Readings for July 30, 2017

The Male Impersonator

Fintan O’Toole JUNE 22, 2017 ISSUE

Ernest Hemingway: A Biography

by Mary V. Dearborn

Knopf, 738 pp., $35.00

Ernest Hemingway: A New Life

by James M. Hutchisson

Pennsylvania State University Press, 292 pp., $37.95

Writer, Sailor, Soldier, Spy: Ernest Hemingway’s Secret Adventures, 1935–1961

by Nicholas Reynolds

William Morrow, 357 pp., $27.99

The Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway: The Hemingway Library Edition

edited and with an introduction by Seán Hemingway, and a foreword by Patrick Hemingway

Scribner, 576 pp., $32.00 (to be published in July)

John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston

Ernest Hemingway on his first safari in Africa, 1933–1934

I am not sure whether the National Rifle Association has ever thought of having an official Nobel literary laureate. But if it did there is no doubt that it would choose Ernest Hemingway. There is a coffee table book, published by Shooting Sportsman in 2010, called Hemingway’s Guns. It is a lovingly detailed, lavishly illustrated, and creepily fetishistic catalog of the great writer’s firearms: the Browning automatic 5s, the Colt Woodman pistols, the Winchester 21 shotguns, the Merkel over/unders, the Beretta S3, the Mannlicher- Schoenauer rifles, the .577 Nitro Express with which he fantasized about shooting Senator Joe McCarthy, the big-bore Mauser, the Thomson sub-machine gun with which, he claimed, he shot sharks.

Here he is brandishing his Browning Superposed with Gary Cooper, or showing his Model 12 pumpgun to an admiring Hollywood beauty: “Hemingway enjoyed teaching women to shoot—and what man wouldn’t like to coach Jane Russell?” Here is the Griffin and Howe .30-06 Springfield—“already bloodied on elk, deer and bear”—leaning against a dead rhino. The one gun whose identity the authors seem unsure of is the one with which he took his own life in 1961.

Hemingway’s peculiar variation on American romanticism was a profound connection to the natural world expressed through violent assaults on it. In one of his still-radiant stories, “Fathers and Sons,” we find his alter ego Nick Adams driving through the landscape and “hunting the country in his mind as he went by.” This rapaciousness was what made Hemingway so famous in his own time as the gold standard of American masculinity. As David Earle has shown in All Man!, men’s magazines in the 1950s carried headlines like “Hemingway: America’s No.1 He-Man” and “The Hairy Chest of Hemingway.”\*

Yet it is this same alpha-male persona and its relentless desire to possess women and defeat nature that now make Hemingway such a rebarbative figure. It is hard to sympathize with the Hemingway who cabled his third wife, the brilliant journalist Martha Gellhorn, while she was away covering World War II: “ARE YOU A WAR CORRESPONDENT OR WIFE IN MY BED?” Harder still not to recoil from accounts of Hemingway’s slaughtering of lions, leopards, cheetahs, and rhinoceros in Africa or from Mary Dearborn’s deadpan revelation of the fate of eighteen mahi-mahi caught by Hemingway and his cronies off Key West: “They would be used as fertilizer for [his second wife] Pauline’s flowerbeds.”

Add in the overwhelming evidence that Hemingway in his later decades was, in the words of his fourth wife Mary, “truculent, brutal, abusive and extremely childish” and his life story becomes ever more repellent. Yet the appetite for Hemingway biographies appears limitless. Michael Reynolds seemed to say everything worth saying in his five-volume life, published between 1986 and 1999, but the books keep coming. They raise the issue that Gellhorn stated in a letter to her mother when she was about to divorce Hemingway: “A man must be a very great genius to make up for being such a loathsome human being.”

The constant excavation of Hemingway’s life creates the danger of pollution: the loathsome sludge of the personality might seep into the genius of The Sun Also Rises, A Farewell to Arms, and a score of magnificent short stories. Unless, that is, we can see through the phoniness of America’s number-one he-man to the genuine tragedy of masculinity that is played out in Hemingway’s life and in his best work.

