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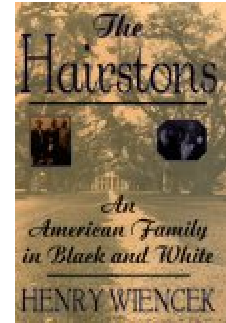
Henry Wiencek. *The Hairstons: An American Family in Black and White.* New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999. Xx + 361pp. $24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-312-19277-8.



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HISTORIES OF RECONCILIATION

It was with joy and fear that I finished Henry Wiencek's breathtaking saga, *The Hairstons: An American Family in Black and White*. Joy, in that I was introduced to such a compelling cast of characters, set within riveting contexts, drawn with insight and erudition, illuminated by vivid, narrative that pulls the reader toward the important reckoning slavery continues to create for us all. Fear, in that the resonance of this story, the compelling quality of the author's prose, the superior level of his research, both with oral histories and archival digging, may set too high a standard for future work.

But we must all swallow our fears, and let Wiencek's remarkable confrontation with slavery wash over us. The author allows us to make a journey along with him, by letting us know how he innocuously began his investigation of a North Carolina plantation, and then spent seven years tracking down the remarkable Hairston family from its colonial roots to the present. On the brink of the Civil War the white Hairstons owned forty-five plantations in four states, with combined slave holdings of over ten thousand slaves: Samuel Hairston of Oak Hill, Virginia had land and slaves worth nearly five million dollars–reputedly the largest slaveowner in the South. But Wiencek also began his quest by attending an African American family reunion of Hairstons, with nearly a thousand in attendance from all over the country. His curiosities, his hesitancy, his reverence all interlace his analysis. He joined up on the amazing trek toward their African-American past, guided by the voices of blacks forced to keep counter-accounts, unabashedly determined to restore some balance to whitewashed tales of a plantation past dripping in nostalgia.

My exalted embrace of such a *tour-de-force* on this topic must be set within an historiographical context. Those of us working on the Old South and slavery have discovered a wide range of new evidence and approaches to delve into dozens of important topics–resulting in an exponential growth of good work in slave studies, most especially since the explosion of important revisionism in the 1970s. But the sexual exploitation of slave women and the shadow families of white men within southern culture (up until the present, I might add) remains a remarkably controversial topic. One on which feminist scholars have been called on the carpet for their "exaggerated claims."

Wiencek uses a quote from Eugene Genovese as an epigraph at one point. On this topic of "miscegenation" Genovese offered opinions in his influential *Roll, Jordan, Roll* (1974), which has set the tone for slavery studies for the past quarter century: "The sexual exploitation of black women, however outrageous, will startle no one. The problem is to explain why is did not go much further ..." and again, "It would be hard to live with a beautiful and submissive young woman for long and to continue consider her mere property or a mere object of sexual gratification, especially since the free gift of her beauty has so much more to offer than her yielding to force."[1] This perspective on the subject is one that many scholars working in the field have found less than satisfying.

Over the past twenty years, numerous scholars have been able to demonstrate the way in which shadow

families and white male sexual coercion could and did shape conflicts within southern culture, in particular I am thinking of Carol Bleser and Drew Faust on James Henry Hammond, Kent Leslie, Jean Yellin, Adele Logan Alexander, Deborah White, Jacqueline Jones, Mary Frances Berry and Darlene Clark Hine, among others, on African American women's responses, and Nell Painter, Peter Bardaglio, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, and this reviewer, among others, on white women's responses. Although much of this scholarship has become conventional wisdom within southern women's history, it has been resisted mightily by many scholars working on slavery and on the nineteenth century more generally. The fact that rape, coercion and concubinage were institutionalized within ante-bellum southern slavery remains a contested issue.

The passionate opinions exchanged in late 1998 over DNA testing of descendants of Thomas Jefferson's female slave, Sally Hemings, has created more than a tempest in a teapot--more like a hurricane, gale winds creating havoc and bluster among historians of early America.

So much of the "evidence" concerning interracial heritage, short of DNA testing, remains difficult to dig up. Much of this evidence remains within the realm of oral histories passed down in families--most often black families. It is stumbled upon by modern historians, in the majority white scholars, who have limited access to African American family lore. I am reminded of the white southern scholar who confided to me that when he went to interview a black family in the 1980s he was surprised to see a large portrait of Nathan Bedford Forrest, founder of the Ku Klux Klan, hanging in their home--but was informed Forrest was an ancestor!

