



Another America: The Story of Liberia and the Former Slaves Who Ruled It

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“Vivid . . . An engaging and accessible account.” —Publishers Weekly

In 1820, a small group of African Americans reversed the course of centuries and sailed to Africa, to a place they would name after liberty itself. They went under the aegis of the American Colonization Society, a white philanthropic organization with a dual agenda: to rid America of its blacks and to evangelize Africa. The settlers, eventually numbering in the thousands, broke free from the ACS and, in 1847, established the Republic of Liberia.

James Ciment, in his enthralling history *Another America*, shows that the settlers struggled to balance their high ideals with their prejudices. On the steamy shores of West Africa, they re-created the only social order they knew, that of an antebellum Dixie, with themselves as the master caste, ruling over a native population that outnumbered them twenty to one. They built plantations, held elegant dances, and worked to protect their fragile independence from the predations of foreign powers. Meanwhile, they fought, abused, and even helped to enslave the native Liberians. The persecuted became the persecutors—until a lowly native sergeant murdered their president in 1980, ending 133 years of Americo-Liberian rule and inaugurating a quarter century of civil war.

Riven by caste, committed to commerce, practicing democratic and Christian ideals haphazardly, the Americo-Liberians created a history that is, to a surprising degree, the mirror image of our own.

Another America: The Story of Liberia and the Former Slaves Who Ruled It Details

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Susie says

Interesting to read about Liberia, but why is a white man writing it?! (Book group selection.) Also not very engaging style.

Ricky Callahan Jr. says

Over all, I'd say that this book held my interest. However, to be perfectly blunt, this book is exceedingly dense. This is not a book written in a manner to weave the history of Liberia into a cohesive, linear story. Rather, Ciment's choice is to throw gobs of information at the reader at a rapid pace and then leave them to shuffle through everything. If you have the patience to really focus and pay attention to the barrage of all facts, dates, times, names, and places, then you may find that this book warrants more stars than I'm giving. In addition, the book doesn't necessarily run in a completely linear fashion. True, it's not written completely in flashbacks, however the story-line jumps from decade to decade, presidency to presidency, and time period to time period. In fact, some presidencies and other information is completely overlooked in favor of proceeding to the next part of the narrative.

In short, if you're looking for a scholarly and in depth study of Liberia in a strictly linear fashion, then this is not the book for you. However, if you're looking for something that gives you information about Liberia from multiple different angles, in multiple different ways, then you may find this book intriguing.

My knowledge of Liberia was indeed increased, however, this book really left me with more questions that, unfortunately, I will probably have to read another comprehensive study of Liberia to have answered.

Robin says

Fascinating history, but the bar for narrative non-fiction is a lot higher these days, and this would benefit from more engaging storytelling since there are so many amazing stories to tell.

Graeme Bradley says

A good overview of the history of Liberia and the key events which created and shaped the country.

Kyle says

James Ciment does a remarkable job in terms of scale here, bringing the relatively short history of Liberia to us from multiple perspectives, from wide groups and movements to "big men" to hand-picked individuals

characteristic of the situations at hand. There's a hearty balance between big man history and more cultural history (even if the big man areas threaten to take over from time to time) that is gravely absent elsewhere. Also pleasantly present is a balanced mindset in terms of judgment, showing success and failure in full light, outlining the other in each, keeping things from becoming direct finger-wagging or boot-licking. In the end, the somewhat mixed-up and crazy bundle of experiences that has been Liberia is given a fresh, easy-reading light that keeps the complexity of life alive in a fairly straightforward manner.

Jeff Jellels says

If there was any lesson to be taken from Liberian history, it was a general one about human nature: an oppressed people could readily become oppressors.

Liberia is a footnote in nearly all American history books: a nation founded by Americans for freed slaves, returned back to their African homeland to establish the continent's first black republic. I remember this experiment in inverse-colonization as being portrayed rather benignly in my own textbooks; unfortunately, the reality -- as historian James Ciment points out in this excellent history of the country -- is far less rosy. The core of this "back-to-America" resettlement movement -- originated by a bunch of rich white guys in silk breeches hanging out at the local tavern-- was motivated less by philanthropic altruism and more by a desire to rid the U.S. of its black population. And once onshore in Africa, the newly arrived African-American settlers quickly found themselves at odds with the indigenous peoples.

