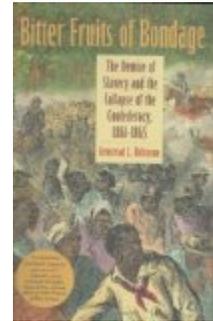


Armstead L. Robinson. *Bitter Fruits of Bondage: The Demise of Slavery and the Collapse of the Confederacy, 1861-1865*. Reidy and Barbara J. Fields. Carter G. Woodson Institute Series. Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 2005. xviii + 352 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8139-2309-3.

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Endgame: Dissension, Class Conflict, and Defeatism as the Confederacy's Downfall

"The South! The poor South! God knows what will become of her" were the alleged dying words of John C. Calhoun (1782-1850), the apostle of states' rights, prophet of secession, and proponent of slavery. Armstead L. Robinson's *Bitter Fruits of Bondage: The Demise of Slavery and the Collapse of the Confederacy, 1861-1865*, attempts to answer that and analogous questions in this analysis of Southern nationalism. He also examines whites' internal class conflicts as catalysts for the undoing of the Confederacy and the destruction of hereditary racial slavery. This narrative synthesis of the slaveholders' quixotic inability to sustain their prerogatives and nationhood consists of ten insightful chapters accompanied by statistical maps, tables, and endnotes. Long awaited by scholars for more than a decade after the author's death, its chapter drafts were consulted by historians such as James McPherson for his Pulitzer Prize-winning *Battle Cry of Freedom* (1988).[1]

Armstead Louis Robinson (1947-1995) was a colleague, friend, and mentor; we discussed our respective books-in-progress on many occasions. As the University of Virginia special collections' research archivist and Civil War specialist, I am currently processing his papers (70,000 items) which include several groups of *Bitter Fruits of Bondage* manuscripts and research material; these are not yet available to the public but once they are, his dedication to the historian's craft will be deservedly appreciated. As a teacher, Black Studies advocate, Civil War historian, and founding director of

the University of Virginia's Carter G. Woodson Institute for Afro-American and African Studies, Robinson was widely respected among his peers. One monograph of African-American intellectuals included him among a pantheon of nearly two hundred exceptional minds including W. E. B. Du Bois, Toni Morrison, and Cornel West. Colleagues familiar with Robinson's academic career as a student and teacher maintain he was a genius born to be a historian; as a history undergraduate his maturing skills were acknowledged by mentors such as Eugene Genovese, who quoted Robinson's unpublished honors thesis in his peerless *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (1974).[2]

Robinson, an unpretentious man, would have been gratified by historian Joseph Reidy's introductory paean, "Armstead L. Robinson, Historian of the Confederate States of America" (pp. vii-xi). But throughout his career he admired Charles Harris Wesley (1891-1987), an almost forgotten scholar who, like Robinson, was an African-American historian of the Civil War. *The Collapse of the Confederacy* (1937), Wesley's trailblazing study published nearly seventy years ago, was a forerunner of *Bitter Fruits of Bondage*, and he was uneasy about African-Americans' marginalization in the war's historiography and commemorations of the war's centennial.[3] In a 1991 paper for a proposed *festschrift* for *The Journal of Negro History*, Robinson eulogized Wesley as a pioneering Confederate historian and credited him as the first to formulate the thesis of loss of national will, loss of the will to fight, and

the “deleterious effects of states’ rights ideology” as the causes of Confederate defeat (pp. 6, 8, 33, 287 n. 3 and 5, 288 n. 21, 299 n. 1).[4]

In his other writings Robinson acknowledged the influence of another uncelebrated black historian, James H. Brewer (1917-1974), who taught Black Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. In 1969 Brewer published *The Confederate Negro* (1969), a slim 212-page study of slaves and free blacks as coerced and sometimes voluntary laborers in Confederate Virginia, and asserted they “contributed a sustaining effort to the War for Southern Independence.”[5] Another possible influence, journalist Walter Adolphe Roberts (1886-1962) of Jamaica, was the first black to publish a Confederate biography, that of Admiral Raphael Semmes.[6] Clio, the goddess of history in Greek mythology, has not been kind to the memory of this triumvirate of black Civil War scholars. Roberts and Wesley’s works have since been generally forgotten; Brewer’s book, long out of print, is decreasingly cited in various studies.[7]

