

2-2015

Ebony and Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America's Universities (Book Review)

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Recommended Citation

Ayers, Edward L. Review of *Ebony and Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America's Universities*, by Craig Steven Wilder. *The Journal of Southern History* 81, no. 1 (2015): 178-179.

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Ebony and Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America's Universities. By Craig Steven Wilder. (New York and other cities: Bloomsbury Press, 2013. Pp. [viii], 423. \$30.00, ISBN 978-1-59691-681-4.)

This book surprises. It focuses, for one thing, on the northeastern United States, not on the southern states where slavery was anchored. The chronological focus, with half its space devoted to the colonial period and to implications of colleges for American Indians, is also not what a reader might expect, given that most American colleges were founded in the antebellum era.

Most surprising, perhaps, the story is less about individual universities than it is about the networks that created and sustained them. *Ebony and Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America's Universities* is a powerful bill of indictment, unrelenting and unforgiving. The evidence is clear, and Craig Steven Wilder's account is single-minded and persuasive. The book includes few extended histories of individual colleges, for they are all presented as nodes in larger systems.

None of these surprises are disappointments. In fact, the freshness of perspective is one of the several strengths of this book. Wilder, while inspired by the efforts of Brown and Yale Universities to document their complicity in the slave trade, is not content merely to point to institutionally specific episodes of evasion, forgetfulness, or hypocrisy. He is interested instead in the way that the early colleges and universities of the United States were entangled in webs of trade, science, power, and race.

Wilder's richly documented story details, in his words, how "[t]he American college trained the personnel and cultivated the ideas that accelerated and legitimated the dispossession of Native Americans and the enslavement of Africans. Modern slavery required the acquiescence of scholars and the cooperation of academic institutions" (p. 10). Indeed, Wilder argues, the academy "stood beside church and state as the third pillar of a civilization built on bondage" (p. 11). Harvard College, the College of William and Mary, and Yale—the first three colleges in the British North American colonies—were "instruments of Christian expansionism, weapons for the conquest of indigenous peoples, and major beneficiaries of the African slave trade and slavery" (p. 17).

It is a thorough indictment, growing more detailed as the generations pass and the implication grows deeper. The narrative's considerable power comes through its calm and yet devastating detail, the stories of institution-building interweaving with empire- and slavery-building. From their outset, Wilder makes clear, American colleges helped generate new racial hierarchies and new racial science. The book is about the interaction of race, power, and knowledge, of which American colleges were the products, the embodiments, and the engines.

The American South, somewhat surprisingly, does not play a particularly important role in this discouraging history. Unlike earlier scholars who emphasized a southern pseudoscience of early anthropology, Wilder finds the leading minds of the Atlantic world in agreement that race was a physical fact with profound social consequences. Wilder, in fact, has little to say about southern colleges except to show how tightly woven they

were into larger patterns of ideas and institution-building. This is not a bad thing; it is useful for southern history to be situated within this larger frame, to see how the problem of slavery “was located in the entangled economies, histories, institutions, and lineages of the South, the free states, Europe, the Caribbean, and Africa” (p. 283).

There is one thing missing from this broad and deep book: acknowledgment of the ameliorative and even subversive effects that institutions of higher education can and have played. Abolitionists, for example, appear in this story only briefly, mainly so they can be defeated by powerful men who ran the early colleges of the United States. It is possible, though, that by neglecting the brave stories of people and institutions who somehow transcended their histories, who used them to foster dissent and to educate those who had been excluded, we forget that universities can sometimes rise above the deeply compromised societies that created them in their own image.

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