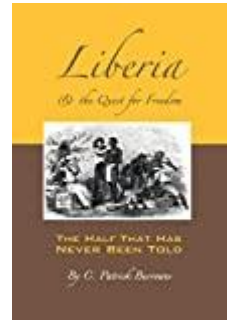


C. Patrick Burrowes. *Liberia & the Quest for Freedom*. Liberia: Know Your Self Press, 2019. 114 pp. \$19.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-08-943806-9.



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Commissioned by Andrew J. Kettler (University of California, Los Angeles)

C. Patrick Burrowes is a Liberian national treasure. He should also be a treasure for all those interested in public-facing history. Trained in the United States in journalism (Howard, Syracuse, and Temple Universities), Burrowes published a number of articles on Liberian politics and on Liberian journalism in the 1980s and 1990s. Among his positions have been a named professorship in journalism at Marshall University and administrative role at Cuttington University, Suakoko, Liberia. In the 1990s, in the midst of the civil war that raged from 1989 to 1997, his works became more self-consciously historical. The Second Liberian Civil War, 1999 to 2003, appears to have induced a pause in his writing and yet a new dedication. Since 2011, he has published a number of historically minded works, including a history of Liberia, a documentary edition of Hilary Teage, and studies of John Brown Russwurm. Teage and Russwurm were leaders of the nineteenth-century repatriates. Some of these works were funded by Kickstarter campaigns, then published by a Liberian press, Know Your Self.[1]

Now under review is a magnificent long essay (eighty-seven pages, plus a two-page glossary and twenty-two pages of notes) that is a model of public-facing history. Burrowes's avowed intent is a statement that will help a society heal ethnic rifts (articulated also in race and status) that have been used for centuries to justify forced labor, violence, and denigration by one group of another. The Liberian civil wars are everywhere yet almost nowhere in the book. Even as I write this review, in spring 2021, Kunti K., a former Liberian commander of the United Liberation Movement of Liberia for Democracy (ULIMO), has just been indicted in France following on complaints of residents of Lofa County for crimes against humanity allegedly committed during the First Liberian Civil War, while another, Alieu Kosiah, has been sentenced, in Switzerland, to twenty years' imprisonment after convictions for rape and murder.

Although the civil wars are mentioned only briefly in the book, renewed civil war or some version of it, whether ideological, political, or economic, seems to be a probable alternative to a

healing process. Burrowes's method is to move briskly from the effects of the Mediterranean slave trade on what came to be known as the Windward Coast to the Atlantic slave trade, then to the establishment of repatriate settlements and the anti-slave-trade efforts associated with them, and, finally, to the remains of these events that entailed so much harm to Liberians in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

The originating act in Liberian history entailed relatively small groups fleeing the Sahel for the forests of the Windward Coast in order to avoid the slave catchers of larger, powerful societies that were selling members of marginal groups into the Mediterranean trade. Burrowes writes, "The Saharan slave trade occurred centuries ago. Yet, it continues to impact Liberians until today. It drove a wedge between those groups on the edge of the empires who were preyed upon and the Malinke, who ancestors were at the heart of the slave-catching empires. Many non-Malinke groups fled the slave-raiders of the Sahel to seek refuge near the forest, including ancestors of the Kpelle, Loma, Gbandi, and others" (p. 4). Permutations of this originating conflict have occurred over more than a millennium in the Windward Coast. Burrowes's conviction is that if twenty-first-century Liberians understand this history and the challenges made at times to slave traders, particularly in the early nineteenth century—he has special praise for the first two generations of repatriates and their indigenous allies—then further trauma, inequality, and violence can be mitigated, if not avoided.

This book could be assigned to undergraduates for a brief survey of Liberian history or a brief example of ways that older slave trades (here, the Mediterranean) interacted with newer ones (here, the Atlantic). It could also be assigned to undergraduates or graduate students for consideration of public morality in a society coming to grips with a slave trade deep in its past and with conflict and violence that have succeeded the

trade. A few sentences from the conclusion are worth quoting:

Slavery is Africa's original sin whose name Liberians refuse to speak. Like our recent civil war, it inflicted pains, traumas, and losses that cannot be ignored out of existence. Driven beneath the surface, they corrode our conscience and erode our humanity.... Echoes of the slavery era can be heard in the derogatory names we call each other. Three local ethnic groups continue to bear the scars of that period in the names outsiders call them. The people who called themselves Dan, in Liberia are known as "Gio," meaning "slaves." The most popular name for the Kuwaa people is "Belle," which means "savages." Both of these derogatory names were bestowed by Malinke slave catchers and picked up by other groups. The third group consists of the repatriates' descendants who are routinely labeled as "the ex-slaves" by divisive politicians.... The brutality of slavery reverberates today in our peppering of children, sexual violence against women, and lynch-mob beatings of suspected rogues. No bold contemporary actions have been taken to curtail abuse of vulnerable children from poor families taken into the homes of the rich and powerful such as the 1828 law [during the first decade of repatriates' influence] to protect apprentices [e.g., pawns].... Furthermore, the hunting and selling of people caused a deep and abiding sense of distrust in each other.... Without trust, we are unable to empathize with others. Trust is also an indispensable foundation for economic prosperity. (pp. 84–85)

Invocations of the moral value of history and the positive effects of social harmony do seem old-fashioned in American academia at the moment, but they are certainly one rational response to recent deadly conflict in Liberia. There is another old-fashioned element in Burrowes's work in that, as part and parcel of his scholarship, he condemns modern overconsumption of alcohol. All scholars studying the slave trade are aware of rum and other spirits as gifts and trade items that furthered

the trade. However, modern scholarship excises early Anglo-American antislavery from the context in which "sins" like drunkenness and fornication were condemned side by side with the slave trade and slavery. Enslavement is now seen as an offense *sui generis*. Yet early agitators and reformers saw it in a system of sins, and their remedies were intended to address a number of social problems. A brief quotation from Burrowes must suffice: "In Liberia today alcohol abuse is an open secret.... The taste for imported spirits is a drain on foreign exchange. Both widespread alcoholism and consumption of strong imported drinks emerged during the slave trade, when captives were exchanged for rum and brandy" (p. 85).