Déjà vu for the seamy side of the American identity as it's settlers versus natives from the get-go -- with the native tribes quickly getting the short end of the stick -- and (in what has to be the most macabre and tragic of historical ironies) -- the new Americo-Liberian society that roots in that African soil resembles nothing so much as the antebellum south, plantation farms run by a gentry of former slaves, overseeing an impoverished and politically impotent class of poor immigrants and native tribesmen.

With *Another America*, Ciment offers a compelling primer on Liberian history, covering some 150 years of the country's major historical figures, epochal events, and the political, economic and sociological factors that shaped (and ultimately unshaped) the country. Admittedly, the book is episodic history as Ciment hits the highlights in telling this story. But it's a good choice because, despite its breadth, *Another America* is amazingly accessible -- particularly to American readers who know little more than those textbook footnotes -- and while the factors that helped create and fracture Liberia may be amazingly complex, Ciment's prose is never dense or dry, but wonderfully readable and understandable to the average armchair historian.

It's also a tragic story. If you are an American (like me), you can help but feel like Liberia was the little brother we should have stood up for and helped raise a whole lot better. And while the book avoids being either preachy or moralistic (or even anti-American for that matter), you can't help but feel that if the road to hell is paved with good intentions, Liberia got a similar deal.

P.S. A nugget of world trivia for anyone aspiring to be on Jeopardy one day. As Ciment explains, Liberia's capital Monrovia is named after James Monroe, the fifth President of the United States, who was instrumental in securing funding for the first group of African-American settlers to emigrate to the country. Today Monrovia has the distinction of being the only capital in the world named for the elected leader of another country.

David Nichols says

When Liberia appears in the evening news, we generally anticipate bad tidings: Ebola, gruesome civil wars, Michael Jackson's dreadful single "Liberian Girl." For most of its nearly 200-year history, though, the West African nation was a beacon of liberty, a country where former slaves could find freedom and their descendants could govern themselves free of European domination. Such was at least the popular image of Liberia, which James Ciment clarifies and qualifies with this study of the nation's colonial elite.

The Americos, as their indigenous African subjects called them, descended from several thousand free blacks or manumitted slaves who emigrated from the United States to the Grain Coast of Africa, principally between the 1820s and 1850s. From an early date they specialized in trade rather than agriculture or industry, exporting palm oil and rubber produced by local African villagers. Liberians proclaimed their colony an independent republic in 1847, though in the manner of most small nations surrounded by predatory empires they preserved their independence less by force of arms than by skillful diplomatic maneuvering. Liberian leaders offered Britain and France a useful buffer zone between their colonies, offered Germany a dedicated trading partner (until the First World War), and offered the Americans military bases during the world wars.

As a democratic republic, Liberia was something of a bust. Suffrage was limited to the original settlers and their descendants for much of the nation's history, and a single political party, the True Whigs, controlled elective offices for more than a century. Liberia became, essentially, an Americo oligarchy headed by an elected dictator, who in the manner of many twentieth-century oligarchies used secret police, imprisonment, and forced public confessions to quash political dissent. Opposition to President William Tubman, who ruled Liberia for much of the past century (1944-71), became so minimal that his 1959 electoral opponent declared that "this venture of mine is purely sportsmanlike, and is in response to the ardent desire of Dr. Tubman for fair and friendly competition." (p. 214)

The Americos' exploitative relationship with their Gola, Grebo, and other indigenous neighbors, meanwhile, became a scandal in the 1920s and '30s, when the League of Nations investigated claims that Liberia was exporting slaves to the colony of Fernando Po. This proved an exaggeration, and the Liberian government soon ended the practice of labor contracting that observers (with some justification) construed as de facto slavery. Indigenes, however, remained outside of Liberia's national elite, even as Tubman and his successors brought more of them into the schools, army, and bureaucracy. Samuel Doe's 1980 coup against the Americo-dominated government was the perhaps-inevitable result of these two developments, but the ferocity of the civil wars that gripped the country in the 1990s and early 2000s and killed over 100,000 people remains inexplicable, at least to the author and this reviewer. These wars, however, lie beyond the scope of Ciment's book, which is primarily a narrative history of Liberia's colonial elite, heavy on biographical detail and light on analysis. Experts, or those seeking more information on the history of the non-colonial population, will find *ANOTHER AMERICA* rather shallow, but for non-experts it provides a clear and reasonably informative introduction to Liberian history.

