

episodically around familiar great men, notably Abraham Lincoln and John A. Macdonald, with less attention given to Jefferson Davis. The other usual suspects, such as William Henry Seward, enter on cue, with Louis Riel closing the curtain. Laxer's coverage of the shooting war is spotty and his explanation of emancipation dated. The end result, to be sure, is better than similar recent works. Laxer writes

in clear prose, makes no noticeable gaffes, and largely achieves balance. The definitive work on this vital subject, however, remains unwritten.

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### *Black Girlhood in the Nineteenth Century*

By Nazera Sadiq Wright

(Urbana: University of Illinois, 2016. Pp. 256. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. Cloth, \$95.00; paper \$27.95.)

The meaning and function of black girlhood in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries remains understudied, especially in its ability to speak to the ways we still represent black girls today. Utilizing primary and literary sources produced by black women and men, Wright contextualizes how the bodies of black girls were used to teach, chastise, and empower black communities. She closely analyzes newly revealed print sources to uncover how representations of black girlhood functioned, arguing that black writers used black girls as tools to forward their own social and political agendas. As Wright examines the specifics of these agendas, she reveals how the boundaries of black girlhood were constructed to enable particular roles that served social, cultural, racial, and patriarchal hierarchies of power.

One of the most fascinating aspects of Wright's text is her identification of the differences in representation produced by black women and men. Black men's depictions focused on shaping black girls to serve as vessels that could embody masculinized ideals of racial uplift. Paradoxically, black women's representations focused on the thoughts, plans, dreams, and aspirations of black girls. Black women's portrayals of black girlhood reveal girls' agency, determination, power, and challenge to both racial and sexual oppression. The significance of these gendered insights ripple across Wright's text to reveal important differences in the philosophies of black female and male leaders regarding racial empowerment, progress, and justice.

Wright divides her study by historical periods, with Chapter One covering

early nineteenth-century representations published in the *Freedman's Journal* and the *Colored American*—periodicals controlled by black men promoting the adoption of white middle-class sensibilities as a means to gain equality. Chapter Two considers the antebellum work of Harriet Jacobs, Harriet Wilson, and Maria W. Stewart, especially their depictions of how black girlhood differed from white girlhood. In particular, Wright studies the “trope of the self-reliant black girl” (p. 60) and the complex and much more realistic portrayals of black girls created by black women. Chapters Three and Four focus on the period after the Civil War when blacks were still hopeful of achieving equality. Wright considers the life and writings of Gertrude Bustill Mossell, editor of the advice column, “Our Woman’s Department,” in T. Thomas Fortune’s *New York Freeman*. She goes on to look at Frances E.W. Harper’s *Trial and Triumph* and its depiction of a dark-skinned girl who asserts her strength and independence by rejecting marriage and overcoming adversity. In Chapter Five, she discusses Silas X. Floyd’s *Floyd’s Flowers* and how this

text re-imposes the patriarchal agendas of the 1820s and 1830s to circumscribe the roles of black girls within notions of racial uplift and black male authority.

The groundbreaking nature of Wright’s book resides in its ability to provide us with a history and language for discussing, examining, and demystifying the uses of black girlhood—both historical and contemporary. *Black Girlhood* provides an historical and theoretical framework on which to further womanist/feminist explorations of the meaning, celebration, and deformation of black girlhood in America as we intervene within racially gendered discourses and practices by calling attention to the ways in which black women remain “othered” and marginalized within our culture.

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## *Thomas Hart Benton: Discoveries & Interpretations*

By Henry Adams

(Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2015. Pp. ix, 364. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$50.00.)

Perhaps no American artist of the twentieth century has aroused more

critical controversy than Thomas Hart Benton. On December 24, 1934, the