

### Mastering America: Southern Slaveholders and the Crisis of American Nationhood

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## Review

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**Bonner, Robert E.** *Mastering America: Southern Slaveholders and the Crisis of American Nationhood.* Cambridge University Press, \$21.99 ISBN 9780521541770

### A Unique Look at Southern and Confederate Nationalism

In this deeply researched study, Robert Bonner explores the nationalism of the South's slaveholding elite, highlighting interesting new territory in a number of areas. Particularly welcome is his sensitivity to the ways that slaveholders understood the relationship between republican government, constitutionalism, mastery, and divine will, and the way those understandings evolved over time. In particular, and contrary to much popular understanding, he argues that masters rooted this understanding less in ideas of state sovereignty than in robust, if changing, notions of American nationalism. As Bonner argues, "We take for granted the extent to which slaveholders tried to shape the Confederate States of America in their own self-image. Both hindsight and a certain national provincialism obscure how successful [they] were during the 1850s in framing a proslavery version of American nationhood that sought to assimilate bondage to republican norms" (xviii).

Perhaps most well-developed is Bonner's contention that southern masters were essentially nationalist from the country's founding to the Civil War. What changed in the antebellum period was their identification of the enemy. Replacing an earlier fear of foreign interference was their growing conviction that the free states posed the greatest threat to southern liberties and expansion. Moreover, they became increasingly determined that the federal government should take the lead in defending the South's interests from other states. This shift, Bonner contends, reveals how much slaveholders had come to distrust the early "federal consensus" in which the founders had left the management of slavery up to the individual states. Westward expansion quickly made it clear to most southern elites that states' rights offered no protection to their interests in

the West, and indeed, could be used against them by free states. Thus, though the rhetoric of "states rights" has come to be heavily associated with the secessionists of the 1850s, Bonner encourages us to focus more carefully on the notion of "southern rights," for it was in this term that masters anchored their notion of a "proslavery nationhood" (43). Key to this ideological development was an effort to unify Jacksonian notions of equality with the assertion of sectional prerogatives in the newly acquired territories of the West. "In condemning what proponents considered an invidious distinction between freeborn white men, Southern Rights orators and pamphleteers drew upon mainstream republican commitments" (74). In this constitutional view, the federal Union was obliged to protect the rights of all citizens in the Union, regardless of whether they hailed from slaveholding or free states.

Bonner also takes care to examine the religious nationalism that proliferated in the South during the late antebellum period, arguing that "to reframe the boundaries between religious observance and nationalist development over the course of the 1850s" was essential to the development of secessionist ideas" (141). Again, however, Bonner is careful to note the strongly unionist roots of some of the religious thinkers whom we very commonly consider the consecrators of disunion. His treatment of the Reverend Benjamin Palmer is especially interesting in this respect. Palmer, considered by both Northerners and Southerners to be one of the greatest preachers in the country, is presented as someone who moved from a fairly traditional evangelical Protestant view of manifest destiny as a *national* matter to, in Bonner's words, the "masters' particular destiny" to "make a national covenant as Christian masters" (147). In Palmer's formulation by the end of the 1850s, secession was thus a religious duty, not just a constitutional one.

The study continues to explore these and other aspects of slaveholder ideology as the masters' world fell apart during the Civil War and Reconstruction. One of the more compelling sections of the work discusses the wartime development of militaristic authoritarian or theocratic thinking among a substantial number of southern intellectuals, most notably George Fitzhugh (who condemned Lockian "doctrines of equality and consent") and Presbyterian divine James Henley Thornwell (who advocated a republic governed rigidly by Biblical law) (264-66). Such impulses were not warmly received by all southern elites, and indeed, prompted concern among certain leaders. Bonner's treatment of the debate reminds us that the fissures in Confederate society lay along elite lines, not just as matters of class, race, or state prerogatives. Finally, Bonner deftly

explores another major wartime debate over the significance and meaning of the war for slaves and slavery, with a number of southern thinkers revising proslavery paternalism such that the Confederate nation became the bulwark for slaves' future prosperity. Such efforts, of course, self-servingly ignored the evidence of slaves' own views of the matter, not to mention the essential violence of slavery. As Bonner puts it, "Black salvation would in fact be the most dramatic result of this bloody war over American nationhood, just as paternalists foretold. Where these partisans went astray was in their failure to realize that it would be Union victory that would bring about this result" (285).

Bonner provides a thought-provoking and nuanced explication of slaveholder ideology and its complicated relationship to American nationalism. It is a welcome and important addition to the growing body of literature attempting to reframe and revisit this issue in recent years.

*Margaret Storey is the author of Loyalty and Loss: Alabama's Unionists in the Civil War and Reconstruction (2004). Current projects include the edited memoir of a Tennessee Union cavalryman and a study of the federal occupation of Memphis.*