The issues surrounding mixed race legacies are topics that I believe academically trained scholars continue to stumble over and continue to stumble around. So it should be no surprise that the most compelling books dealing with this constellation of concerns have been produced by those outside the academy: Shirlee Taylor Haizlip's *The Sweeter the Juice: A Family Memoir in Black and White* and Edward Ball's National Book Award-winning *Slaves in the Family*.

Nearly a hundred years ago, W.E.B. DuBois predicted that during the twentieth century we would have to contend with the color line--that attitudes and shifts concerning race would shape our modern era. Perhaps at this century mark, we should explore the blurring of these demarcations, the consequences of seventeenth, eighteenth and especially nineteenth century race mixture--and what its legacy has wrought for twenty-first century America.

Henry Wiencek's thoughtful and sensitive analysis will push us in the right directions. Wiencek forces us to both rethink our comfortable assumptions about the nature of race relations and to reshape our sense of slavery's legacy.

The burdens of silence and deceit are a troubling undertone throughout the author's research into all aspects of the Hairstons. Wiencek plows through plantation ledgers and reminds us that the "value" of slaves to white planters may be detected in the careful records: these lists of names, these inventories of human property, these dollar values placed on human lives. But although these ledgers are the "bankbooks of human souls," Wiencek complains the records are as "inscrutable as the clay tablets of Babylon." (p. 57) I'm sure many scholars in the field can empathize.

Yet the author deftly decodes the chicken scratches of the seventeenth and eighteen century, introducing us to a complex crew of forbears, the harsh and compelling conditions of colonial settlements, sketching how Africans and Europeans made their uncomfortable accommodations on the frontier. Much like Melton McLaurin's *Celia, A Slave*, this author pushes beyond the bare bones of public record.

A really fascinating aspect of the Hairston saga emerges with Wiencek's unraveling of the nineteenth century planter clan. Since the white Hairstons believed in keeping land and slaves in the family, the intricate interconnections are difficult to untangle (and family trees at the book's opening offer some help, as everyone seemed to have the same first names as well). But midway through the ante-bellum era, a family rebel emerges with Robert Hairston (1783-1852)--who first emancipated some of his own slaves in Virginia and sent them to Liberia in 1832. His wife Ruth was so shocked that she worked to remove her inheritance of slave property (from her father and first husband) out of her husband's grasp. Robert went away to Europe and when he returned to the States, he joined two brothers in Mississippi and became master of several estates and hundreds of slaves. As a Mississippi planter, Robert Hairston granted his enslaved workers an enormous degree of autonomy. Having left his wife behind in Virginia in 1840, Robert took a slave concubine and even gave her a ring, as they lived as man and wife to the consternation of white neighbors. The couple had a daughter named Chrillis sometime between 1845 and 1847. When Robert was ill in 1852, he sent

for his nephew George. He promised George Hairston some small portion of land and slaves, but wanted all the rest of his property given to his slave daughter, who would be set free by the terms of his will. He insisted that George honor his wishes. A lawyer was called, and Robert Hairston's will properly executed. Hairston's bequest would have made Chrillis (under ten years old) one of the richest women, black or white, in Mississippi. Naturally, the white Hairstons back in Virginia and North Carolina were in a fury–and opposed the will. This slave child never inherited the property her father wanted her to have. She disappeared from the records.

Wiencek is able to take us through his puzzlements and investigations to uncover the fate of this Chrillis. He had been given every indication that the child had died, but he suspected she had survived. Imagine his surprise when he finds her portrait on the wall of a black Hairston descendant– who is also the granddaughter of Major George Hairston. George Hairston had been listed by his white family as a bachelor. But "Major George," as he was known, had sent Robert Hairston's child to a distant plantation, renaming her Elizabeth. In 1865 George Hairston and Elizabeth began to live together as man and wife and they had six children. Ironically, when George Hairston died in 1885, without a will, his white heirs evicted Elizabeth from his property, as the law failed to recognize any interracial common law marriage. She sued for "back wages," as she could not obtain any other form of justice from the courts. Nevertheless, she lost her suit, and Elizabeth Hairston was twice cheated by her white relatives–both as the daughter of Robert and the wife of George, she was denied her due. However, she went on to triumph over circumstances–to provide for her children and give them a sense of their ancestry.

Wiencek's tale of Chrillis not only reveals the past, but it unlocks the present as he confronted living family members with his evidence. It provides for moving narrative when some are willing to reunite as "long-lost cousins," to face what they had only suspected, but were taught to deny.