Early in his brisk new biography, James Hutchisson has an anecdote that smells as fishy as the dead marlin in The Old Man and the Sea. It sets up a physical and psychological contrast between the super-manly Hemingway and the weakling James Joyce in Paris in the mid-1920s:

Although Hemingway often made fun of the Irishman’s frail physique, this afforded opportunities for fun and games when they went out drinking together, as they did frequently. When Joyce got drunk and challenged some stranger in a café to settle things manfully, he would simply defer to his companion, saying, “Deal with him, Hemingway! Deal with him!”

Did Joyce really go around picking physical fights in bars? If so, his biographers have missed it. Michael Reynolds, in his authoritative Hemingway: The Paris Years, makes no mention of this delicious anecdote. The origin of the story, so far as I can tell, is Hemingway’s boasting thirty years later. He tells it an interview with Time when he won his Nobel Prize in 1954. And the context makes it obviously bogus. The tale of the frail Irishman hiding behind the manful American is part of a longer quotation in which Joyce allegedly tells Hemingway that “he was afraid his [own] writing was too suburban and that maybe he should get around a bit and see the world.” Nora, Joyce’s future wife, is listening in and adds her approval: “His wife was there and she said, yes, his work was too suburban—‘Jim could do with a spot of that lion hunting.’”

What makes the whole story so clearly specious is that Hemingway’s earliest lion-hunting exploits date from 1933, around a decade after this supposed conversation. Essentially, the Joyces are supposed to be admitting in the mid-1920s that Joyce would be a much better writer if only he were more like the Hemingway of later decades, the world-traveling he-man and hunter, and less like the weedy fellow who needed his bigger companion to “settle things manfully” on his behalf.

In one sense, this episode tells us nothing more than that Hemingway was a compulsive liar and that Hutchisson is foolish to fall for his bragging. The idea of Joyce on safari suggests the possibility of a parlor game: Proust in space, Kafka at the disco. But behind it there is an immense sadness. For this woeful fabrication substitutes for something that might have been real: Hemingway did have a deep connection to Joyce. His two earliest—and best—novels, The Sun Also Rises and A Farewell to Arms, pick up on what Joyce had done in Ulysses. As Hemingway admitted to George Plimpton in a celebrated Paris Review interview in 1958, “the influence of [Joyce’s] work was what changed everything, and made it possible for us to break away from the restrictions.”

These restrictions were partly questions of frankness about sex and the body and partly questions of style. Hemingway made wonderful use of the freedom that Joyce had created. The tone of his masterly Nick Adams stories comes from Dubliners: it is impossible to imagine his first fully achieved piece, “Indian Camp,” for example, without “Araby,” and we can see in Seán Hemingway’s introduction to the new edition of the short stories precisely how his grandfather ruthlessly cut eight pages from the beginning of that story to plunge the reader, as Joyce does, straight into the stream of the action. The long interior monologue of Harry Morgan’s wife, Marie, that ends To Have and Have Not may not be a worthy successor to Molly Bloom’s in Ulysses, but at least Joyce gave Hemingway permission to try.

However, even these influences may be less important than something else that Joyce gave Hemingway: a specific idea of maleness. That idea is the opposite of the persona Hemingway would later forge—the hero who “settles things manfully.” Joyce gave us, in Leopold Bloom, the hero who settles nothing and is not at all manful, the pacifistic little man who just lives with Molly’s cheating on him with Blazes Boylan. Hemingway’s great tragedy is that he delved deeper into this unmanliness but then turned himself into a parody of the very masculinity he had subverted. For all his talk of courage, his is perhaps the greatest loss of nerve in twentieth-century literature.

Hemingway had imaginative access to two things he hid behind his outlandish public image—a complex sexuality and a deep trauma. Since the publication in 1986 of the unfinished novel The Garden of Eden, which he had worked on fitfully from 1945 until 1961, it has been obvious that he was drawn to the excitement of crossing sexual boundaries. The he-man was at least in part imaginatively a she-man. It was already clear that Hemingway was drawn to the erotic potential of androgyny. In A Farewell to Arms, Frederic and Catherine discuss growing their hair to the same length so that they can be “the same one.” In the story “The Last Good Country,” Nick Adams’s sister cuts her hair off so she can be like him—“I’m a boy, too”—and Nick says, “I like it very much.” But The Garden of Eden took all of this much further. Catherine cuts her hair to match that of her husband David but she then becomes a boy, Peter, and David becomes a girl, also called Catherine. David/Catherine is penetrated by his wife/husband:

He lay there and felt something and then her hand holding him and searching lower and he helped with his hands and then lay back in the dark and did not think at all and only felt the weight and strangeness inside and she said, “Now you can’t tell who is who can you?”

