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Abstract

“There is a clause in the Act which is likely to meet with misconstruction in Europe,” wrote Frederick Milnes Edge about the legislation that emancipated the slaves of the District of Columbia in April 1862, “namely the appropriation for colonizing the freed slaves.” Ignore it, Edge advised. It only “was adopted to silence the weak-nerved, whose name is legion—and to enable any of the slaves who see fit to emigrate to more genial climes.” And this, for a long time, has been the way that most commentators have understood *colonization*—a plan ostensibly designed to expatriate any emancipated blacks to Africa or the West Indies or South America, but offered mostly as a placebo to reassure nervous white Americans that their hiring halls and neighborhoods would not be swamped with cheap (and presumably undesirable) freedmen. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Abraham Lincoln, colonization, emancipation, Emancipation Proclamation, Civil War, slavery, freedom, citizenship, abolition, African American, freed slaves, resettlement, Africa

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Review

Phillip W. Magness and Sebastian N. Page. *Colonization After Emancipation: Lincoln and the Movement for Black Resettlement*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2011. Pp. 164.

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“There is a clause in the Act which is likely to meet with misconstruction in Europe,” wrote Frederick Milnes Edge about the legislation that emancipated the slaves of the District of Columbia in April 1862, “namely the appropriation for colonizing the freed slaves.” Ignore it, Edge advised. It only “was adopted to silence the weak-nerved, whose name is legion—and to enable any of the slaves who see fit to emigrate to more genial climes.” And this, for a long time, has been the way that most commentators have understood *colonization*—a plan ostensibly designed to expatriate any emancipated blacks to Africa or the West Indies or South America, but offered mostly as a placebo to reassure nervous white Americans that their hiring halls and neighborhoods would not be swamped with cheap (and presumably undesirable) freedmen.

Some placebo. It baffles us today to imagine how, even in the new age of steamships, anyone seriously expected that four million human beings could be uprooted and relocated like a collection of exotic plants. And so the first instinct we have upon meeting colonization is to assume that Edge was right—that all the talk about colonization was pure window-dressing, designed to persuade truculent white supremacists into dropping their last guard against emancipation, but nothing more. Still, there is something disturbing about the suggestion that the hook of emancipation should be baited with a proposition as noxious as colonization, and it taints the reputation of many of the leading lights of the antebellum antislavery movement with the implication that antislavery whites might actually might have been less concerned with the noble work of freeing a race from bondage than they were with the ethnic cleansing of all blacks, slave or free, through removal elsewhere. This uncertainty is deepened by the unsmiling earnestness of some emancipationists toward colonization.

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It had institutional shape in the form of the American Colonization Society, and it had colonial shape in the form of the dreary little settlements of Liberia, which were supplied by fits and starts with small (and frequently doomed) deposits of freed American slaves.

There is also a purposefulness in the rhetoric of some colonization-ists that implies a good deal more purpose than rhetoric. Abolition alone, objected J. H. B. Latrobe in 1851, “could give political, but not social position” to the freed slaves. “It could empower the emancipated slaves to hold property and to vote, which has been already done in some of the States; but it could not remove the prejudice which the white population entertain against their race.” And prejudice, Latrobe warned, “is traditionary; and even after the white generations which have seen slavery have died out, the prejudices, originating from that condition, will be handed down from generation to generation.” Hence, Latrobe coldly reasoned, “the colonization of the free negroes, and of such slaves as may be emancipated, from time to time, is . . . the only remedy.” Colonization quickly acquires the atmosphere of a lifeboat—*it’s us or them*.¹

Certainly, the coupling of emancipation and colonization offered some tactical advantages in an age that took Romantic racism as its default position, even if the intention behind it was never designed to be more than tactical. Colonization allowed some sympathetic whites (who knew all too well the kind of resistance to absorption into the American body politic that would follow emancipation) to advocate colonization as a practical short-cut to genuine autonomy; some white supremacists (those who despised slavery and slave labor) to feign sympathy for blacks who confronted the unfortunate but irremediable problem of racial bigotry, and to exercise that sympathy by showing them the exit door; and other white supremacists (those who frankly despised black people and preferred to see them in slavery rather than in anywhere nearby) to be bribed into supporting emancipation with the assurance that there would be no social price to be paid by white people for ending slavery, since all the freed blacks would be made to vanish.