Liberia and the Quest for Freedom has a moral purpose that should be clear. The method now deserves commentary, as this work could become a paradigm at the union of journalism and historical studies. The journalist's urge to impart knowledge and judgment to readers is not set in opposition to a tradition of research and publication. While sharp critiques of phenomena as various as economic inequality and overconsumption of alcohol are obvious challenges to the status quo, Burrowes treats scholars as engaged in an evolving enterprise and he understands his audience as capable of agreeing on a historical narrative and ethical standards. His method does allow for disagreement. For instance, he may overestimate the antislavery credentials of the Liberian charter generation of the 1820s, who found ways to command the labor of what they considered low-status people (both indigenous and American-born) even without enslavement. There is, however, one modern scholar whom Burrowes upbraids—not for being right or wrong in analysis but for having suspect motives and misleading his audience with untruths: Dew Tuan-Wleh Mayson. [2]

Like Burrowes, Mayson was educated in the United States (Georgetown University and UCLA). He published on labor in Liberia in the 1970s, held

a number of important diplomatic posts for the Republic of Liberia, led a coalition party, and moved into international business concerns. One of his ventures, the importation of a large quantity of rice into Liberia, failed, very publicly, in 2008. Burrowes is particularly critical of the importation into Liberia of foodstuffs, like rice, in which the country could be self-sufficient. Here I cannot claim to understand the entire context for Burrowes's harsh judgment of Mayson, but let it suffice to say that Burrowes defends the American-born Lott Cary from Mayson's negative comment that Cary died as he prepared ordnance to attack "native Africans" (pp. 2, 48). Cary was an important figure in the early territory (Liberia was not a colony) who negotiated with a local ruler for a deed for land that allowed the new settlement to expand upriver. Burrowes attacks Mayson on the grounds that Cary was in the midst of preparing to rout local slave traders, so the description of them as "native" (p. 2) or "indigenous" (p. 48) is a bad-faith half-truth. "By framing the conflict along those lines," Burrowes writes, Mayson "masked the nefarious activities of traffickers while fueling ethnic antagonisms among Liberians" (p. 48).

Mayson is assumed to have transposed an abolitionist-versus-slave trader conflict of the 1820s into an "Americo-Liberian"-versus-indigenous conflict today since he himself identifies as indigenous so that today's conflict can be stoked to his own advantage, perhaps as an interpreter of events or as a power player in commerce or politics. In other words, Mayson allowed his own identity to sway his interpretation completely into the lane of self-interest for himself and his ethnic group. Whether this assumption is fair to Mayson is not a question easily answered. What is important for us as we consider scholarly method is that Burrowes's response is delegitimation of Mayson's argument, not disagreement or counterargument. It is instructive that it appears only once in a book dedicated to the creation of a common conscience and a common consciousness in a society deeply affected by the slave trade, indeed, by several dif-

ferent trades in slaves. The moral message of *Liberia and the Quest for Freedom* relies on its author's participation in a tradition of scholarly discourse, and the role Mayson plays in the book is a stark exception to that.

Finally, a word should be said about Know Your Self Press and Burrowes's internet presence. He has published with a small Liberian press by means of an old-fashioned approach well known in the first days of Anglo-American abolitionism—subscription. He appears in videos on the internet asking Liberians to subscribe to his books, in effect to buy a copy in advance or even to donate more than the price of a book in order to fund typesetting, illustrations, cover design, and the like. He promises the chance to understand Liberian history and to contribute to a better future—along with an occasional guest appearance by him—in exchange. Additionally, he delivers internet lectures on Liberian topics. Some of his students also appear on the internet, testifying that he opened their eyes to Liberian history. I do not provide links to these videos here simply because many URLs are unstable. Anyone reading this review can search the internet and view what is available. In the age of Twitter, truth be told, Burrowes's facility with internet-based media is negligible, so that his performances seem avuncular and, in an old-fashioned sense, professorial. Twitter is far from professorial in this older sense. (Some of scholars' Twitter today is short-form one-upmanship. I wrote about Burrowes's response to Mayson above because that is his one shot at short-form one-upmanship and it is an exception to his method). Engagement with the tradition of scholarship on Liberia and on the slave trade, even if evincing little skill with the internet, much less with Twitter, better suits his method and his moral purpose.

Notes

[1]. His most recent major work is C. Patrick Burrowes, *Between the Kola Forest and the Salty Sea: A History of the Liberian People before 1800*

(Bomi County, Liberia: Know Your Self Press, 2016).

[2]. For example, Dew Tuan-Wleh Mayson and Amos Sawyer, "Capitalism and the Struggle of the Working Class in Liberia," *Review of Black Political Economy* 9, no. 2 (1979): 140–58, and "Labour in Liberia," *Review of African Political Economy* 6, no. 14 (1979): 3–15.

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