Zelda Fitzgerald’s mockery of Hemingway as “a pansy with hair on his chest” was crude and inaccurate but no more so than Hemingway’s own self-caricature as the straightest hombre on the planet.

Mary Dearborn’s well-balanced and deeply researched new biography convincingly traces some of this interest back to Hemingway’s childhood and the way his formidable mother Grace insisted on treating Ernest and his older sister Marcelline as if they were twins, giving them the same haircuts and insisting that they be in the same classes at school. The strong antipathy that Ernest developed for Marcelline may be the first expression of his tendency to react to complicated desires by swinging to the opposite extremes.

But Hemingway’s sexual complexity may also be connected to his experience in World War I. Of course, he hated the idea that he was traumatized. In part, he hated it because it was a cliché. There is weariness as well as humor in the deadpan way the narrator of The Sun Also Rises, Jake Barnes, says of his first meeting with Brett Ashley: “We would probably have gone on and discussed the war and agreed that it was in reality a calamity for civilization, and perhaps would have been better avoided.” It is understandable that Hemingway, whose family was cursed through the generations by mental illness and suicide, did not wish to be reduced to a case study. In the 1954 interview with Time, he asked, “How would you like it if someone said that everything you’ve done in your life was done because of some trauma? I don’t want to go down as the Legs Diamond of Letters.” (Diamond was a gangster known for surviving multiple shootings.)

When Philip Young’s study of him appeared in 1959, Hemingway objected in a letter to Harvey Breit: “P. Young: It’s all trauma. Sure plenty trauma in 1918 but symptoms absent by 1928.” But if the exaggerated masculinity was an attempt to escape Hemingway’s attraction to androgyny, the exaggerated action-man poses, the constant return to sites of death and danger, were surely symptoms of the long reach of his early wartime experiences.

Hemingway was just eighteen—in our terms barely out of his childhood—when he arrived in Italy in June 1918. On his first day there, before he had even joined his Red Cross ambulance unit, he was called to the scene of a huge explosion at a munitions factory twelve miles outside Milan. His first taste of war was collecting the shredded parts of the workers’ bodies. Hutchisson quotes from the diary of one of Hemingway’s comrades, Milford Baker:

In the barbed wire fence enclosing the grounds and 300 yards from the factory were hung pieces of meat, chunks of heads, arms, legs, backs, hair and whole torsos. We grabbed a stretcher and started to pick up the fragments. The first we saw was the body of a woman, legs gone, head gone, intestines strung out. Hemmie and I nearly passed out cold but gritted our teeth and laid the thing on the stretcher….

Dearborn, rather startlingly, gives this incident a single paragraph in her hefty biography, and confines her commentary to the breathtakingly glib: “Ernest went at the job most likely with his heart in his mouth.” It seems more likely that a kid who had never seen violent death before, let alone picked up a torso with dangling intestines, and who “nearly passed out cold” at the sight, was profoundly affected.

When Hemingway used this experience, in the story/essay “A Natural History of the Dead,” he did so within a frame of exaggerated scientific objectivity. The story begins: “It has always seemed to me that the war has been omitted as a field for the observations of the naturalist.” The passage dealing with the incident moves quickly from “I” to “we” and says nothing about almost passing out. It attempts a cold, neutral tone:

I remember that after we had searched quite thoroughly for the complete dead we collected fragments. Many of these were detached from a heavy, barbed-wire fence which had surrounded the position of the factory and from the still existent portions of which we picked many of these detached bits….

It is worth noting the (unconscious?) repetition of “detached”—the first time in the passive voice to distance us from the action of Hemingway and his colleagues actually picking body parts from the barbed wire, the second to distance those “bits” from the humanity to which they so recently belonged. There is something unconvincing in the prose, something panicked in the need for so much insulation from the reality being described. And that distancing becomes downright demented when Hemingway goes on to write, with a surreal blitheness, that “the pleasant, though dusty, ride through the beautiful Lombard countryside…was a compensation for the unpleasantness of the duty.” This takes protesting too much to a riotous pitch. When, in an early draft of the story published in Seán Hemingway’s new edition, his grandfather writes, “As for thinking about what I had seen; I have never been much impressed by horrors so called,” it is simply very hard to believe him.

