REVIEW


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In *Yuletide in Dixie: Slavery, Christmas, and Southern Memory*, Robert E. May, emeritus professor of history at Purdue University, proposes to dismantle a long-lasting myth about antebellum slavery: that enslaved people benefited from their enslavers’ clemency and generosity during Christmas celebrations. Southerners’ will to insist on that period of indulgence was also used as a way to distinguish themselves further from their counterparts in the North, where New England Puritans had suppressed Christmas celebrations. Repeated references in Southern propaganda to times of relief as being integral to enslaved people’s experience were intended to justify slavery as a benevolent system and give the lie to Northern abolitionist critiques before the war. After the Southern defeat, the need was felt to attenuate the harshness of the system to better portray Southerners as victims of Northern aggression. In this rewritten version of history—the myth of the “Lost Cause”—Southerners had lost their precious civilization “populated by ‘Southern gentlemen,’ ‘gracious white ladies,’ ‘Negro mammies’ and ‘unwaveringly loyal bondsmen’” (p. 6).

Robert E. May recognizes that many sources document these moments of recreation: diaries and letters not only of Southern slaveholders but also of the wives and daughters of plantation owners, travel accounts, state and local newspapers from across the Old South, national publications like the *New York Times* and *Harper’s Weekly*, runaway slave narratives, antislavery tracts, popular publications like Celina E. Means’s *Thirty-Four Years: An American Story of Southern Life* (1878), children’s literature like Louise-Clark Pyrnelle’s *Diddie, Dumps, and Tot, or Plantation Child-Life* (1882) or folk stories like Joel Chandler Harris’s *Uncle Remus, His Songs and Sayings: The Folklore of the Old Plantation* (1880), and even oral interviews of former enslaved people conducted by the Federal Writers’ Project in the 1930s. Yet this reality cannot be generalized; if it indeed happened, it is just one side of the story, and one needs to “recover the missing elements of the narrative” (p. 11). For the enslaved, Christmas also meant extra work to prepare their masters’ festivities, along with the ever-present risk of being whipped or sold. The aim of this book is thus not only to highlight the way history has been distorted but also to denounce the “slavery-wasn’t-all-that-bad” trope that “hampers racial reconciliation today” (p. 11). Through an impressive collection of primary sources emanating from slaveholders themselves, letters, plantation journals, diaries, newspaper reports, travelers’ accounts, and fugitive slave advertisements, May reveals a very different story from the paternalist one that has been commonly told. The book claims to differ from previous studies on the subject as it depicts Christmas as a time of tension rather than compassion between the enslaved and the enslavers. It also adds new elements, with an emphasis on enslaved people’s agency, as they were not only the mere recipients of enslavers’ generosity but were active in taking advantage of their masters’ lack of vigilance to simply enjoy a moment of relief, to escape, or to foment a rebellion. The book follows a chronological progression, with five chapters on the antebellum period, one on the Civil

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The first chapter, “Time and Punishment,” immediately debunks the myth of Christmas clemency as it plumbs the tension between merriment and chastisement, explicitly detailing the many instances when masters showed their power by resorting to whipping enslaved people at Christmas time. Moreover, sources seem to show that enslaved people received less free time than has been commonly thought, and because plantation owners liked to organize extravagant parties, enslaved people were expected to furnish “herculean efforts” in the preparations (p. 30).

The second chapter, “Purchased at Little Cost,” reflects on the reasons enslavers would indulge in generous behaviors at Christmas. For May, “unsentimental calculations” need to be considered (p. 57). Masters acted out of pure self-interest, delivering as gifts necessities like food or clothing that they ordinarily provided, money representing “payback for produce provided from slave plots” (p. 67), or alcohol to stave off potential discontent. May underscores the agency of enslaved people when he describes the dances they performed for their masters, through which they could transmit some ancestral West African traditions. According to him, Southerners enjoyed these performances just as Northerners relished watching minstrel shows, with both audiences “engag[ing] in ‘erotic consumption’ of ‘the Other’” (p. 74).

Chapter 3, “Human Trafficking on Jesus’s Birthday,” addresses a darker side of the allegedly joyous Christmases: “the Christmastime commercialization of slave bodies” (p. 102). Indeed, as Christmas marked the end of the year, many masters negotiated new deals that resulted in the hiring or selling of human property. Moreover, enslaved people could themselves be given as gifts and thus be separated from their families. May tells us this caused great “terror and anxiety” among enslaved people and resulted in their running away (p. 91). For instance, Harriet Tubman’s first return trip to the South in 1854 was to prevent her brothers in Maryland from being sold to the Deep South on Christmas Day.

