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Beverly C. Tomek

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COLONIZATION *and Its* DISCONTENTS



*Emancipation, Emigration,
and Antislavery in
Antebellum Pennsylvania*

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Beverly C. Tomek : Colonization and Its Discontents: Emancipation, Emigration, and Antislavery in Antebellum Pennsylvania (Early American Places) before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Colonization and Its Discontents: Emancipation, Emigration, and Antislavery in Antebellum Pennsylvania (Early American Places):

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The antebellum American anti-slavery network consisted of three competing but interlocking branches: immediatists, gradualists, and colonizationists. Although debates between the three groups were hotly contested, members could and did move fluidly between the camps. According to the author, William Lloyd Garrison's demonization of colonization proved successful in the long term and the immediatists won the battle for historical memory. Historians have therefore come to see colonization as an unlikely racist scheme, while in fact the movement found substantial acceptance among the numerically superior gradualists. Tomek argues further that many in the contentious anti-slavery coalition found colonization a "humanitarian" endeavor and a "logical corollary to gradual abolition." (3)

Tomek is successful in placing colonization within the anti-slavery network, rescuing it perhaps from its historiographical status as a wild, independent movement of racist idealists. To make her case, Tomek presents chapter-length studies of individual Pennsylvanians involved with colonization during the 18th and 19th centuries. If Massachusetts is to be seen as the base of immediatist sentiment, Pennsylvania must be seen as the center of the gradual abolitionist movement. As a heavily populated border state, birthed in Quaker humanitarianism, Pennsylvania was home to the American Colonization Society (ACS) as well as many important free black leaders of the period. Although Tomek ostensibly restricts her study to Pennsylvania, her thesis has implications at the national level. Tomek begins by placing colonization within the context of 18th century attempts to restrict and control the black population in Pennsylvania. That is, colonization grew out of a larger anti-slavery mindset which desired to ban the importation and trade of slaves, and then to educate them and remove their perceived threat. By 1816, the year the ACS was founded, colonization was common language in the abolitionist movement, and although there was already plenty of disagreement about its aims, usefulness, and feasibility, it was not to be ignored. Colonizationists gained ground in the 1820s by placing themselves within the framework of larger social reform movements. Indeed, they found a marketable strategy by appealing to a wide range of sentiments. For example, on the one hand, they proposed that colonization could weaken the threat of slave revolts and provide for the removal of a proportionally large black prison population. On the other hand, colonization could provide positive externalities through its civilizing effects on Africa. For this latter reason, churches became involved with collections to fund African American educational reform, a generally agreed-upon prerequisite for colonization. In the words of Pennsylvania's Francis Scott Key, colonization could provide the state both a "refuge for her outcast children" and an outlet for our greatest evil." (58)

The third chapter, one of the most interesting in the book, explains how colonization fit well into the Whig mindset and why the Whigs championed the use of government to aid colonization. The leading Whig, Henry Clay, inherited from Alexander Hamilton a philosophy of economics intent on ordering and directing life. Whigs were humanitarians and nationalists who wanted strong governments to coordinate economic activity. Whigs imagined colonization as another kind of government-led internal improvement project. Anti-black ideas among Free Soilers and Whigs contributed to an understanding of an industrial American identity which left no room for African Americans. "To dismiss [colonization] as unrealistic or impractical would be to miss the entire point," Tomek states clearly if perhaps too late in her monograph. (238)

In fact, Tomek credits colonization with some real accomplishments. First, it provided a way out for slave-owners who fought local and state ordinances which effectively blocked manumission on American soil. More importantly, colonization fed ideas of black self-determination. Liberia stood for the potential for Africans to showcase the equality of the races. In fact, Tomek believes that the establishment of Liberia played at least some role in ending the slave trade, although one might wish that she would elaborate further on this point. (237). Through her case study of a leading black Philadelphian, James Forten, Tomek demonstrates how African American leaders opposed white-led colonization efforts. For Forten, a pen pal of William Lloyd Garrison, leadership had to come from blacks, or the paternal scheme would never be able to make claims of African equality or ability. For this reason, Forten supported a black-led colonization plan in Haiti, where some eight to thirteen thousand African Americans migrated to in the 1820s. In the 1850s, another African American leader in Pennsylvania, Martin Delaney, also turned his eye towards mass migration projects in Central America. Tomek is no cheerleader for colonization, but she does demand that the movement gets its due recognition. It is clear that the anti-slavery movement was not always benevolent, and that there were plenty of racists among the immediatists and gradualists as well as the colonizationists. Tomek could be criticized for over-employing the phrase "it was complicated" if she did not so meticulously explain and analyze the complications of colonization. In the end, Tomek is wise to avoid turning history into a morality play. Colonization may be, as the humanitarian Matthew Carey put it, "one of the wildest projects ever patronized by a body of enlightened men," but it was only one of many anti-slavery ideas of the early 19th century which may seem abhorrent today.

Pennsylvania contained the largest concentration of early America's abolitionist leaders and organizations, making it a necessary and illustrative stage from which to understand how national conversations about the place of free blacks in early America originated and evolved, and, importantly, the role that colonization—supporting the emigration of free and emancipated blacks to Africa—played in national and international antislavery movements. Beverly C. Tomek's meticulous exploration of the archives of the American Colonization Society, Pennsylvania's abolitionist societies,

and colonizationist leaders (both black and white) enables her to boldly and innovatively demonstrate that, in Philadelphia at least, the American Colonization Society often worked closely with other antislavery groups to further the goals of the abolitionist movement. In *Colonization and Its Discontents*, Tomek brings a much-needed examination of the complexity of the colonization movement by describing in depth the difference between those who supported colonization for political and social reasons and those who supported it for religious and humanitarian reasons. Finally, she puts the black perspective on emigration into the broader picture instead of treating black nationalism as an isolated phenomenon and examines its role in influencing the black abolitionist agenda.

"*Colonization and Its Discontents* is a well-researched and welcome reexamination of a movement that defies easy definition."