The way in which black and white Hairstons are able to confront or deny their mixed heritage becomes a running theme of the book as well. Does Peter W. Hairston, the white patriarch with whom the author began his quest, really want to know the truths about his family, especially his grandfather? How are Ever Lee Hairston, an outspoken black woman, and Lucy D. Hairston, a white southern lady of the old school, able to make their peace?

Wiencek weaves together fascinating stories of both black and white individuals and the great historical events which shaped their lives. He has poignant evidence about white post-Civil War Hairstons–such as Lizzie, who, in order to survive, had to sell off (piece by piece) the twenty-six place settings of Limoges china that her mother brought overland from Virginia to Mississippi in the 1830s. The reduced circumstances of Samuel W. Hairston caused him to move his family to southwestern Georgia, with his wife Eliza writing home, "I feel so discouraged some times that I hardly know whether I would rather live or die" (p. 201).

Wiencek also captures the way in which paternalism played an important role in shaping race relations, as for example when Fanny Hairston, living as "mistress" on a broken-down plantation, decided to send her black teenaged butler to college as a reward for his talents–with no strings attached. This young man, John Hairston, became a revered preacher, and carried the coffin at his former benefactor's funeral in 1907. He wrote in his tribute to her that she was unlike many of her generation, as she took action, which spoke louder than words, and "no one knows of the great help she has been to me but myself." (p. 286)

However, *The Hairstons* also chronicles the rise of the Ku Klux Klan, lynchings, and racial injustice by individuals and instutitions. In other words, several sets of colliding and conflicting texts and tales are interwoven, with such skill and dexterity that it veritably dazzles. Wiencek's narrative overflows with clashes of opinion, awkward silences, elaborate dissemblance and angry gatekeepers–sometimes full of rage, at other times laced with ribaldry, but always centered on the complexities of race and family.

Wiencek's real gift emerges as he tells the stories of African Americans whose lives have been neglected, individuals who demand more attention–as victims or as heroes, and often as both. Certainly the way he is able to excavate and illuminate the life of Elizabeth Hairston, and trace her journey for the descendants of her six children is a treasure.

He powerfully evokes the pain and suffering of family members when he sketches out the early death of one of the black clan. The execution of Henry Lee Hairston in 1951 as one of the Martinsville Seven recalls the horrors of racism and "legal lynchings." Seven young black men were executed for the crime of rape, when, for example, only a short time before in Virginia two white men [actually police officers] were convicted of a similar crime and sentenced to seven years. Wiencek contrasts the Mar-

tinsville verdict with a case involving the quiet disposition of a gang rape at the University of Virginia in the spring of 1954–where eleven of the twelve perpetrators were students. None of the young white men spent a day in jail and only one was even expelled–ironically, a relative of one of the judges who sent the Martinsville Seven to their death. (p. 214) These kinds of rich contextual details make *The Hairstons* such an impressive and powerful work.

Most vivid and energetic are Wiencek's portrait of modern black Hairstons (who he points out don't pronounce their name in the Scottish way white Hairstons continue to do, as "Harston"). He shows the width and breadth of black Hairstons by showing descendants composing music for the award-winning film, "Lilies of the Field," to working at NASA on the space program. Wiencek's use of John L. Hairston's life story, as an educator and race leader, offers us a riveting portrait of modern southern struggles, of the constant toil of shaping young black people to stand up for themselves, against racism and injustice. He highlights John L. Hairston's decision to stay in North Carolina rather than migrate North, to make a difference within his community. John L. Hairston was one of the grassroots activists who made the civil rights movement the powerful force it became within the post-World War II South. Also heartrending is the narrative of Joseph Henry Hairston's life story and service in World War II. This black soldier's story provides a vivid series of vignettes for understanding racism's entrenchment in the military and its consequences for thousands of blacks in the U.S. armed forces.

So truly as Henry Wiencek promises in the opening, the story of the Hairstons is the story of America. We must look beyond the imposing white columns and lovely tree-lined drives [on the cover, with portraits of both blacks and whites inset] to understand the forces which created such twisted southern heritage and labyrinth race relations, to appreciate what went into building this land and its mythology. History must be revisited and revised to honor those who lived and died in slavery's thrall, and whose lives have been shaped by its shadows and its legacy. Although popular audiences may continue beguiled by the physical grandeur of plantations and the ideological razzle-dazzle of those who owned them, Wiencek allows the words of Joseph Henry Hairston, an African American descendant at a gathering at Cooleemee Plantation in 1995, to both chide and inspire us: "Our blood is in this soil." (p. 248)

Notes:

[1]. Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon, 1974), p. 423 & p. 417.

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