Still, it disturbs the equanimity of modern Americans, who have made the transition toward a color-blind society far faster and with far less strife than Latrobe feared possible, to discover that colonization was endorsed by an embarrassing number of saints in the antislavery

1. *Major-General McClellan and the Campaign on the Yorktown Peninsula* (London: Trubner, 1895), 61; Latrobe, *Colonization: A Notice of Victor Hugo's Views of Slavery in the United States* (Baltimore: John D. Toy, 1851), 12, 22.

hagiography: Granville Sharpe (who created a colonization experiment on the west coast of Africa in Sierra Leone), Daniel Webster, Francis Scott Key, Roger Sherman (of *Amistad* fame), John Marshall, James Monroe, the presidents of Princeton, Yale, Columbia and Harvard universities, John J. Crittenden, the Marquis de Lafayette, Henry Clay, the last surviving signer of the Declaration of Independence, Abraham Lincoln, and even Phineas Densmore Gurley—the pastor of the Lincoln family’s church in Washington. And far from being an impracticality, the movement of millions of Europeans around the globe in the nineteenth century, and the agitation of even sympathetic European liberals (Alexis de Tocqueville, for one) in favor of colonization schemes gave the idea far more verisimilitude than we may like to think.²

We would like to believe that the problem, a century and a half later, can be evaded by deciding which of the three basic motives for advocating colonization held the upper hand with whom, as though colonizationists could be sorted into *good* colonizationists and *bad* colonizationists—those who only used the idea as a pacifier, and those who were in repulsive earnest—without having to confront the stupefying reality that none of these allowances rose an inch above the level of banal excuse. But still we do the evading, and especially in the case of Abraham Lincoln, whom we would prefer to render as *good* a colonizationist as we can. To that end, the following exculpations for Lincoln are generally trotted out in order to prove that his endorsement of colonization was more harmless than it looks:

- 1) *He only pretended to like it.* Although Lincoln explicitly endorsed colonization in at least eight major public speeches (his 1852 eulogy for Henry Clay; speeches in 1854, 1857, and 1858 in Peoria, Springfield, and Edwardsville; his 1861 and 1862 Annual Messages to Congress, and twice more in 1862, after signing the District emancipation bill and then appealing to the border state representatives to undertake emancipation programs), he only did so in a spirit of “contradiction and ambivalence” because he genuinely was conflicted about

2. Massachusetts Colonization Society, *American Colonization Society, and the Colony at Liberia* (Boston: Pierce & Parker, 1831), 4; Deirdre Coleman, *Romantic Colonization and British Anti-Slavery* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 8, 104; Early Lee Fox, *The American Colonization Society, 1817–1840* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1919), 9–10; Gurley, in *American Colonization Society: Addresses Delivered at Its Late Annual Meeting in Washington, D.C. by John H.B. Latrobe, Esq. and Rev. Phineas D. Gurley, D.D.* (New York: T.R. Dawley, 1864), 13–16; André Jardin, *Tocqueville: A Biography* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1988), 447.

the degree of racial tolerance white Americans were likely to show the freedmen.

- 2) *He was only thinking of them.* Although Lincoln attempted to persuade a delegation of African-American clergymen to support a plan to create a freedmen's colony in Central America in August 1862, he did so because he entertained the hope that the establishment of successful colonies of volunteer black settlers would convince whites at home of "the capacity of the allegedly inferior black race to work with self-discipline and dedication" and thus "deflect racist challenges to emancipation."
- 3) *He stopped it right away.* Although Lincoln supported the creation of a freedmen's colony on Île à Vache in 1863, he never made participation in colonizing efforts compulsory for emancipated slaves, and once the Île à Vache experiment had been tried and failed, Lincoln evacuated the colonists and (according to John Hay) "sloughed off that idea" once and for all as a "hideous & barbarous humbug."³

He was, on these grounds, never more than halfhearted in his endorsement of colonization, never trespassed further on black agency than merely to offer support for colonization, and never returned to the idea once an initial—and presumably harmless—experiment had been tried. Innocence returns to Lincoln, rejoicing. And it returns to us, rejoicing too, since we live in the Union Lincoln saved from dissolution, and it will be difficult to enjoy that Union fully if its preservation turns out to have been linked to policies that we have come to abhor—slavery, segregation, and colonization.

This is not unlike similar efforts to cleanse Lincoln from the taint of social, political, and biological racism; and not unlike those similar efforts, it tends to have the aroma of special pleading. No stigma is so feared or so devastating in modern American minds as the accusation of racism; none is easier to assert, and none is more difficult to cleanse away without a certain rolling of the eyes on the part of accusers and even onlookers. We repristinate Lincoln on colonization for the same reason we repristinate Lincoln on race in general, because we crave repristination ourselves.