Chapter 4, “Gaming the System,” gives us very interesting instances of Southerners’ clemency on Christmas day, “endearing display[s] of mutual adoration” that were later used in the post-Civil War romanticization of Southern life (p. 109). The Christmas Gif’ game consisted in masters and slaves competing to be the first to exclaim “Christmas Gif’” on Christmas Day, with the loser providing the winner with a small gift. For May, this ritual incarnated “a reaffirmation of master power within the context of a competitive game stacked to give slaves a superficial victory, a kind of temporary role reversal” (p. 110). In the same way, the John Canoe performance, found mostly in coastal North Carolina, in which enslaved men clothed in “exotic-looking garments and accessories made out of animal skins and rags marched . . . shouted, played music, clattered bones, hit triangles, and danced and gyrated,” gave enslaved people the feeling that they could temporarily regain some agency (p. 113).

Chapter 5, “Winters of Their Discontent,” delves into the key issue regarding Christmas clemency: the desire for rebellion. The paradox lies here in the fact that if enslavers showed some compassion by granting enslaved people some moments of relief at Christmas time, they would consequently be consumed by the fear that enslaved people would take the opportunity to plot a rebellion. As May rightly puts it, “there were no widespread southern slave rebellions at Christmas War, and the last one on the Reconstruction period.”
before the Civil War. However, white southerners had fallen into repeated panics about *phantom Christmas revolts year after year* (p. 119). Indeed, enslaved people who were unsupervised or allowed to travel to visit friends and family were given plenty of opportunities for revenge but interestingly, they rarely revolted. Nevertheless, private letters and diaries show that Southerners were consumed by fear that they would. This is exactly the situation Jason Sharples depicts in *The World that Fear Made: Slave Revolts and Conspiracy Scares in Early America* (2020): enslavers created that fearsome environment, constraining and subduing their workforce through terror. Enslaved people feared their masters’ potential use of violence and enslavers were terrified that enslaved people would take revenge on them. That Christmas became for some synonymous with freedom, was a notion spread even by Northerners as part of their abolitionist propaganda, which depicted Christmas as more emblematic than Thanksgiving for “colored people.”

Chapter 6, “Ransacking the Garret,” digs into the celebration of Christmas during wartime. Very interestingly, May reminds us that Southerners used their Christmas celebrations—which, they claimed, were far more cheerful than in the “Puritan” North—as a justification for the war and their willingness to become independent. If they tried to continue their practice of gift-giving to maintain control over their enslaved population, the war turned Christmases into “declension rather than normality, stress rather than celebration” (p. 161). Indeed, enslaved people managed to take advantage of the wartime chaos and the presence of Union troops to escape from the plantations, to find relatives, or to join Union troops.

Chapter 7, “Sanitizing the Past,” tackles the rewriting of antebellum Christmas practices during the postwar period. Again very interestingly, while Southerners had been animated by fears of rebellion throughout the antebellum period, May explains that they “found it convenient to forget, or subconsciously repress, that they or their ancestors had feared holiday revolts in the first place. Recalling such panics would have been inconvenient in constructing the legend of the Lost Cause” (p. 198). As May explains, “legions of southern white memoirists, essayists, novelists, folklorists, children’s writers and editorialists . . . forged a genre of stereotypical slave Christmas idylls glorifying the coercive labor system that lay at the root of their antebellum society and the recent Civil War” (p. 198). If these representations prevailed well into the twentieth century, the reader may be astonished to learn that they were also spread in Northern writings, the authors of which May calls “Yankee collaborators” (p. 222), or in interviews of formerly enslaved people in the 1930s, who seemed to wish to “repress memories of slave times, including Christmas, as a kind of ‘prehistory,’ upsetting to recall much less write or speak publicly about” (p. 235).

In the epilogue entitled “Beyond the Candlelight Tours,” Robert E. May shows the legacy of these myths as shown in Southern magazines like *Southern Living* or on plantation tours. If some museum curators and plantation managers are striving to change the narrative, long-held representations will take a long time to eradicate. One must start by reading compelling works like *Yuletide in Dixie*. Indeed, the book is essential to fully grasp the current debates about the presence of Confederate symbols all over American territory, North and South. The book’s significance does not lie in its analysis of Lost Cause rhetoric—although May’s examination of the ways Christmas was romanticized is novel—but in the way it traces the origin of the Lost Cause rhetoric in slaveholders’ attempts at manipulating enslaved people during the antebellum period with pretended acts of generosity in order to ensure the latter’s loyalty and alleviate their own fears of slave rebellions. The distortion of history started then and endures to this day.
AUTHOR BIO

Anne-Claire Faucquez is associate professor in American civilization and history at University Paris 8. She published *De la Nouvelle-Néerlande à New York : La naissance d’une société escalavagiste (1624–1712)* [*From New Netherland to New York: The Birth of a Slave Society, 1624–1712*] in 2021. She works on New York’s colonial past and more specifically on the issue of race in colonial America. Her next project deals with history writing and the erasure of the history of slavery in nineteenth-century history books and textbooks. She is also interested in the commemoration and representations of slavery in public space (museums, monuments, and contemporary art).

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