It is only because of the persistence of Robinson’s widow, a distinguished law professor in her own right, that this book was made publishable and published. *Bitter Fruits of Bondage’s* long birth pangs have a labyrinthine background and numerous incarnations. It was to have been published by his Yale alma mater as a two- or three-volume study of Civil War women, slavery, and Confederate nationalism. Its research origins were Robinson’s undergraduate and graduate research papers, including his Yale Scholar of the House thesis, “In the Aftermath of Slavery: Blacks and Reconstruction in Memphis, Tennessee, 1865-1870” (1969) and University of Rochester dissertation, “Day of Jubilo: Civil War and the Demise of Slavery in the Mississippi Valley, 1861-1865” (1977), which he hoped to revise and publish with Cambridge University Press after incorporating conference papers, articles, and additional archival research.

Under the concept of authorial intentionality, an editor’s task is to seek out and reasonably emend the manuscript most intended by an author. Characteristic of a posthumous magnum opus, Robinson’s book resembles an exquisite tapestry woven by a group of skilled weavers. Renowned historians Stanley Engerman, Barbara J. Fields, Eugene Genovese, and Joseph Reidy reviewed various chapter drafts while indefatigable book editors Jeannette Hopkins and Ruth Melville “took on the task of rendering the manuscript into publishable form” (pp. xvii, xviii). Because of this, some will question how much of this book is Robinson’s and how much is the re-

sult of this posthumous editorial collective of colleagues and admirers. He produced at least three manuscripts during 1982, 1984, and 1991; during 1998-2000 several chapters were revised and edited (pp. xvii-xviii). For a variety of reasons, some were more heavily edited than others and their placement in the final table of contents varied considerably over time. For example, chapter 1, “A Most Un-Civil War,” was based on the author’s Neilson Lectures delivered at Smith College, Massachusetts, during the fall of 1991 (p. xi) but is not the first chapter in several of Robinson’s and subsequent edited drafts; several other surviving manuscripts (under variant titles) briefly served as the book’s first chapter.

The editors were unable to locate most of Robinson’s endnotes for the original 1,200-page manuscript; several maps, statistical tables and appendices (pp. 287 n.2, 292 n.22, 308 n. 42, 312 n. 25) were also missing while some descriptive statistics were confined to separate endnotes pages (pp. 292, 293, 300, 303-304, 307, 314). The original manuscript was reduced by 70 percent; of the current 352 pages, 270 pages comprise chapter text for which there are approximately 40 pages of endnotes. The editors also decided to exclude publications unavailable to Robinson prior to his untimely August 1995 death (pp. xvi-xviii); consequently, most of the published sources date no later than the 1980s. While this reviewer believes this to have been the correct decision, some readers may feel this makes the book uneven and lessens its applicability given the plethora of pertinent studies since then; a select bibliography of manuscript collections, newspapers, and periodicals is to be hoped for in subsequent editions.

Robinson’s meticulous cross-disciplinary research encompassed agricultural economics, cliometrics, geography, plant ecology, and weather patterns (pp. 121, 127, 307). His demographic data is derived from the 1860 federal census compiled during a massive computer mapping project of the antebellum South’s 1300 slaveholding counties (in private correspondence he claimed to have amassed “750,000 computer observations”) for “a mathematical model of the social structure and economy of the Confederacy” (p. 4). The body of evidence cited by Robinson typifies the paradigmatic virtues and weaknesses of revolutionaries’ writings in that they were created more for self-justification and self-persuasion as to the righteousness of their cause than as objective chronicles.

The book’s geographical focus is the Mississippi Valley, defined as “an area stretching from western Vir-

ginia to eastern Texas” (Alabama, Arkansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, Oklahoma Territory, Tennessee, Texas, West Virginia) because it was there that “rampant defeatism imposed the greatest military havoc on the Southern cause” (pp. 5-6). Even so, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia are not neglected. Instead of the usual procession of now-famous personages, *Bitter Fruits of Bondage* features ordinary white southern males, white women, and slaves in a wary coexistence; yeomen and planters are depicted as adversaries more often than allies (pp. 60-71, 187, 239). Robinson argues that the Confederacy’s aborted nationalism, divided by race and class, seethed with internal conflicts: slaveholders versus the majority yeoman non-slaveholders, unionists versus secessionists, whites versus blacks, urbanites versus ruralists, bourgeois whites versus poor whites. In this sense, the Confederacy’s unraveling was due in no small part to strained relationships among whites across class lines as well as the slaves’ desire for freedom, creating tensions and war-weariness that led to a cancerous distrust and defeatism on the home front that quickly spread to soldiers on the battlefields.