3. Gabor Boritt, "Did He Dream of a Lily-White America? The Voyage to Linconia," in *The Lincoln Enigma: The Changing Faces of an American Icon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 8; Philip S. Paludan, *The Presidency of Abraham Lincoln* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1994), 132–33; Hay, diary entry for July 1, 1864, in *Inside Lincoln's White House: The Complete Civil War Diary of John Hay*, ed. Michael Burlingame and J.R.T. Ettliger (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1997), 217.

What is difficult for many to grasp is that, for Lincoln, an absolute enmity against slavery had little or nothing to do with race. Slavery, in the eye of Abraham Lincoln, was the sign of the seeping return of Romantic aristocracy to American minds. It embodied a hierarchical and unmoving social order that liberal democracy and liberal capitalism had briefly overthrown in 1776 and 1789, but which had regenerated itself like the Hydra's heads and choked off the hope of popular government everywhere but in the American Union. Lincoln's antislavery was only tangentially connected to race, not because he was what we would call a *racist*, but because slavery was bigger than race. Judging Lincoln's bona fides as a Great Emancipator according to the folly of colonization is, in its own way, as historically near-sighted as the Sisyphean labors of those who try to deny that his embrace of it *was* folly.

Phillip Magness and Sebastian Page really have only one argument to make in *Colonization After Emancipation*, and it is the one most Lincolnites dread: That Lincoln not only favored colonization in all the instances previously cited, but that he persisted in favoring colonization schemes until almost the day he died and with such tenacity that no amount of excuse-mongering can cleanse him from association with it. Far from having "sloughed off that idea," Lincoln remained so enamored of it that he initiated a second wave of colonization projects after the failure of Île à Vache, starting with a plan to ship freedmen as workers to British Honduras, and including plans for settlements in British Guiana and the Dutch West Indies. He did not merely nod in the direction of these plans, argue Magness and Page. He was personally involved in these schemes, meeting with the British minister to America, Lord Richard Lyons, and putting the presidential shoulder behind the self-promoting antics of James Mitchell, the U.S. government's commissioner of emigration. Mitchell had been involved closely with colonization efforts in his home state of Indiana, and while he genuinely abhorred slavery as a "crime" for which "God will hold the guilty responsible, in the day of judgment," he nevertheless believed even free blacks "are a degraded people" who are legally boxed-in by "hereditary prejudice against the colored race." For them, said Mitchell, colonization is the only "remedy." If he had said *final solution*, the impact could not be more ominous.⁴

4. Mitchell, *Answer of the Agent of the Indiana Colonization Society to the Resolution of Inquiry on the Subject of African Colonization, passed by the House of Representatives of the General Assembly of the State of Indiana on the 3rd of February 1852* (Indianapolis: J.P. Chapman, 1852), 17, 19.

That Abraham Lincoln would make himself the umbrella under which Mitchell's plans would be carried out "seems"—as the authors appear delighted to point out—"to completely dispel his popular reputation as a racial egalitarian" (125), and so we arrive at the real eureka of the book. Of course, I am not sure that anyone ever really claimed that Lincoln was "a racial egalitarian," or that any three individuals agree on just what a "racial egalitarian" might be, then or now. But the point is clear all the same: Abraham Lincoln fails the test of modern social virtue. As Richard Thompson Ford remarked in *The Race Card*, even the slightest ambiguity in contemporary racial politics demands that the worst be assumed, and Magness and Page unhesitatingly assume it.⁵ The authors modify this charge mildly by adding that Lincoln's "plans for voluntary emigration lacked the callous deportation to which more serious racial separatists subscribed" and added a pinch of "benign reasoning to his brand of colonization" (121). But much of that qualification melts away when we are asked to remember that "even as black regiments proved themselves in battle at Milliken's Bend and Fort Wagner," Lincoln was signing authorizations for transporting black laborers to Central America. It is hard to salvage much of the benign from Lincoln's advocacy of colonization after Magness and Page assert that Lincoln "was a principal driving force behind the British project, and he sustained it through 1863, by personal intervention when necessary," and only gave up on colonization "from sheer political fatigue" (122–23).

On what evidence, then, do Magness and Page build their indictment? Because, in spite of the temporizing arguments about Lincoln's lack of "callous" motivations, this book really *is* an indictment, and of the sort Lerone Bennett and Thomas Di Lorenzo and all the tribes of Lincoln-haters down through the years will cherish. The answer, surprisingly, is *none at all*.

Colonization after Emancipation opens on June 13, 1863, with what is supposed to be the smoking gun—an order, drafted by Mitchell but signed or endorsed by Lincoln, to the chief representative of the British Honduras Company, authorizing the recruitment of emancipated slaves as laborers in British Honduras. This is the same order that Magness presented as Exhibit A in two sensational articles published in this journal in 2008 and 2011, and it is worth quoting in full:

5. Ford, *The Race Card: How Bluffing About Bias Makes Race Relations Worse* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2008), 24.

