial order had not been entirely inverted, it had at the very least been inalterably changed so that a more democratic and humane future for all its inhabitants seemed possible. Thus the Civil War, although horrific in its costs, was noble for both its purpose and its achievement.

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¹ Albion W. Tourgée quoted in Mark Elliott and John David Smith, eds., *Undaunted Radical: The Selected Writings and Speeches of Albion W. Tourgée* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010), 196.

² Roy P. Basler, ed., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 8:332.