Yet what is also very striking about the account in “A Natural History of the Dead” is that it strangely prefigures his interest in hair as a token of sexual inversion:

Regarding the sex of the dead it is a fact that one becomes so accustomed to the sight of all the dead being men that the sight of a dead woman is quite shocking. I first saw inversion of the usual sex of the dead after the explosion of a munition factory which had been situated in the countryside near Milan…. I must admit, frankly, the shock it was to find that these dead were women rather than men. In those days women had not yet commenced to wear their hair cut short, as they did later for several years in Europe and America, and the most disturbing thing, perhaps because it was the most unaccustomed, was the presence and, even more disturbing, the occasional absence of this long hair.

Paper dolls of Ernest Hemingway from Vanity Fair, March 1934

Here we can see Hemingway’s secret erotic interests—the inversion of gender, the fetishizing of hair—becoming entangled with extreme violence and grotesque horror. We do not have to reduce all of his life to trauma to understand how powerful the disturbance must have been for a teenager. It is hardly surprising that Hemingway’s career as a childish liar began after this psychological wound was compounded by a real one in July 1918 when he was hit by shrapnel and machine-gun fire. He began to tell tales of phoney heroics and he never really stopped. When the boasting was not enough, he threw himself into reckless adventures, going on safari, becoming (illegally) a combatant in World War II, and accumulating more and more of the brain injuries that surely hastened his descent into mania.

Oddly, the bragging sometimes obscured realities that were remarkable enough in themselves: while Dearborn, for example, dismisses Hemingway’s wartime links with the NKVD, forerunner of the KGB (“The NKVD connection never really bore fruit”), Nicholas Reynolds’s fascinating new research in Writer, Sailor, Soldier, Spy shows that he was in fact working for both the Russians and the Americans: he visited the Chinese Communist Party deputy leader for the NKVD on a reporting trip to China in 1940 even though two years later he was producing fantastical reports for the FBI on German spies in Cuba. (In one, he suggested using jai alai players to throw bombs into U-boats.)

Hemingway saw enough action not to have to make risible claims like his more-or-less single-handed taking of Paris from the Nazis, as Man’s Magazine had it in a 1959 spread entitled “Ernest Hemingway’s Private War with Adolf Hitler”: “When the Allies first marched into Paris, they found a sign reading ‘PROPERTY OF ERNEST HEMINGWAY.’” The truth that is most obscured by the puerile bravado, though, is the tenderness of Hemingway’s best fiction, its subversion of all those notions of heroic masculinity. In his sad little book, Papa: A Personal Memoir, Hemingway’s son Gregory, who was transsexual, wrote: “What I really wanted to be was a Hemingway hero. But what the hell was a Hemingway hero?… A Hemingway hero was Hemingway himself.” In this he was mistaken. The Hemingway hero, at least in his most important work, is very far from the hairy-chested ultra-male that his father pretended to be.

In one of his finest stories, “The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber,” the Hemingwayesque great white hunter Wilson is not the hero. The hero, Macomber, is a coward and a cuckold. In The Sun Also Rises, the central character Jake has no penis. And this is not, as it would have been in any novel before Hemingway, a symbol or a joke—it is a human reality evoked with gentle subtlety and infused with a simple dignity. Hemingway’s introduction of the fact is one of the great episodes of artistic tact. In the third chapter, the prostitute Georgette says, “‘It’s a shame you’re sick. We get on well. What’s the matter with you, anyway?’ ‘I got hurt in the war,’ I said.” In the next chapter, Jake is undressing and looks at himself in the mirror. Hemingway’s genius is to reveal Jake’s “hurt” to us while the narrator is also thinking about the furniture, so that what he sees in his reflection—his mutilated self—is mixed up with banal thoughts on the mirror in which he is seeing it:

Undressing, I looked at myself in the mirror of the big armoire beside the bed. That was a typically French way to furnish a room. Practical, too, I suppose. Of all the ways to be wounded. I suppose it was funny. I put on my pajamas and got into bed.