Louise says

Author James Ciment tells the history of Liberia starting with the 1820 arrival of its first colonists on the Elizabeth. He gives interesting background on the settlers and their reasons emigrating from the US to the

new country, Liberia. He shows that like the US, itself, the country had to wrestle from the natives that had controlled it to date. The reader sees how the tensions of this past affected each successive generation up to the present time.

The history is told in a series of episodes. While each is interesting and unique some of the early ones seem incomplete and not well tied together. For instance, the leap from starving colonists to a thriving community is not described very well. There are more specifics on a meeting in Germany where the map of Africa is determined, than there is on how Liberia actually lost land to France and England. Four pages are devoted to the travels of Benjamin Anderson and the challenges to his reports. It appears that Liberia's claim to interior land was based on Anderson's exploration. The implication is that the challenge to the reports allowed France to take these lands, but how this was done is not explained.

The post WW2 narrative is the best, most likely reflecting the availability of more sources. Ciment notes that very little of the historical record survives in Liberia making the US the location of most primary sources.

This book will appeal to general readers with an interest in slavery and/or Africa. The overall story of this country struck me as being very important to the study of sociology. How is it that those who fled slavery built a prosperous life by re-instituting it? What were the factors that created oppressors from the oppressed?

While the narrative is uneven, the book succeeds for its great portraits of the key players and because in the end you come to understand the historical forces that created this country and how their affect can still be seen in Liberia today.

Henry Lovgren says

Good and surprisingly quickly read. Not the best historical book I've read but I learned a lot and enjoyed it. Ease of reading was a plus but the multitude of historical figures was at times hard to keep track of

Amber Wolfinger says

Another America is an obviously well researched book with various quotes and information available on every page, but I did expect there to be more analysis of how the conditions of Liberia's past influence today. Due to its heavy and obvious research I found it difficult to focus and read for long stretches of time.

Jerrod says

Having recently read a couple of books from the late 19th/early 20th century on Liberian history, I was interested to read something more recent about the country's history, especially the famous coup of 1980 and the civil wars and collapse of the economy that occurred over the following 25 years. As someone involved in development, it's a fascinating case study to see a country that had per-capita gross domestic product of \$450 in 1980 and subsequently fell to below \$65 by 1995. It's hard to think of another place where things have gone so badly so quickly in recent history.

Aside from their recent huge problems--coups, civil wars, regional instability, Charles Taylor, now the Ebola

crisis--Liberia really does have a pretty fascinating history. It was originally founded by free American and West Indian blacks and former slaves from the United States as a refuge for mistreated blacks and as a possible solution to the "Negro problem"--that is, the problem, from the perspective of whites in the United States, of the presence of several million people of color in "their" country. Even white abolitionists (as well as many free blacks) in the US who argued for the fundamental equality of people of different skin colors worried about the ability to assimilate culturally, economically and socially a large group of people who, due to systematic segregation and oppression, had been given no opportunity to "become American". One solution to this "problem" was thought to be the establishment of a settlement where black people could govern themselves.

Of course, as a solution this was pretty ridiculous, given that it would have required the resettlement of at least most of the about 2 million black people (as of 1820) to some foreign place, the vast majority of whom had never been anywhere outside of the Southern US. They weren't African any more than a third- or fourth-generation American of German descent is German--in fact, they were likely less so, since the experience of slavery was so dislocating. Individuals were separated forcibly from their families, moved around a foreign country, and put into a dehumanizing economic system that, in many cases, actively attempted to strip away everything that tied those individuals to each other or to any sense of themselves apart from their work and obligations to their owners.

The most idealistic promoters of the movement hoped these individuals would go to West Africa to (1) develop a black-led society in a completely foreign environment and amongst rightly hostile existing communities and (2) "civilize" these natives by bringing them the fruits of Western society. This whole idea was both unrealistic and deeply problematic, since it was based on the idea that black people who acted like white people were somehow more legitimate as organizers of society (of course, only society in Africa) than were black people who already lived there.

