

NELL IRVIN PAINTER, *EXODUSTERS: BLACK MIGRATION TO KANSAS AFTER RECONSTRUCTION*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1976, 288 pp.

and

ROBERT G. ATHEARN, *IN SEARCH OF CANAAN: BLACK MIGRATION TO KANSAS, 1879-80*. Lawrence, Kansas: The Regents Press of Kansas, 1978, xii, 338 pp.

In 1909 Walter L. Fleming published an article on "'Pap' Singleton, the Moses of the Colored Exodus," in the *American Journal of Sociology*. Some forty years later, Herbert Aptheker in his *Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States*, responded to it somewhat disparagingly. The Black Exodus was not a "spontaneous movement inspired by a Moses in the guise of the aged Benjamin Singleton." It was "the culmination of a steady process of migration and came in response to years of preparation." In this process "the somewhat eccentric Singleton" was only of secondary significance. It was Henry Adams, a grass roots organizer, disassociated from the millenarian strain, represented by Singleton, whom Aptheker hailed as "the single most important person behind the 1879 exodus."

In her study of Exodusters, a name that the migrants applied to themselves, Nell Irvin Painter investigates the question at the core of Aptheker's objection--Was the Exodus a spontaneous movement with millenarian overtones? Was it a practical response to a specific political crisis? Was it the result of years of careful preparation? Painter discovers that the Exodus was all of these things. She begins by describing the systematic repression of black political rights during counter-reconstruction. She shows how leaders like Henry Adams did, as Aptheker has insisted, attempt to formulate a rational political response to the steadily worsening conditions. But, observes Painter, "as Southern life grew progressively more feudal, men such as Adams, who worked squarely within the American tradition of representative democracy, became anachronisms." There was a resuscitation of black nationalism and emigration movements as noted by George B. Tindall in his article on "The Liberian Exodus of 1878," in *South Carolina Historical Magazine* (July, 1952). When the back to Africa movement floundered due to the economic helplessness of its supporters, Henry Adams and other grass roots political leaders began to investigate the political condition of Blacks in the South and to explore possibilities for resettling them elsewhere.

Prior to 1878, black migration to Kansas was orderly, and relatively sparse. But, as Painter demonstrates, the "unadulterated violence" accompanying the campaign of 1878 in Louisiana, "alerted Blacks that bulldozing would accompany politics as long as they pretended to any political autonomy." (p. 174) This "bulldozing" as its name implied, consisted of a heavy-handed program of intimidation, assassination, and a ruthless smashing of political rights. In the wake of this repression, the

"Kansas Fever Exodus of 1879," which had an unquestionably millenarian dimension, sprang up. This Exodus received "tremendous publicity," on the lecture rostrum and in the press, and "spurred nonmillenarian Blacks to consider seriously migrating to Kansas to better their condition."

Robert G. Athearn's study focuses on the Kansas Fever Exodus of 1879-80. It is micro-history at its best, a lively, well-written, detailed, and painstaking study of the conditions that Exodusters met with on entering Kansas, and the responses of the white community to their influx. Unlike the Painter volume, it does not place the Exodus within the larger context of Black Reconstruction politics. Nor are the overtones of Black nationalism or millenarianism so painstakingly explored. To be sure, these themes are hardly neglected, but the primary objectives of Athearn are to describe the reactions of white Kansans, which ranged from ambivalence to open hostility. For Painter, the Kansas Exodus is essentially a problem in Afro-American history and it is discussed within the context of Black attempts to control their own destiny. For Athearn, "The exodus movement, which was born out of misapprehension as to the probable penalty for remaining in the South, was a phenomenon in the frontier movement." Painter demonstrates that the Exodus was politically effective in providing "proof that Afro-Americans did not quietly resign themselves to the political or economic order of the Redeemed South." It had the short term effect of "a reduction in rents and prices, bringing a real but fleeting amelioration in the economic lives of limited numbers of Blacks", who remained in the South. Athearn would seem to agree with the contrasting opinion he describes in saying, "Aside from the moral aspects of Southern mistreatment of former slaves and the righteousness of the Blacks' cause, almost everything else about the exodus was wrong, or at least unfortunate, from the Kansas viewpoint."

Athearn's treatment of the Exodus shows sensitivity to human suffering in what most scholars will agree was a dismal period in the history of Black Americans. Unfortunately, he falls into the pit that Aptheker warned against, in overstressing the irrational behavior and political naivete of the migrants. On the other hand, Painter responds well to Aptheker's challenge and is able to follow up on his suggestions as to the importance of Henry Adams' political movement, without neglecting the utopianism represented by Singleton and his followers. Athearn treats -- and rightly so -- on the tragic nature of the migration and the helplessness of the migrants, victimized by American racism. Painter, on the other hand, follows a recent trend in black history by placing greater emphasis on what Blacks have attempted for themselves, rather than lamenting the bitter trials that have been inflicted upon them. She does this without overstating her case, and she walks gracefully the narrow line between the appreciation of black accomplishments and the creation of a historical myth.

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