The rhythm of the prose here comes from Leopold Bloom, but Hemingway is going even further than Joyce did with Bloom in making the unmanned man a living and unashamed presence in literature. Jake recalls an Italian officer telling him that he has sacrificed more than life to the cause in losing his penis—but the book tells us that life, after all, is more than a penis.

This embrace of unmanliness extends, in A Farewell to Arms, to the ultimate betrayal of male honor, desertion from the warfront. Arguably the single greatest passage in Hemingway is about running away from war. The long description of the Italian army’s retreat from its disastrous defeat at Caporetto is a bravura set piece in itself and it is worth noting that for all Hemingway’s exaltation of true firsthand experience it was constructed from other people’s testimonies. It is also a farewell to valor and power and a manliness that expresses itself with a stiff upper lip. The carabinieri who question the retreating soldiers and summarily execute those they suspect of treason are models of coolness and courage, rendering those qualities appalling. That word “detachment” returns with all its psychotic resonance:

So far they had shot every one they had questioned. The questioners had that beautiful detachment and devotion to stern justice of men dealing in death without being in any danger of it.

And the hero of the book is literally fleeing from this beautiful detachment of the cool killer. He makes a break for it, both physically and psychologically: “I was through. I wish them all the luck…. But it was not my show any more.”

In these great books, Hemingway made his own break for it. And he nearly made it too. Aesthetically at least, manliness wasn’t his show anymore. Or at least it wasn’t until the world became enormously interested, not in his grown-up truths, but in his childish lies. He ran away from his own brave desertion. He became a male impersonator—the swagger, the drinking, the trading in of wives for younger models, the boy’s own adventures, the male harem of cronies, the exaggerated gestures of butchness became Hemingway and he became them. Having so heroically left the show, he ended up making a mock-heroic show of himself.

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The Slave Owners’ Foreign Policy

David S. Reynolds JUNE 22, 2017 ISSUE

This Vast Southern Empire: Slaveholders at the Helm of American Foreign Policy

by Matthew Karp

Harvard University Press, 360 pp., $29.95

A slave family, Savannah, Georgia, early 1860s

The US Civil War was once commonly interpreted as a conflict between a progressive North, industrially strong and committed to a powerful central government, and a backward South that clung to states’ rights and agrarianism in its effort to preserve slavery. In this reading, proposed most influentially by the late Eugene D. Genovese, the South was distanced from modern society and the world scene.

Recent historians increasingly have recognized the inadequacy of this explanation. As the producer of America’s leading export, cotton, the South in the first half of the nineteenth century was a major participant in the global economy. Its rate of urbanization relative to population, while not as rapid as the North’s, exceeded that of England, France, or the American Midwest. Politically, the South was dominant. Slave owners occupied the presidency for about three quarters of the nation’s first sixty-four years. A slave owner, John Marshall, served as the chief justice of the Supreme Court for over three decades and was succeeded by another one, Roger Taney, who headed the Court for almost as long. For much of this time, southerners had a grip on the cabinet and lower government positions as well.

The expansion of slavery was one of the South’s main goals. The immediate trigger of the Civil War was the election of Abraham Lincoln, whose aim of halting the westward spread of slavery led to the South’s secession and the outbreak of war. Matthew Karp’s illuminating book This Vast Southern Empire shows that the South was interested not only in gaining new slave territory but also in promoting slavery throughout the Western Hemisphere. Far from insular, proslavery leaders had a far-reaching awareness of the international status of human bondage, which they regarded as essential to progress and prosperity. Holding the reins of political power, slave owners largely determined American foreign policy from the 1830s through the 1850s. As Karp reveals, they were well positioned to use the resources of the federal government to push their agenda around the world.

This reliance on the national government, manifested in robust military spending and an aggressive policy abroad, was at odds with the states’ rights position that southerners took on other issues. Then as now, politicians were at ease with inconsistencies as long as their goals were served. The South opportunistically appealed both to states’ rights (as in its resistance to federal tampering with slavery) and to a strong national government (as in its support of the Fugitive Slave Act or the gag rule on the discussion of slavery in Congress). In foreign policy, Karp demonstrates, proslavery elites favored a powerful central government. The historian Henry Adams later recalled, “Whenever a question arose of extending or protecting slavery, the slave-holders became friends of centralized power, and used that dangerous weapon with a kind of frenzy.”