All that said, I do think that the author could present a slightly more nuanced view of the motives of those, principally the American Colonization Society (ACS), who advocated black American colonization of Africa and led to the founding of Liberia. Looking back on their views from nearly 200 years later, they certainly do seem both morally objectionable and terribly antiquated, but I think it's important to recognize the context that they were operating in. The debates about whether or not poor white Americans could effectively take part in the governance of the country (a la the Federalist Papers) were not so far in the past. Moreover, the subsequent history of African Americans in the US is undoubtedly one of imperfect assimilation with the (until recently) predominantly white society.

I'm not suggesting that colonization was an appropriate response to the "problem" of assimilation, nor am I suggesting that there was anything *inevitable* about the inequities in black/non-black social and economic outcomes in the US, historically and today. Those inequities were and are by and large a product of policies that explicitly attempted to maintain the barriers between the black and white Americas. However, I think it is important to recognize that the "problem" was (and remains) a real one--that is, how can a society, in which relations between two physically identifiable groups--people of dark and light skin--have historically been and (to some extent) continue to be so fraught with prejudice, conflict and ill will, move toward a place where those differences lose their divisiveness, and where individuals, families and communities succeed or fail on a basis other than that of their skin color?

Many of the proponents of African colonization, I think, believed that this was essentially impossible, and that the best way to achieve a more just society was to separate the two groups. And historically this has absolutely been one method for achieving social cohesion and equality, by minimizing within-group divisions, as occurred, for example, over the course of several hundreds of years' wars in Europe. I hope

that's not the only way such social identity can be forged, and I think that possibly America's only legitimate claim to greatness is in this--that, imperfect as we've been at bringing in the Other and making them Americans, we can credibly claim to have done so more effectively than just about any other society on earth. I do feel that African Americans in many ways have been left out of this cycle of assimilation, and a huge policy challenge going forward is to figure out how to fix that and reduce the discrepancies in outcomes for American blacks relative to just about everyone else--in education, health, crime and incarceration, income and economic status, and many other areas.

OK enough social preaching, back to the book: the author paints the ACS as essentially a paternalistic organization, whose larger aims were little more than removing the irritant of free blacks and problematic slaves from the US, and colonization as at best a salve for the white conscience and at worst a pawning-off of the problems of slavery by getting rid of the evidence--the former slaves themselves. I disagree with that characterization, for reasons stated above. I think the book I read a couple of months ago, *A Social History of the American Negro*, outlines these motivations in a more nuanced matter, although that book certainly has its own set of problems.

Getting away from the question of motives for founding Liberia, the strongest part of this book to me was the section from about 1840 to 1950, covering the series of governments that took Liberia from its founding era through to the modern (post-WWII) period. The book does a great job of highlighting the ongoing divisions within Liberian society, the position of natives in Liberia, and the structures that the Americo settlers used to sustain their dominance. I found especially fascinating the parallels between the Liberia created by the settlers and antebellum Southern society--it makes a kind of perfect, though twisted, sense that former slaves and free blacks, who were disproportionately from the Southern US and the West Indies, would develop a social order that reflected what they knew--plantation-based economy, rigid social hierarchy based on family ties, and the disenfranchisement of large proportions of the country. It certainly doesn't justify it, but it was really interesting to read about.

The final part of the book, dealing with Liberia's modern history, was frankly a little disappointing, only because it was so cursory. The last three chapters focused on Liberia's strong-man president, the last period of Liberia's first regime, the coup that overthrew that regime and the series of political events that followed. But those chapters really just scratch the surface--I feel like I could have gotten the same amount of basic information about this period in Liberian history from reading a series of Wikipedia articles. I'm sure the book is better written, but still, 40 or so pages to cover the most salient part of a country's recent history really just feels like an afterthought. For example, I think Charles Taylor, his wars against the central government, his subsequent term(s?) as president, and his arrest and trial before the International Criminal Court, are all squeezed into eight pages of the epilogue. I'll grant that the author gets to choose his own timeframe for analysis, but it does seem to me that he could have spent a little more time teasing out how the issues he brought up during the middle section of the book played out after the fall of the regime in Monrovia. I guess it just means I'll just need to read another book about Liberia.

