

BOOK REVIEWS

Mary Frances Berry and John Blassingame, **Long Memory: The Black Experience in America** (Oxford University Press, New York, 1982).

By now it is a commonplace that the civil rights revolution of the 1950s and 1960s changed the way Americans, black and white, think about blacks in this country. Much of the change occurred in law and employment, but for students of history, the most important thing about the intellectual shift accompanying the black studies movement occurred in the writing of Afro-American history. Not only was there an explosion of writing on what happened to blacks in the past, but new assumptions and emphases also governed the works that appeared after the mid-1960s. In addition to biographies of great figures, like Frederick Douglass, by Nathan I. Huggins, James Weldon Johnson, by Eugene Levy, and Zora Neale Hurston, by Robert Hemenway, the 1960s and 1970s added significant community studies, like that by Thomas Holt on black legislators in Reconstruction South Carolina and Alfred A. Moss on the American Negro Academy. Given the intellectual shifts in Afro-American and American historiographies, many students began to demand a new synthesis that would be more nationalist, more black-centered than the standard text, John Hope Franklin's **From Slavery to Freedom**, first published in 1947. More than a decade ago, as a graduate student, I learned that two leaders in the field of Afro-American history, Mary Frances Berry and John Blassingame, were preparing such a book.

Seeking, perhaps, to circumvent the war-centered periodization of older American history and the Franklin text, Berry and Blassingame substituted a topic organization that stresses continuity rather than change. Three chapters are extraordinarily thorough and useful: Chapter 7 on blacks and the criminal justice system, Chapter 8 on education, and Chapter 9 on blacks in the military. These chapters combine mostly up-to-date statistics with nuanced discussions that include apt quotes, such as one from J. Saunders Redding on hating and fearing everyone at college (page 287). Much of the material is fresh, such as the truly shocking racial violence in the armed services in the Vietnam era. These chapters succeed wonderfully and are worth the price of the book.

There are also other fine points, such as the use of poetry and contemporary quotes that add pungency to the scholarly discussion, for instance Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's "Bury Me in a Free land" (page 66) and T.H. Malone's views on peonage (page 196). The hard-headed discussion of miscengenation after the Civil War is a welcome corrective to American historians who deny race mixing in the second half of the nineteenth century. Several pages throughout the book contain illuminating truths and demonstrate the authors' mastery of primary sources.

But **Long Memory** is also uneven, frightfully so, if it is intended as a

survey of Afro-American history. Partly this stems from the book's topical arrangement, so that the civil rights revolution gets split between Chapters 5 and 10. (There is no one chapter on the struggle for civil rights in the 1950s and 1960s, as probably there would be in a chronologically arranged text). But the topical organization cannot explain other weaknesses, three of which I found especially disturbing. The illustrations disappoint tremendously, as, with very few exceptions, cartoons take the place of contemporary drawings and photographs. The illustration for the opening chapter, "Africa, Slavery, and the Shaping of Black Culture," is a 1971 cartoon by Brumsic Brandon showing how a little white girl cannot understand black urban language (page 128). Then the chapter on politics is marred by naivete—not otherwise characteristic of this book—as on pages 158-159: "On issues that could have crippled their white opponents, black members of the [South Carolina] legislature showed a lack of resolve," as though "resolve," not economic advantage and political power belonged to their opposition. And, finally, women are sometimes discussed desultorily, even annoyingly, as in the chapter on economics, which seems to be of two minds, even on the same page. On page 216, black women seem to be prospering at the expense of black men ("The discrimination against the black male is shown in the fact that from 1949 to 1956 black women were able to narrow the gap between their income and that of white women, but black males lost ground to white males," and "The black female was also more likely to obtain a high-status job than was the black male.") Yet "the black woman was triply oppressed . . . The much-heralded movement toward the equalization of the income of black and white women between 1952 and 1972 was deceptive."

In addition to exhibiting a mean-spiritness that would pit black women against black men, these quotes on women also show one of the book's main weak points, which is particularly apparent in the chapter on economics: the use of old figures. While it is true that the returns from the 1980 federal census had not all been released when the authors wrote, the federal Department of Labor issues frequent reports that would have provided more recent statistics for use in this book. Numbers from the mid-1960s and early 1970s do explain what was happening more than a decade ago, but they cannot stand for the present-day, particularly after the disastrous recession of the mid-1970s, which hurt black economic standing, and the impact of the desegregation of salaried positions, which has widened the income spread within the race.

This use of stale statistics underlines an insensitivity to chronology that makes *Long Memory* an odd book and implicitly contradicts two widely-held assumptions about the writing of history in this country. First, most historians assume that chronology is at the core of history and that the passage of time entails change, the very meat of history. Second, Americans, not just historians, tend to take for granted that the passage of time brings progress. By jettisoning chronology, Berry and Blassingame show that change over time is not central to their view of Afro-American history. They reject the idea of progress, for their discussions repeatedly demonstrate that the old ways were awful and the new ways are not much better: segregated schools were terrible,

desegregated schools are no improvement; disfranchisement was disastrous, voting does little good. Without an explicitly stated theme of black transcendence, such as in Vincent Harding's **There is a River**, this book's emphasis on defeat obscures the dignity and hope of a strong people who have faced adversity, but who have also known some triumphs.

Long Memory most certainly makes a contribution to Afro-American historiography, particularly in the three chapters mentioned above. But because of its organization and the resulting unevenness, it does not replace the most recent edition of **From Slavery to Freedom**. We still need to know what happened and in what order.

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Willard B. Gatewood, Jr., ed., **Free Man of Color: The Autobiography of Willis Augustus Hodges** (University of Tennessee Press, Knoxville, 1983), lxxiii, 97.

During the last decade, scholars have rewritten the history of Afro-American slavery in the United States. Much of this revision has rested upon the discovery of new sources and the ingenious use of long-ignored materials. Now, as the creative work of the last decade is being digested, historians are turning their attention to that peculiar product of the peculiar institution—the free blacks. The discovery of new manuscript materials by free blacks and relating to free blacks and the reconstruction of other source material from tax lists, census records, and the like offer a new perspective on the lives of antebellum free people of color. One of the most important of these works is the **Autobiography of Willis Augustus Hodges**, written in 1849 and serialized in the **Indianapolis Freeman** by Hodges's son in 1896. Professor Willard B. Gatewood, Jr., has edited the **Freeman** version with extraordinary care and perception. He also has added a thoughtful introduction that itself is a significant contribution to this ongoing reevaluation of free black life.

Hodges was born and lived much of his life in the tidewater Virginia county of Princess Anne. The details of this portion of his autobiography are fascinating and significant—no similar first hand account exists. But, as a young man, Hodges fled the tidewater, traveled north, and eventually settled in New York where he became actively involved in antislavery politics. This portion of Hodges's autobiography is of special interest to the readers of this journal.

Like many tidewater free blacks, Hodges was the descendant of a black slave man and a free white woman—perhaps the most frequent interracial match in the non-plantation South. Through the hard work of his parents, Hodges escaped the grinding poverty that inmeshed most Southern free blacks. In fact, the Hodges family own a sizable freehold in Princess Anne County and educated their children with private tutors,