The program of defending slavery internationally, Karp demonstrates, was driven by a growing concern over the encroachments of abolitionism abroad. In August 1833, Great Britain announced the abolition of slavery in its Caribbean colonies. While the emancipation of the British West Indies is widely recognized as a significant event in the history of abolition, no one has described its effect on US international relations as fully or persuasively as Karp does. The liberation of some 800,000 blacks in the West Indies alarmed southern leaders. Alarm turned to outrage when British officials in Bermuda freed enslaved blacks on three American ships stranded or wrecked there in the 1830s and subsequently liberated slave rebels who had taken over the US brig Creole in 1841.

Fearing that British-led abolitionism would spread to slaveholding powers like Brazil, Cuba, and the Republic of Texas, the administrations of John Tyler and James K. Polk strengthened the US military. The Virginian Abel Parker Upshur, who served under Tyler as secretary of the navy and then as secretary of state, appealed to Congress for funds that he hoped would create a maritime force half the size of England’s navy, the largest in the world. Upshur’s successor in the State Department, John C. Calhoun of South Carolina, continued the push for a mighty navy. Other government officials, almost all of them champions of slavery, spearheaded the establishment of a standing army and the modernization of ships and weapons.

This governmental muscle-flexing was widely seen as anticipating an international war over slavery. Georgia congressman Thomas Butler King, denouncing England for freeing its slaves in the West Indies, declared that “we might expect war—war to the knife—war with all her thunder.” James Henry Hammond of South Carolina wanted to “send a strong squadron” to police the British navy. Abel Upshur considered war inevitable and said that the only question was “where and by whom shall these battles be fought”—whether by the navy at sea or by the army on land. The naval officer and engineer of southern forts William Henry Chase predicted “a great naval battle in the Gulf of Mexico or the Caribbean Sea” to combat “the policy of England and the abolitionists” who were dead set on emancipation in Cuba and the rest of “the slave islands of West Indies.”

As Karp makes clear, such prophecies of war had strong elements of racial paranoia. Robert Monroe Harrison, the Virginia-born US consul in Jamaica, feared that British forces in the Caribbean might send “upwards of 200,000 blacks” from the West Indies to invade the American South. Thomas Butler King called for stronger coastal defenses to ward off a possible effort by what he called “fleets of armed steamers, loaded with black troops from the West Indies, to annoy and plunder the country.” The aging ex-president Andrew Jackson, observing his nation from his Tennessee plantation, warned that an alliance between England and the Republic of Texas could lead to an invasion of the American South by up to 30,000 troops. Such an invasion, he thought, would spur slave insurrections that would rage “all over the southern and western country.”

The southerners, Karp notes, were just “scaring themselves”; their fears were “illusory—or consciously propagandistic.” But the fears were strong, and they contributed to the war between the United States and Mexico, which lasted from 1846 to 1848. The Mexican War is customarily associated with the South’s greed for new slave lands to the west and with the spirit of “manifest destiny” proclaimed by the Democratic editor John L. O’Sullivan in 1845. Without denying these and other influences, Karp emphasizes another dimension of the war: its alignment with a foreign policy of solidifying slavery within the hemisphere. Texas, which became a state in 1845, “was above all a slaveholding republic in the Western Hemisphere” that

required US support—and, if necessary, US protection. Threatened by abolitionist forces from both Great Britain and Mexico, the Lone Star Republic represented a key arena in the larger battle over the future of slavery.

The Mexican War provoked ongoing disputes over the settlement of the vast territories won from Mexico, which stretched all the way to the Pacific. Would the territories go for slavery or freedom?

Tensions over the issue escalated during the 1850s. This decade is traditionally viewed as a time when the South became intransigent and revived its conservative traditions as northerners were increasingly attracted to reforms, such as abolitionism. Karp argues that, in fact, the South saw itself as ultra-modern and forward-looking. Slave countries like Brazil and Cuba, proslavery leaders held, were prospering while places where slavery had been abolished, such as Mexico and the West Indies, were faring poorly. Slavery, therefore, appeared to southerners to make excellent economic sense for the modern world. American champions of human bondage noted that even England, despite its official policy of abolition, exploited indigenous peoples in India, China, South Africa, and elsewhere. The necessity of coerced labor was also proved by the widespread use of other types of dark-skinned workers—whether “coolies,” “apprentices,” or “slaves”—to cultivate agricultural staples throughout the Western Hemisphere. The Americans insisted that, in comparison to the destructive imperialism of Great Britain and other nations, slavery in the US was benign and exemplary.

