

CottonraceANTIOCHREVIEW, june22,2010

Cotton and Race in the Making of America: The Human Cost of Economic Power.(Brief article)(Book review)

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Steve Brzezinski

Cotton and Race in the Making of America: The Human Cost of Economic Power by Gene Dattel. Ivan R. Dee, 432 pp., \$28.95. This is a highly readable account of the centrality of cotton in any attempt to understand the dynamic historical interplay of race relations and economic development in the United States. Paraphrasing Marx, the book argues that without slavery there would have been no cotton and without cotton no modern industry.

The book demonstrates that without cotton, slavery would likely have morphed into tenant farming long before the Civil War (the importation of African slaves was banned completely in 1808). Without cotton and the westward expansion of America triggered by the Louisiana Purchase, there would have been no sectional political crisis, no secession from the Union by the South, and hence no Civil War.

Cotton was the first truly globalized American commodity. Financed in the North, especially New York, and then shipped by sea to hungry textile mills all over the world, it was of immense significance in the expansion of American power, prestige, and influence in the world.

One of the most compelling aspects of the book is its harsh view of Northern complicity in slavery and hostility toward the migration of free Blacks before the Civil War and after. Slavery was a truly American tragedy, not merely the shame of the South. In Dattel's view, emancipation was as much a calculated geographic, political, and economic containment strategy as it was the instrument of freedom for slaves.

Dattel argues forcefully that the Confederacy failed because it miscalculated that England, with its heavy demand for cotton, would enter the war on its side. Ironically, though it was clear England thought the Confederacy would prevail, it had built up enough cotton reserves to remain at least diplomatically neutral until the end of the fighting.

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