Emigration Office
Washington D.C. June 11th, 1863

John Hodge of London, and S. R. Dickson, agents of the British Colonies of Honduras and Guiana, are here in accordance with the well settled policy of the United States, to aid such free persons of color as desire to remove to their colonies. We, therefore, recommend all parties and persons having the direction or charge of such, to present no hindrance to them or their agents in the work of canvassing for emigrants, but to render them and their regularly appointed agents, all the aid possible in this work.

James Mitchell
Commissioner of Emigration⁶

From this, Magness and Page followed the trail of “a succession of document discoveries in the British and American National Archives,” demonstrating that an unabated interest in colonization “occurred in the latter years of Lincoln’s presidency.” This “extensive assemblage of letters, pamphlets, and newspaper articles” opened up a view into “a previously unknown fact-finding mission” for the purpose of creating a Central American freedmens’ colony.

Lovely, except that Exhibit A is not a Lincoln document, and neither are the other documents in their “extensive assemblage.” In fact, no original of Exhibit A actually exists, only “a second-generation secretary’s copy . . . neatly tucked away into an obscure file at the Department of the Interior.” This document is *supposed* to carry an endorsement by Lincoln—this is the smoke from the smoking gun—but no such “endorsement” appears. Magness and Page *supply* the endorsement by citing the report of one of the British Honduras agents that Lincoln “handed me the authority which had been drawn up by the Govt. Emigration Commissioner [i.e. James Mitchell], signed by himself” with the words “I approve the within” (37). That, as the authors admit in a long footnote, is it. They *believe* that Lincoln actually signed two copies of the order, but neither has survived, and (as they coyly concede) “the final disposition of an original in Lincoln’s pen remains a puzzle for historians” (139).

It accomplishes exactly nothing to cite documents that do not exist and then smother their non-existence with invocations of “mystery”

6. Phillip W. Magness, “Benjamin Butler’s Colonization Testimony Re-evaluated,” *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 29 (Winter 2008): 1–28, and “James Mitchell and the Mystery of the Emigration Office Papers,” *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 32 (September 2011): 51–62.

(x), or to imply (as Magness did in 2011) that “Lincoln’s colonization records became so sporadic after January 1863 at least in part because they were removed from government files and remain missing to this day,” as though some shadowy conspiracy was at work *ex machina*. In his 2011 article on the “mystery” of the trunk Mitchell used to store his emigration archive, Magness announced that “Newly discovered documents in Lincoln’s handwriting naturally generate historical excitement”—only to follow that bang with the whimper that “there is reason to believe that Mitchell’s trunk contained several of them.” The trunk and the archive, alas! disappeared after Mitchell’s death in 1904. But this acts as no brake on Magness’s lengthy but purely speculative description of the possible contents of the trunk. “These and other mysteries from Mitchell’s trunk,” Magness solemnly asserts, “tend to suggest a more complex and less certain picture of Lincoln’s ideas about the future of the freed slaves.” How they perform this feat is a mystery in itself, considering as no one alive today seems ever to have seen Mitchell’s “archive.”⁷

That almost entirely exhausts the store of shattering testimony Magness and Page promised to bring against Lincoln’s “popular reputation as a racial egalitarian.” They review Lincoln’s other utterances on the subject; they knit together long-published testimonies from Gideon Welles, Edward Bates, and many others about Lincoln’s interest in colonization in general; and they exhume at least one resident of the Civil War’s historical drunk tank, Benjamin Butler, and breathe new air into the bubble of Butler’s claim that Lincoln discussed colonization with him as late as April 1865. But all of this is either well-known enough to be valuable only for having it all in one book, or too vague to establish more about Lincoln’s interest in colonization than Lincoln himself tells us. So, we are left at the end of *Colonization After Emancipation* with something akin to the old Scottish verdict: *not proven*. History has the license of poetry but not the liberty of manufacture.

