

who have supposedly spread the myth that early Americans had lots of guns, Bellesiles pays short shrift to Edmund S. Morgan, author of *American Slavery, American Freedom* (1975). Bellesiles should think more deeply about how many guns it took to subjugate millions of human beings for two hundred and fifty years.

Eighty years ago, Van Wyck Brooks called for American historians to portray “a useable past.” His call has certainly produced masterpieces like Morgan’s book. Unfortunately, it has also produced Michael Bellesiles’s tale of Americans without weapons. While *Arming America* tells us a good deal about academic culture in the year 2000, it teaches little about colonial and early national American history and cultures.

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*Black Prisoners and Their World, Alabama, 1865–1900.* By Mary Ellen Curtin. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000. Pp. xi, 261. Maps, illustrations, notes, index. Clothbound, \$59.50; paperbound, \$19.50.)

The notorious convict-lease system buttressed the repressive racial order of the post-Civil War South. Vital to the construction of the “New South,” the lease achieved the multiple purposes of social and economic control of African Americans, tax relief for white property holders, cash revenue for local governments, and cheap labor for industrial capitalists. This was certainly the case in the state of Alabama, where state and county officials rented prisoners to major mining companies. Mary Ellen Curtin’s crisply paced and readable work, *Black Prisoners and Their World*, argues that Alabama had one of the most profitable, and brutal, prison systems in the nation during the late nineteenth century.

Curtin draws on the field of black history to expand scholars’ perceptions of those who fell captive to this system of forced labor for profit. Most studies of the subject ignore the agency of black prisoners, emphasizing instead the leasing system’s economic functions and the activities of administrators. In contrast, the author draws on correspondence from prisoners and their families to help portray black lives before, during, and after incarceration. This challenges assumptions of absolute white hegemony over black inmates, though it does not make the workings of the lease system any less nightmarish.

As the author elaborates, most Alabama inmates were part of a new generation of former slaves who had believed the promises of Reconstruction-era Republicanism. In many cases, their “crimes” had to do only with exercising their political rights and economic independence. This self-assertive spirit did not die, even after white

Democrats undercut social advances in the South. As convict laborers, African Americans influenced daily mining operations and administrative policy through strikes, arson, and other forms of resistance. They used prison reforms to gain early release, expose contractors' abuses, and maintain communication with their families. Moreover, through their experiences in the prison mines, they became strongly class conscious. Many black ex-convicts in Alabama subsequently joined the local Knights of Labor and United Mine Workers, where they helped build a tradition of labor militancy in the region, though they often faced racial discrimination within the movement.

Curtin discusses the black leadership's opposition to the lease system and the predicaments of men and women caught in the southern legal system. She engages the literature on resistance in contemporary black history, though, inexplicably, she does not draw on work of Robin D. G. Kelley, who brought James C. Scott's "hidden transcripts" thesis to the field. Curtin draws parallels between the convict-lease system of the nineteenth century and the "prison-industrial complex" of today. Both involve the linking of race and criminality and the use of inmates to generate private profit. In light of the legacies of the past, she concludes, current incarceration policies raise the question of "whether a highly disproportionate number of African Americans in prison indicates deep social inequities" (p. 216). Well-researched and -argued, Curtin's work is appropriate for both upper-level undergraduate and graduate-level courses.

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*The Great Arizona Orphan Abduction.* By Linda Gordon (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999. Pp. xii, 416. Maps, illustrations, notes, index. \$29.95).

Linda Gordon's book focuses on the placement of forty Irish-Catholic orphans with Mexican copper-mining families in Arizona. Protestant Anglos in Morcenci-Clifton seized the children and refused to return them to either the Mexican families or the New York Foundling Hospital. The episode provides Gordon with an opportunity to explore numerous variables such as whiteness, race, religion, and gender. Anglo women who saw the arrival of the "orphan train" expected the children to be available to them for adoption. When they were not allowed to adopt the children they launched a crusade to take them from the Mexicans. While under other circumstances, Catholic children being given to Catholics would have been seen as appropriate, white Protestants framed the issue not as kidnapping, but rather as saving the children from the "abuse" of Mexican homes, which by their definition were unfit environments for white children.