The southern view, Karp reminds us, was bolstered by contemporary scientific ethnology, which identified “inferior” races destined to die off unless they had the protection and security offered by American-style slavery. The political essayist Louisa McCord, an outspoken defender of slavery, echoed the scientific consensus when she wrote in 1851, “God’s will formed the weaker race so that they dwindle and die out by contact with the stronger…. Slavery, then, or extermination, seems to be the fate of the dark races.” Southern masters were presented to the world as models of how to save black people from extinction. A writer for the southern magazine De Bow’s Review described the South’s “three hundred thousand masters” as an imperial army “standing guard over a nation of four million negroes, and absolutely preserving their lives from destruction.”

The Georgia agriculturalist Daniel Lee argued, “If civilized man has a right to subdue, tame, teach, and civilize wild men, [then] the plow, the hoe, and the whip are the best known means to accomplish such purposes.” These racial attitudes fed into the ethos behind the Confederate States of America, whose vice-president, Alexander Stephens, boasted in 1861 that the Confederacy was the first society founded on “the great truth, that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery—subordination to the superior race—is his natural and normal condition.”

Convinced that they were advancing a noble cause, many southerners serving in the US government during the 1850s continued to advocate for a military buildup in response to what they regarded as a worldwide threat from abolitionism. Although the proslavery politicians did not get everything they requested from Congress, by 1857 they had succeeded in nearly doubling the size of the naval fleet, quadrupling the number of guns on the ships, and increasing active troops in the army from 11,000 to nearly 16,000.

Karp points out ironies surrounding this use of federal power to bolster the proslavery cause. Many of the shallow-draft vessels produced as a result of proslavery pressure were put to effective use during the Civil War by the North in its naval blockade of southern ports.

There was irony too in the North’s complicity in proslavery policies. Southern leaders gloated that the North, with all its moral posturing against slavery, built many of the ships used in the international slave trade. Henry A. Wise of Virginia declared that the Americans most involved in the slave trade were “all from North of Balt[imore],” and that even abolitionists sometimes participated, as in the case of a notorious ship that landed about six hundred slaves in Brazil and “was owned by a Quaker of Delaware who would not even eat slave sugar,” or of another slave ship run by someone who was “the owner of an abolition newspaper in Bangor, Maine.” There were many other commercial ties between the North and the South as well. As the Democratic editor Duff Green wrote, slavery “unites the interests of the several states, furnishes the basis of foreign commerce…[and] constitutes an element of their common prosperity.”

One of Karp’s contributions is to reveal ways in which the South was not isolated, either nationally or internationally. He shows that it appropriated the main structures of federal power. In this sense, through much of the era leading up to the Civil War, the South, effectively, was the United States, at least in its contacts with the rest of the world. As Karp writes:

For nearly the whole antebellum period, southern confidence in slavery was more often synonymous with confidence in the United States, whose government had done so much to nurture slave institutions throughout the hemisphere.

This plausible argument illustrates how fresh insights can emerge from the recent emphasis in historical and other studies on global perspectives and views that follow developments across hemispheres. The hemispheric approach also helps Karp explain certain anomalies in the proslavery position. For instance, previous historians have wondered why such fervent slavery promoters as John Calhoun and Henry Wise at times denounced the international slave trade, which was being carried on by nations like Brazil and Cuba. Karp’s answer: some proslavery leaders wanted slavery to be established in the Western Hemisphere as a permanent, self-regenerating institution, not one that had to be fed constantly by Africa. They and other southerners were convinced that this could happen. As South Carolina senator James Chesnut declared, slavery “is not a dead body, but one full of life, vigor, and pliability; capable of self-creating power and preservation.”

