The Kidnapping Club: Wall Street, Slavery, and Resistance on the Eve of the Civil War by Jonathan Daniel Wells (review)

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The Kidnapping Club: Wall Street, Slavery, and Resistance on the Eve of the Civil War. By Jonathan Daniel Wells. (New York: Bold Type Books, 2020. Pp. viii, 354. $30.00, ISBN 978-1-56858-752-3.)

Near the end of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), Harriet Jacobs explained how she had escaped the South but not slavery. "I was, in fact, a slave in New York," Jacobs wrote, "as subject to slave laws as I had been in a Slave State. Strange incongruity in a State called free!" In a beautifully researched study, Jonathan Daniel Wells elaborates on the making of this incongruity. His account brings us to pre–Civil War New York City, detailing how white authorities actively and repeatedly subverted Black freedom.

Wells's narrative centers on the machinations of the eponymous New York Kidnapping Club. Taking advantage of the U.S. Constitution's fugitive slave clause, this loose affiliation of police officers, city officials, and judges worked in concert to abduct Black New Yorkers—free people as well as runaways—and sell them south into enslavement. Along with tracing "a 'reverse underground railroad,'" Wells shows how New York politicians and businessmen countenanced and even profited from another kidnapping effort: the transatlantic slave trade (p. 20). White elites accepted the illegal use of the port of New York as a slave-trading hub, Wells contends, because they knew Wall Street's profits depended on slave-grown cotton.

Black New Yorkers never stopped resisting kidnapping and slave trading in their city, Wells makes clear. He focuses especially on the activism of David Ruggles, a radical journalist who fought back both in print—he coined "The Kidnapping Club"—and by organizing, taking a leadership post in the New York Committee of Vigilance. Throughout, we see how Ruggles promoted militant collective action among African Americans less to preserve than to create free space in New York City.

What sets this book apart is the scale of its analysis. An ever-growing body of literature has illuminated how white northerners propped up and benefited from the institution of southern slavery. Unlike many previous studies, however, *The Kidnapping Club: Wall Street, Slavery, and Resistance on the Eve of the Civil War* unpacks the ramifications of northern complicity in extraordinarily specific detail. Wells fills his account with the microbiographies of African Americans stolen into slavery such as Stephen Downing, an accused runaway arrested by New York sheriff's officers, jailed in Bridewell Prison, and shipped to a Virginia plantation under the cover of night. By zooming in on stories like Downing's, Wells refuses to reduce northern support for slavery to an abstraction. Instead, the author foregrounds everyday acts of complicity and their damning human consequences.

Full of essential stories, the book falters only in that its various parts do not always add up. The alternating chapters examining the Kidnapping Club and the transatlantic slave trade cohere incompletely, and the book's momentum begins to flag after Ruggles departs for Massachusetts two-thirds of the way into the narrative.

Still, *The Kidnapping Club* deserves to be widely read, not least because of its timeliness. Wells's analysis provides a genealogy of racist policing, and in an effective epilogue, he underscores the connection with our present moment,

emphasizing that the struggle of Ruggles and others "against the New York Kidnapping Club is redolent of today's Black Lives Matter movement" (p. 298). Wells concludes his study by proposing that its contents offer supporting evidence in the ongoing case for reparations. And indeed, upon completing this account of arrests and abductions, one is left with a haunting sense of loss, with a recognition of what Harriet Jacobs termed "wrongs which even the grave does not bury."

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Civil Wars, Civil Beings, and Civil Rights in Alabama's Black Belt: A History of Perry County. By Bertis D. English. Foreword by Wayne Flynt. (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2020. Pp. xviii, 573. $59.95, ISBN 978-0-8173-2069-0.)

In *Civil Wars, Civil Beings, and Civil Rights in Alabama's Black Belt: A History of Perry County*, Bertis D. English has written a thought-provoking book detailing a very different reality of Black life on the ground in a much smaller and narrower political space before and after the Civil War. The focus on Perry County, Alabama, is smart and invigorating in the sense that the deliberations within interrupt mainstream narratives, while disrupting the well-established idea that whites were and are all-powerful. We learn that in Perry County, compromise is necessary to move forward. We also see that middle-ground negotiations require a middle group, and in this case interracial people provided such presence. In fact, the integration of interracialism into the discourse is one of the greatest successes of this book and of life in Perry County. Such allows English to argue successfully that certain spaces and places can function as a case study to understand how radically different realities existed in areas where the Ku Klux Klan was not as diligent. English's primary argument builds from this core fact, reflecting also his thinking regarding continuity in contemporary moments. Perry County is such a place, and English's focus on Reconstruction is necessary to understand Black life in Alabama today.

Civil Wars, Civil Beings, and Civil Rights in Alabama's Black Belt spans from secession and Civil War through Reconstruction to the contemporary moment. It contains eight chapters that are riveted with details that encourage hope and reconciliation. Chapter 1 argues that slavery was a critical issue in the conversation concerning initiation of war. Chapter 2 demonstrates how race and racialized politics often impacted Perry County negatively, even though leading Black and interracial businessmen, clergy, politicians, and educators aggressively rejected being totally dominated. Consistent with the desires of Blacks throughout the South to be autonomous by founding their own churches and religious organizations, business establishments, and schools, colleges, and universities, chapter 3 demonstrates how religion and education were utilized by Blacks in Perry County to establish their human agency. Deliberations in chapters 4–6 follow with equally impressive evidence revealing Blacks understood the moment and were prepared to compromise when necessary, since institutional and structural racism did not