The index’s three entries for “women” give the impression they receive short shrift. Confederate women had more complex relationships with the government than their militarized menfolk; ordinary and famous ones such as diarist Sarah Katherine “Kate” Stone and novelist Augusta Jane Evans are among the exemplars. As “earnest and uncompromising” secessionists (p. 30), white southern women participated in traditional roles as morale boosters, nurses, mourners of the dead, and petticoated rebels spitting venom at the Yankees. Irrespective of conventional restrictions on women’s roles, incidents such as the 1863 Richmond Bread Riot, and thousands of desperate letters to soldier-husbands urging them to give their first loyalty to “hungry wives and starving children” (p. 186) signify their reevaluation of their role in a wartime society besieged internally and externally. As one soldier expressed it, “My family are nearer and dearer to me than any Confederacy could be. My first allegiance is to my family, a second to the Country if it does not trample on my rights” (p. 244). This and other pragmatic examples are indicative of the psychological complexities and influences of wartime womanhood.

If the Confederacy was a camel, then Vicksburg was the straw that broke its back; after its fall in 1863 despairing Confederate civilians feared the coming of the Yankees and mounting domestic security threats as personified by blacks. “Vicksburg is gone” as a conse-

quence Mississippi is gone” and in the opinion of almost everyone here the Confederacy is gone. Take our negro men away and thereby relieve us of a dangerous element,” one despairing Mississippi planter pleaded to Confederate president Jefferson Davis in July 1863. Depending on a region’s proximity to Union troops, blacks were deemed sources of strength or threat, and southerners proposed often contradictory measures calling for the imprisonment of adult black males or their conscription under the presumption that Confederate soldiers could oversee them at the front better than old men, women and children at home. An anxious Alabama farmer reminded Davis of the dangers posed by slaves, “We are in danger of our lives here among them,” and a Georgian grimly predicted: “Large numbers of our negroes will ransack portions of the country [and] kill numbers of our inhabitants.”[8] This proved an exaggerated threat as most slaves had no intention of killing whites or being killed by them; they merely wanted their freedom. Robinson coined the phrase “insurrection anxiety” for his seminal article “In the Shadow of Old John Brown: Insurrection Anxiety and Confederate Mobilization” (1980), and this anxiety was evident throughout the war (pp. 9-10, 38-51).[9] During the earliest phase of his career Robinson was a Black Studies advocate (pp. xiii-xv), and one of this book’s most curious aspects involves black southerners. They had more at stake in the war’s outcome than any other group and are prominently featured on the dust jacket cover. Robinson demonstrates experience and ability in penetrating the minds of white Confederates and Yankees but not quite those of African Americans. Moreover, several pages of the narrative concern whites’ discussions about perpetuating slavery irrespective of the slaves’ half-hearted subservience; there is little detailed direct quoting of slaves or thorough contemplation of their racial alienation; their circumscribed transformation from slavery to emancipation is often told from white northerners’ perspectives (pp. 176, 201). The slaves most quoted identified are female, among them Henrietta Butler, Dora Franks, Priscilla Gray, Talitha Lewis, Katie Rowe, Jane Simpson, and Mary Woolridge; perhaps in a future edition they and other named African Americans will be identified as such in a revised index. Commentaries on the Union’s successful recruitment of nearly 100,000 black troops in the Deep South, as well as the Confederacy’s 260,000 free blacks (p. 278), are also conspicuously brief or absent; as long as slavery existed, they knew they could never be absolutely free. While Mary Woolridge is revealingly quoted twice, “My Missus and Massa did not like Mr. Lincoln, but pshaw, all de niggers did” (pp. 41, 178), Arkansas slave Talitha Lewis

best articulated the desires of her fellow dwellers in the crucible: “Lord, deliver us from under this bondage” (p. 178).

My observations are made with the understanding that limited first-hand documentary materials by African Americans in the Confederate South makes it difficult to know what they genuinely said and believed. When quoted, their words were prudently self-censored or filtered by white hegemony; instinct and experience caused most to keep their opinions to themselves. In the manner of similar studies partly or fully focusing on slaves (Randolph Campbell, *An Empire for Slavery: The Peculiar Institution in Texas, 1821-1865* [1989]; John Cimprich, *Slavery’s End in Tennessee, 1861-1865* [1985], and Clarence Mohr, *On the Threshold of Freedom: Masters and Slaves in Civil War Georgia* [1986]), *Bitter Fruits of Bondage* concentrates on white slaveholders and nonslaveholders’ efforts to perpetuate slavery, stifle race dissent, and maintain white supremacy even as slavery proved the Lost Cause’s curse and cornerstone.