But if Magness and Page’s evidence falls somewhere short of convincing us that Lincoln was a *bad* colonizationist, it’s worth wondering what exactly we are left with, if the alternative is to plead for Lincoln as a *good* colonizationist. For there is, at least in my mind, no such thing as a *good* colonizationist. And to find a man who was otherwise so radically skeptical of hare-brained schemes of social reform (temperance, for instance) dallying with colonization, is jarring. Even worse,

7. Magness, “James Mitchell and the Mystery of the Emigration Office Papers,” 61–62.

to find a man who believed so profoundly in the equality of natural rights as possessed by blacks and whites alike missing the injustice that William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips had no difficulty seeing in “schemes of expatriation,” is a disheartening blurring of Lincoln’s vision on this issue.⁸

But is the *jarring* Lincoln’s problem or ours, or both? Colonization plans of various shapes bitterly divided African-Americans, usually serving as a counsel of despair in the face of certain unpleasant racial realities. It cannot be too surprising to find Lincoln offering precisely that same counsel as a motive for colonization. “Your race are suffering, in my judgment, the greatest wrong inflicted on any people,” Lincoln said, with unusual frankness for a white man, much less a president of the United States in the nineteenth century. “But even when you cease to be slaves, you are yet far removed from being placed on an equality with the white race,” he added. He saw less chance for equality in white America and more chance elsewhere. “No sane man,” he believed, “will attempt to deny that the African upon his own soil has all the natural rights that [the Declaration of Independence] vouchsafes to all mankind,” he said in 1858. But the “African” would have little chance of realizing them unless and until he was “on his own soil.”⁹ (Why the “African” whose ancestors had been on American soil longer than Lincoln’s should *not* consider America as “his soil” was an idea that seems never to have occurred to Lincoln).

Colonization was a counsel to which Lincoln would have been better advised not to give in and a counsel he himself sometimes shrewdly questioned. “I cannot make it better known than it already is, that I strongly favor colonization,” he told Congress in 1862, but he balked at appealing to the usual, race-baiting, “largely imaginary, if not sometimes malicious” reasons. Lincoln is an example in the history of American race relations not of evil people intentionally doing harm, but of decent people doing harm because they don’t know what else they could do or did not take the trouble to do something else. When Lincoln said in 1854 that “If all earthly power were given me, I should not know what to do, as to the existing institution,” he was expressing a genuine, if short-sighted, puzzlement. And it is

8. Henry Mayer, *All On Fire: William Lloyd Garrison and the Abolition of Slavery* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998), 176

9. Kate Masur, *An Example for All the Land: Emancipation and the Struggle Over Equality in Washington, D.C.* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 35–36; Lincoln, “Speech at Carlinville, Illinois” (August 31, 1858) and “Address on Colonization to a Deputation of Negroes” (August 14, 1862), in Roy P. Basler et al., eds., *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1853), 3:79, 5:371–72.

worth remembering that colonization was not always an end in itself, not always an irritated pitching of the entire problem of race over the side. Frederick Edge's comment about the colonization provisions of the District emancipation bill being a placebo more than a policy should not be tossed aside as easily as Magness and Page do, if only because people like Edge were there to take the unspoken temper of the times. Granville Sharpe advocated colonization in west Africa because he believed it was the best way to interdict the slave trade; Salmon Chase thought colonization would create "an Americo-Afric state in Central America" and ensure the expansion of republican liberty (so long, Chase added, as it was remembered that colonization "will not solve our home problems" with race).¹⁰

Nor should we toss aside as lightly as Magness and Page would like to do the possibility that Lincoln's colonization dabbling really did have a large element of the placebo built into it. Why else did Lincoln arrange for a public meeting with the District of Columbia's African-American clergy, complete with reporters from the Washington papers to record everything he said? There was no particularly large or influential black readership of those papers in 1862; the only real significance of Lincoln's little colonization *tableau* could be for a white readership that needed the oil of reassurance poured onto the rough waters of emancipation—a placebo, in other words. This does not mean that Lincoln might not have mixed the placebo motive with less hallowed motives. But if unhallowed motives had been as ensconced in the driver's-seat as firmly as Magness and Page believe, there would have been no reason for the *tableau* at all.

Which means that the most telling measure of Lincoln's interest in colonization is in the very thing that Magness and Page have to struggle to overcome—the lack of evidence. Had Lincoln in any energetic way been determined to cram colonization down emancipated black throats, then the new national energies that the Civil War put into his hands as president would have allowed very little to stand in his way. Instead, he talked about it, experimented with it once in a small-scale way, and never returned to it afterwards. It was a sad failure of imagination, and not the only one Lincoln suffered from, but in the end, not a major one. Hay was right, and so was Edge. It was a humbug, after all.

10. "Speech at Peoria, Illinois" (October 16, 1854) and "Annual Message to Congress" (December 1, 1862), in *Collected Works*, 2:255, 5:534; Charles Stuart, *A Memoir of Granville Sharp* (New York: William S. Dorr, 1836), 60, 68; Chase to Thaddeus Stevens, in *The Selected Papers of Thaddeus Stevens*, ed. B.W. Palmer (Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997), 1:320.