

cottonraceREVIEWFOREWARDMAGFEB2009

Upcoming in Foreword Mag. for February 2009

Cotton and Race in the Making of America: The Human Costs of Economic Power

Gene Dattel

Ivan R. Dee

Hardcover \$28.95 (416pp) 978-1-56663-747-3

Did someone say not to judge a book by its cover? What about its title? /Cotton and Race in the Making of America /sounds like a ponderous textbook, full of charts and windy academic verbiage. Nothing could be further from the truth. For many people, Gene Dattel's study will be an eye-opener guaranteed to change their idea of the American experience.

As the title suggests, Dattel chronicles the crucial role cotton had in the growth of America, demonstrating in a fair, dispassionate way how many of our forebears worshipped almighty profits as much as almighty God. Slowly but inexorably, the story becomes a damning indictment of racism, from eighteenth-century slavery to twentieth-century segregation.

Statistics don't lie, but they can shock. In 1790, the Land of the Free had approximately 700,000 slaves. By 1860, there were four million—out of a total population of 31 million. Somewhere between two-thirds and three-quarters of the slaves were involved in cotton production.

The slaves were mainly in the South, of course, but it is part of our national myth that the good people of the North went to war against those defiant Southerners in order to free the slaves. Many of those good people, including some abolitionists, wanted to unshackle black people in order to ship them back to Africa or to colonies.

"We forget that anti-slavery for the most part also meant anti-black," Dattel writes. "White Americans have decoupled the horrors of slavery from the condition of free blacks. In a fit of national self-congratulation, Americans have applauded emancipation and relapsed into historical amnesia with respect to the condition of blacks in the North."* *

The author grew up in the cotton country of the Mississippi Delta and worked for years in the financial industry. In tracing the growth of King Cotton and its economic influence, not just in the US but overseas, he has compiled a narrative that is both an impressive work of history and an important sociological masterwork. /Dick Cady/