Among *Bitter Fruits of Bondage*’s more interesting sections is chapter 7, “In the Wake of Military Occupation,” with a perceptive overview of wars of rebellion in the first sentence: “Few crises test national character as remorselessly as the failure to repel an invasion — emerging nations like the Confederacy have to forge a spirit of nationalism” (p. 163). Given the current war on terrorism, the disappointingly short section “The Demand for Martial Law and Suspension of Habeas Corpus” (pp. 167-168) discusses security concerns analogous to twenty-first-century Americans’ disagreements about the Guantanamo Bay, Cuba detainment camps, an allegedly “disloyal” news media, covert monitoring of civilians ostensibly to thwart terrorist plots, and denunciations of peaceful dissenters. Another section in this chapter, “Guerrilla Warfare and Internal Resistance to the War” (pp. 164-168) raises interesting questions: Are civilians who nonviolently oppose their nation’s wartime efforts traitors? Can a nation at war safeguard its dissenters’ civil liberties? Confederates demanded the suppression of counterrevolutionaries by any means necessary and punishment of presumed traitors. Community pressure subdued many neutrals and southern unionists; although fanatic neighbors murdered some while authorities harassed others, many became counterinsurgent informants and bushwhackers by night while disguised as seemingly quiescent civilians by day. As Robinson explains, “The Davis government found itself in the paradoxical position of resisting Northern occupation in some areas of the South while imposing a Southern occupation

among its own people in others” (p. 166).

The parochialism of states’ rights hindered cooperation with Richmond, causing the slaveholders’ rebellion to implode. In the epilogue “Slavery and the Death of the Southern Revolution,” Robinson gainsays Jefferson Davis’s oft-quoted postwar allegation that the Confederacy “died of state rights” and instead contends “class conflict” as a more accurate epitaph (p. 283), but during 1860-1861 this remained to be seen. Robinson agrees with other historians that by 1862-1863 Confederates were thinking more about what they might lose than what they might gain (p. 163); still, this does not always explain how they managed to fight with waning resources until the spring of 1865. The Confederacy succumbed in part from inherent internal weaknesses (slavery, demoralization, desertions, shortage of materials, and the failure of the supply system) as well as external ones (sustained Union military victories, occupation, superior resources, and the absence of foreign military intervention). The author aptly summarizes the domestic dynamics of Confederate defeat: “Emphasis on local defense began to impinge on the efficiency of national mobilization, and the weakening of military strength was a direct consequence of the impact, feared or actual, of slave unrest in the face of the possibility of emancipation” (p. 38). Other historians, myself included, have said the same thing, but not as succinctly nor as well.

Although there is damning indictment of the South’s self-defeating pessimism (p. 134), for the most part Robinson avoids sweeping hindsight generalizations of Confederate doom and demoralization. *Bitter Fruits of Bondage* supplements similar studies published during and after Robinson’s lifetime: Art Bergeron, *Confederate Mobile* (1991); Daniel Crofts, *Reluctant Confederates: Upper South Unionists in the Secession Crisis* (1989); Paul Escott, *After Secession: Jefferson Davis and the Failure of Confederate Nationalism* (1978); William W. Freehling, *The South vs. The South: How Anti-Confederate Southerners Shaped the Course of the Civil War* (2001); Gary Gallagher, *The Confederate War* (1991); Donald Sutherland, *Seasons of War: The Ordeal of a Confederate Community* (1995), and, Emory Thomas, *The Confederate Nation, 1861-1865* (1979). I do not entirely hold with theories that the war resulted primarily from fire-eating extremists on both sides or just an economic clash between an agricultural South and industrialized North. Other nations (Britain, France, Russia, Argentina, and Japan) then and now have urban and rural regions which often promote economic nationalism instead of the kind of sectional tensions and commercialized regionalism that lead

to civil wars (though there are historical exceptions such as the 1967-1970 civil war between Nigeria and the secessionist Republic of Biafra). The causes of the Confederacy's collapse will probably never be determined conclusively but slavery, constitutive of the South's antebellum identity and political power, was a primary constituent. It was the most divisive issue of nineteenth-century America, more so than abortion and gun control during the first decade of the twenty-first century. Without it, there might not have been an American civil war during the 1860s.