One difficulty with emphasizing the South’s position within the hemisphere is that doing so minimizes the profound sectional differences, real or perceived, that led to the Civil War. Karp is right in saying that some northerners participated in or profited from slavery and that the South sought to align its goals with national policy. But it is important to note that passionate antislavery fervor gathered in the North around some of the same international activities that aroused proslavery sentiment in the South.

Take a centerpiece of Karp’s book: the emancipation of the British West Indies. This was met with hostility in the South but also intense joy in the North. William Lloyd Garrison declared that “the abolition of West India slavery was, perhaps, the most remarkable, certainly the most affecting event in the history of human emancipation.” Ralph Waldo Emerson went further, calling abolition in the West Indies “an event singular in the history of civilization.” For over three decades after 1833, American antislavery groups celebrated West Indies Emancipation Day on August 1—so often, in fact, that the reformer Samuel May could assert in 1865 that the day had been honored in the North “more uniformly and generally than in England itself.”

If there was something like unity in the national government on foreign policy, there were bitter cultural divisions between the North and the South. Extensive analysis of cultural differences is frequently missing from political or economic histories such as Karp’s that seek to analyze events in a global perspective. Although Mark Twain exaggerated when he remarked that the Civil War was caused by “the Sir Walter [Scott] disease” that infected the South, he had a point. The South’s dedication to ideals then associated with Walter Scott’s immensely popular novels—chivalry, honor, and the like—shaped its identity as much as the transatlantic concerns about race that Karp discusses. If the South championed slavery before the world, as Karp shows us, it also built a euphemistic defense of its society by fabricating cultural myths about its alleged superiority to the North, which it represented as fanatical, base, and full of anarchic tendencies.

The perceived cultural divide was so great that some leading southerners said that the war was not about slavery but about radically different peoples. A southern correspondent for the New York Herald, the nation’s most widely read newspaper, put it this way: “The people of the North and those of the South are distinct and separate. They think differently; they spring from a different stock; they are different every way; they cannot coalesce.” Mississippian J. Quitman Moore wrote in De Bow’s Review, “No civil strife is this;…but a war of alien races, distinct nationalities, and opposite, hostile and eternally antagonistic Governments.” A Tennessee-born army officer wrote that “the bed rock cause of our political wrangling and disputations” was a “dissimilarity of human nature” between northerners and southerners.

Such extreme statements of difference reflected the South’s evasion of the hard facts of slavery just as surely as did its claims to foreign nations that it had an exemplary history of slaveholding. Cultural myths and political lies were part of the South’s effort to take the moral high road. Since Karp’s goal is to describe and analyze the claims many southern statesmen made, it’s understandable that he is sparing in his account of the harsh realities of slavery—the physical suffering and shattered families that we find in the slave narratives and abolitionist literature of the period. One of the few times Karp gives voice to an African-American in his book speaks to the heartless complacency of southern slaveholding. He quotes Frederick Douglass as remarking on “the cool and thoughtful conclusions of the leading minds of the slaveholding States. They let us into the sources of Southern repose, the tranquility of tyrants.”

Douglass’s words were apt. The frigid callousness engendered by the slave system was appalling. Herein lies a real advantage in Karp’s transnational approach. By taking a global perspective, Karp successfully reenacts the removed attitude of the slaveholders themselves. He cites a number of proslavery commentators who boasted of the sleek efficiency of slavery. One spoke of it as “a well-finished piece of machinery”; another held that it made the worker a “better wealth machine”; even an antislavery British politician compared it to “a steam-engine,” far more powerful than the “race horse” of emancipated labor.

Reading This Vast Southern Empire is like riding a huge vehicle that moves inexorably over plains filled with wretched, chained human beings. Blue skies are above, and we are perched so high that we are shielded from the sights and sounds of slavery—the lacerated backs and cropped ears, the sweat and blood, the groaning and the sorrowful songs.

Shielded but, perhaps, all the more aware of the misery than we would otherwise be. One thinks of the minimalist way Thoreau treats the Middle Passage in his classic antislavery speech “A Plea for Captain John Brown”: “The slave-ship is on her way, crowded with its dying victim…. What is that that I hear cast overboard? The bodies of the dead that have found deliverance. That is the way we are ‘diffusing’ humanity, and its sentiments with it.” Thoreau’s ship is a synecdoche for slavery—the system of cruelty cloaked by benevolence that is presented in Karp’s suggestive book.

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