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Saving Savannah: The City and the Civil War (Book Review)

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JACQUELINE JONES. *Saving Savannah: The City and the Civil War*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 2008. Pp. viii, 510. \$30.00.

Across several pivotal decades of historiography our major books on slavery and emancipation in the United States rarely located their stories in specific places. The books ranged over the enormous landscape of the South, choosing quotations and incidents to make their arguments. The dominant features of slavery and freedom emerged in outline, in the aggregate.

Lately historians have become more interested in individual stories, especially those located on particular landscapes. While some of those historians have focused on small communities, Jacqueline Jones chronicles an entire city across the long span of slavery, war, and emancipation. Integrating black and white, men and women, she presents a panorama of a tumultuous history. Individuals populate virtually every paragraph, their stories composing a vast and varied mosaic. The patterns within that mosaic can be hard to make out at times, but each stone has been carefully mined and polished.

The book's title plays on an ambiguity of who "saved" Savannah: William T. Sherman, who regained the city for the Union during the Civil War, the city fathers who handed it over to Sherman without resistance, or the African Americans who redeemed it with their labor and solidarity. The book under review is not so much about the Civil War itself as it is about the setting and consequences of this war. The war sounds here in a minor key, arriving first in the guise of refugees, deserters, and prisoners of war and then in the form of triumphant Yankees who have marched across Georgia from the ruins of Atlanta. Unimportant strategically, Savannah declined hard and fast, with Union troops entrenched just downriver. White southerners saw loyalties quickly unravel, an enormous enslaved population flee, and the Georgia state government prove a poor ally to the Confederacy. While elites squabbled, families went hungry.

The real subject of this book is suffering. Savannah appears in these pages as something of a geographic mistake, its river too shallow and often choked, its sand streets impassable, its gutters filthy, and its air filled with disease-bearing mosquitoes. Strangers arrive at the docks and grow ill and die without adequate provision. City fathers seem perpetually overwhelmed, at a loss of how to deal with a pestilential yet beautiful place where residents, new and old, love nothing more than to have what they called "blow outs," loud, outrageous public parties and parades. Generations come and go and yet all seem equally befuddled. A more accurate title for this book might be "Surviving Savannah."

White people in general appear lost in this story. Alternately helpless and furious, white men and women bully black people but demonstrate little power when challenged. Black people, by contrast, seem resourceful, wise, and determined. Jones, author of eloquent books about the lives of the poor and oppressed, makes no effort to hide her sympathies here. She recovers, in an astounding accomplishment of research, portraits of hundreds of individual African Americans. Whether in slavery, wartime, or emancipation, they emerge in this book as distinct individuals struggling against and allying with other fully defined people. Looking closely, Jones acknowledges broken connections in black solidarity across the divide of war and freedom: "While emancipation united blacks," she writes, "it also shattered traditional leadership patterns into myriad new channels of action" (p. 218).

Jones's major subject is what one white Georgian called "the dark, dissolving, disquieting wave of emancipation." She traces, month by month, the sequence of war, invasion, dislocation, resistance, and reconstitution of families and communities. She conveys the hopefulness of political freedom for emancipated men and the relentless opposition to that freedom and all its consequences. Sympathetic to the teachers and Freedmen's Bureau agents who came to Savannah from the North even before the war was over, Jones nevertheless acknowledges the failures and fractures within the "bureau-military-missionary complex." In her detailed account, the profoundly unsettled complexity of postwar southern society takes on palpable weight.

The overwhelming theme of Jones's subtle and yet powerful narrative is clear: "freedpeople in the city of Savannah and in the lowcountry were forced to wonder where slavery ended and freedom began in a society only imperfectly transformed" (p. 345). Writing the history of an imperfect transformation, one embodied in a parade of all-too-human characters, presents a challenge only a gifted historian can meet. We are fortunate that Jones is such a historian.

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