On balance, this volume, punctuated by revealing quotes from diaries and letters woven into a rare combination of clarity and subtle understatement, is erudite yet never boring. The author's meticulous scholarship, reasoned judgments, and provocative analyses are richly evocative of current findings in this field. Robinson's convincingly argued thesis and comments are partly grounded on psychological concepts and critical studies of "evil empires" such as Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan, defeated, like the Confederacy, by a self-righteous, racially divided America. "Perhaps now is the time for a scholar to write a history of the southern Confederacy from behind the lines" suggested a historian in a 2005 collection of essays on the war.[10] Robinson often spoke of his unhurried goals for *Bitter Fruits of Bondage*, that "it would not be an easy book to read" and would be "ready when it's ready." Often, an author may write something not intended to be permanent and subject to future revision. This would have been a different book had Robinson lived to publish it. He is careful not to claim this is "the long-awaited history of the Confederacy" (p. 4) yet it is worthy of his scholarly legacy and a commendable asset in our understanding of the blood-stained life and death of the Confederate States of America.

Notes

[1]. James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 611 n. 19, p. 613 n. 43, p. 615 n.47.

[2]. William M. Banks, *Black Intellectuals: Race and Responsibility in American Life* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996), p. 289; Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), pp. 700 n. 26 and 725 n. 4.

[3]. Charles H. Wesley, *The Collapse of the Confederacy* (Washington, D.C.: The Associated Publishers, Inc., 1937), Charles H. Wesley, "The Civil War and the Negro-American," *Journal of Negro History* 47 (April 1962): pp. 77-96; see also Carter G. Woodson book review, "Charles

H. Wesley Unmasks the Confederacy," *New York Age*, February 5, 1938, p. 6.

[4]. Armstead L. Robinson, "Academic Culture and Scientific Racism: The Case of Charles H. Wesley, Pioneer Historian of the Confederacy," 1991, pp. 2, 4, 17 n. 4, folder "Charles Harris Wesley," temporary Box 1, Armstead Robinson Papers, Accession #12836, Special Collections, University of Virginia Library.

[5]. James H. Brewer, *The Confederate Negro: Virginia's Craftsmen and Military Laborers, 1861-1865* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1969), p. xvi; Ervin L. Jordan, Jr. "Clio's Forgotten Son: James H. Brewer and The Confederate Negro," in *Black Southerners in Gray: Essays on Afro-Americans in Confederate Armies*, ed. Richard Rollins (Murfreesboro, Tennessee: Southern Heritage Press, 1994), pp. 145-161.

[6]. Walter Adolphe Roberts, *Semmes of the Alabama* (Indianapolis and New York: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1939). The reasons for Roberts's interest in Raphael Semmes (1809-1877) remain an enigma as the biography lacks a preface or introduction. After a forty-five-year sojourn in America, Roberts returned to Jamaica in 1956. Rear Admiral Semmes, the Confederacy's second-ranking naval officer, commanded the Alabama, its most successful commerce raider.

[7]. Brewer's, Roberts's and Wesley's books are absent from the bibliography of the latest and best single volume overview of Civil War and Reconstruction historiography, Lacy K. Ford, ed., *A Companion to the Civil War and Reconstruction*, Blackwell Companions to American History (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), pp. 468-503. Another black scholar whose Civil War work seems purposely ignored by mainstream historians is Lerone Bennett; there have been few scholarly reviews of his book, *Forced Into Glory: Abraham Lincoln's White Dream* (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Co., 2000).

[8]. Ira Berlin, Barbara J. Fields, Steven F. Miller, Joseph P. Reidy, Leslie S. Rowland, *Free At Last: A Documentary History of Slaves, Freedom, and the Civil War* (New York: The New Press, 1992), pp. 4, 5, 132-133.

[9]. Armstead L. Robinson, "In the Shadow of Old John Brown: Insurrection Anxiety and Confederate Mobilization, 1861-1863," *Journal of Negro History* 65 (Fall 1980): pp. 279-297.

[10]. Mary DeCredico, "The Confederate Home Front," in *Companion to the Civil War and Reconstruction*, p. 274.

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