



Marie Tyler-McGraw. *An African Republic: Black & White Virginians in the Making of Liberia*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007. xi + 249 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3167-0.

Reviewed by Hannah Kelley

Published on H-SAWH (October, 2008)

Commissioned by Antoinette G. van Zelm

Citizens of a New Republic

In the introduction to *An African Republic: Black & White Virginians in the Making of Liberia*, Marie Tyler-McGraw demonstrates that the American Colonization Society (ACS) played a prominent role in the United States and the creation of Liberia. While some scholars have illustrated the ACS as a “sideshow” for racist concepts, Tyler-McGraw argues that the history of the ACS “is central to understanding nineteenth-century American meanings for citizenship in a republic and race as a category” (p. 1).

Created by prominent white men in December 1816, the ACS viewed African colonization as a vehicle for political, economic, and social advancement for America’s free blacks. The founders believed that racial discrimination would always serve as an obstacle to black citizenship and freedom in the United States; emigration was the only way for African Americans to achieve true freedom. Many early ACS members believed that the formation of an African republic would illustrate that America’s free blacks were tethered to their historical subjugation within the United States; free blacks did not lack ability, but white Americans would not be able to see past the historical construct of race.

An African Republic is extensively researched and draws on the records of the ACS, the Virginia Colonization Society, and the Virginia Emigrants to Liberia database at the Virginia Center for Digital History. Tyler-McGraw uncovers the transatlantic conversations taking place concerning ideas of the American republic, region, and racial identity. She asserts that the ACS defined a republic as homogeneous, based on Enlightenment ideas that “human achievement is influenced by environment, and on the energetic missionary impulse of Protestant evangelicalism” (p. 2). Free blacks did not fit into the ACS vision of the American republic. For the organization’s members, America was a white republic.

While free blacks did not, in white minds, fit into the American republic, they could replicate that republic in Liberia; such a daunting task fell on the shoulders of Virginia’s free black emigrants. From the first emigrant voyage to Liberia in 1820 until the Civil War, one-third of all emigrants came from Virginia. Virginia’s free blacks came to dominate the leadership class in Liberia. An interesting connection Tyler-McGraw finds in the transatlantic conversations is the emigrants’ desire to inculcate Virginia’s Jamestown history into Liberia’s national origins story. She asserts that “these recurring themes were celebrated by colonizationists on both sides of the Atlantic as a triumphal narrative” (p. 7). While some whites may have viewed African colonization as a restoration of African Americans to their native land, the free blacks who settled in Liberia saw themselves first as Virginians, and then as Americans. Therefore, it was only natural that they transported the values and culture of Virginia to the continent of Africa.

Liberian emigrants reflected the attitudes and culture of the United States by distinguishing themselves from the indigenous African population. Many emigrants wore fancy clothes and maintained elaborate homes and businesses built out of stone and brick. Throughout the decades, Liberia experienced a kind of strife that affects every country, region, or state: social division. Tyler-McGraw demonstrates that the root of social strife in Liberia was a legacy of the American experience; Liberians separated themselves along lines of class, color, and education. Many of the free blacks of Virginia who first emigrated to Liberia were mulattoes who had often received a smattering of education, and they tended to dominate the local trade. Furthermore, as the first emigrants, Virginians in Liberia often maintained a sense of superiority and “felt themselves to be more culturally and socially elevated than emancipated slaves from the Lower South” (p. 152).

While Tyler-McGraw traces a connection between notions of Virginia identity and racial identity in Liberia, she points out one major difference in the transatlantic debate over African American identity and citizenship: in Liberia, culture was central to emigrants' self-image, not race. Liberian settlers conceived their patriotic narrative through the improvement of Africans in Africa, and thus in the diaspora.

Tyler-McGraw's discussion of the role of gender and race in the colonization movement is particularly effective. White Virginia women were given a voice and role in the public sphere through their involvement with the ACS. These women formed female colonization auxiliaries that were active and visible in Virginia from 1826-36. Some women, such as Virginian Mary Berkeley Blackford of Fredericksburg, linked slavery to morality and championed emancipation and emigration as a means of maintaining the moral fiber of the United States.

Other women viewed slave emancipation as a form of personal emancipation. Tyler-McGraw asserts, "For Virginia colonization women, freedom from the responsibilities of slaves was less a political abstraction than an imagined domestic utopia" (p. 88). Themes of education and morality often dominated female conversations about African colonization. White Virginia women attempted to transmit gendered evangelical, educational, and domestic values to Liberian emigrants. In 1826, the treasurer of the Richmond auxiliary asserted that "the best way to civilize a nation is to educate the girls" (p. 91).

Tyler-McGraw constructs an informative and insightful narrative that thoroughly explains the complications and desires surrounding Liberian colonization. She reveals the connections between notions of national and

regional identity and the formation of Liberia. Her work demonstrates the passion that many prominent white Virginians had for African colonization. However, she asserts that part of this enthusiasm came from Virginians' desire to re-live the glory days of the founding of the American republic through the construction of an African republic. This desire for a lost past led prominent Virginia families, such as the Lees and the Washingtons, to advocate colonization.

On the other end of the spectrum were the African Americans, some of whom desired colonization and the opportunity for full citizenship in a new republic, and others who felt that the ACS was trying to persuade them to leave the only homes they had ever known. Tyler-McGraw demonstrates that African colonization was an explosive issue in the nineteenth century, with its fair share of critics and supporters.

In Tyler-McGraw's treatment of the Liberian experience, the role of religion deserves more attention. While she does discuss the Protestant evangelical strain of the ACS, and the role of morality and religious tract societies with regard to white women colonizationists, more analysis of religion's effect on life in Liberia would have been welcome. How did Protestant evangelicalism affect emigrants' relationships with indigenous Africans? How many indigenous Africans were converted? Did religion lead to feuds between Liberian emigrants and native Africans?

As a transatlantic study, *An African Republic: Black & White Virginians in the Making of Liberia* will be of particular interest to anyone interested in African history, Virginia history, or the history of national identity. Tyler-McGraw includes wonderful maps and illustrations, and she provides a detailed bibliographic essay for further reference.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:

<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

Citation: Hannah Kelley. Review of Tyler-McGraw, Marie, *An African Republic: Black & White Virginians in the Making of Liberia*. H-SAWH, H-Net Reviews. October, 2008.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=15581>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.