Paul Brandel says

I'm very glad I read *Another America*, I knew next to nothing on this African country. What I found sad and ironic was that nearly all of the former slaves and free black Americans felt no affinity towards the native peoples. Yes there was the Pan-Africanist Edward Blyden, but he was like a prophet in the wilderness. The corruption and the hatred towards the natives, while it didn't shock me, too many Africans are like that, still it was disheartening to about decade

after decade.

It was good to read about President Johnson, a woman leader who did a lot of good for her country.

David Harris says

The history of Liberia is a perfect illustration of the old maxim that truth is stranger than fiction. This book tells the story well, and I highly recommend it.

From the 1820 arrival on the West African coast of freed slaves and free blacks in search of a better life than what was available to them in the United States to the 1980 assassination of the last Americo president, William Tolbert Jr, by an obscure master sergeant in the Liberian Army, who then managed to install himself as a dictator with the support of the American Reagan administration, the history of Americo-native relations largely mirrors that of black-white relations in America during a similar timeframe. (Americo is a term used to describe the non-native settler class of Liberians originating from the US and the Caribbean.)

Though Liberia saw itself as a bulwark against the slave trade in its early decades, it's interesting to note that, as late as the 1920s, the Liberian government was implicated in a scheme to enrich wealthy, well-connected Americoes while providing labor from among the native tribes under slave-like conditions to neighboring countries.

If all that wasn't enough, the 1990s brought a tragic civil war to Liberia complete with drugged, machine-gun wielding child soldiers.

Since the 2005 election of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf to the presidency, the country seems to be on an upward swing. But it has a long way yet to go given that a huge chunk of its economy was destroyed during the chaos of the 1990s and early 2000s.

Kenneth Sherman says

In the early 19th century the African Colonization Society thought that freedmen would do well back at their roots. A few blacks thought the same way-They could escape the prejudice where they were living, so back to Africa and not only settle part of west Africa but also act as missionaries and attempt to stop the natives from selling people into slavery. The Black Mayflower was called the Elizabeth and was led by Daniel Coker a mixed race man of relative privilege and Richard Allen a pioneering churchman.

The initial settlement was rough as the Americans (Later called Americos) were resisted by the natives. They set up towns and named them after places back home, Monrovia, Maryland etc. Disease, hunger, death in battle all were overcome and the settlers with their civilized ways soon had an upper hand on the natives. During the 19th century there were attempts to educate and convert the natives with some successes, but generally throughout Liberia's history there was mutual distrust and indeed exploitation. The worst of that was in the early 20th century when chiefs were either paid or coerced into handing over members of their tribes to do hard physical labor in slave-like conditions on the island of Fernando Po and other places. Liberia was the world's second black republic and had to overcome both encroachment from European powers and its own financial blunders to maintain its existence. It had basically one political party, The True Whig Party, until the president was overthrown and murdered in 1980 by the Samuel Doe led coup.

Its greatest period of prosperity was during WW2 and after when its rubber and other materials were highly sought after. The country was led by a man named Tubman who although did improve the country's economy, exploited it in many ways. For a time everyone had a picture of him in their home.

Liberia after having overthrown the better educated Americos is going through tough times. I do not know how well it will rebound. Zimbabwe has done the same and is not fairing well at all. South Africa could follow suit. Even though the colonizers were black, the result has been pretty much the same as in the countries colonized by Europeans-Chaos. Sadly, the change happened rapidly and not only are things tough but exploitation reigns. Many of these countries have the material resources to improve the life of their people. However, the will is not there. There had been a dream, there had been patriotism, and there had been the knowhow.

Excellent story.

Reza Amiri Praramadhan says

Brought to Africa as part of abolitionists' project to establish an independent state for freed slaves, the former slaves, known as Americo-Liberians, ended up enslaving the native tribes. Dominating the scene of economy, culture and politics since the establishment of Liberia, the Americo-Liberians' dominations came to an end in the hand of low-ranking soldier, Samuel Doe, who killed President Tolbert in his bedroom. The death of Tolbert signified the end of True Whig Party rule, which ruled Liberia from 1878 to 1980. Under Doe, his corruption and incompetence put Liberia under civil war, which ended with the arrest of Charles Taylor. The election of Eileen Johnson Sirleaf as the first elected woman president in Africa is also discussed. A book with a new topic for me, which make it an interesting one.
