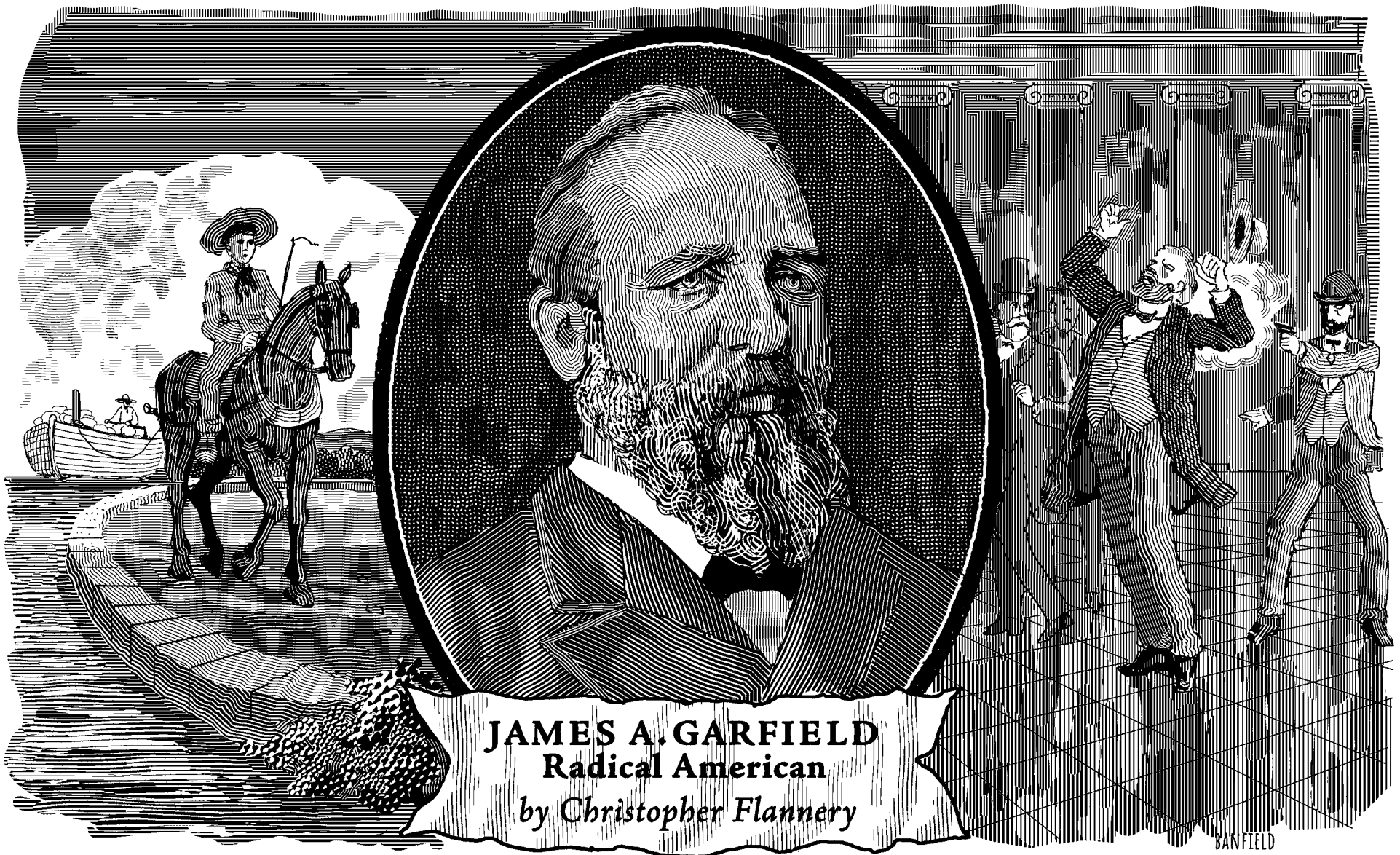


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# CLAREMONT

REVIEW OF BOOKS

*A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship*



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# CORRESPONDENCE

## Slavery and Freedom in America

Having read David Hackett Fischer's *African Founders*, I can attest to the worthiness of Diana Schaub's review as a guide to this mammoth book ("Black Power," Spring 2023). She captures both the content and promise of the distinguished historian's scholarship, previously on display in *Albion's Seed* and *Washington's Crossing*.

Schaub deftly shows how, for example, some African peoples were not slaves in their native lands but rather "prosperous farmers and artisans" and even Christian converts. Some of those purchased by the Dutch West India Company had skills useful to their owners, e.g., knowledge of Portuguese or of navigation. But Schaub also makes clear that the book does not stint on the brutality and injustice of slavery, while at the same time firmly insisting on how these earliest slaves displayed "deep reserves of hope and an unshakable conviction of black belonging."

As Schaub writes, the book's "richness of conception and detail is difficult to convey." Fischer dedicates three chapters each to his portrayal of Africans in three different American regions: the North, the South, and the frontier. Each chapter then has subheadings: for example, the first chapter on the Southern Region—on Virginia and Maryland—has English Founders, West African Strivers, and Afro-American Leaders as subtopics. And each subtopic contains numerous subsections—some only a few paragraphs long, others several pages—dedicated to a supporting example of a person or a legal or political development. The effect is to complement previous scholarship on the era with sparkling anecdotes from the perspectives of slaves and freedmen. The book's nearly thousand pages flash by but also leave an indelible

impression of the complexities of slavery and the African-American experience.

Curiously, there is no mention in the review of natural rights. Schaub's references to Montesquieu and Tocqueville threaten to exclude formal and final causes in favor of material and efficient ones. Despite Fischer's brief, unfavorable mentions in the book of John Locke, one could dwell instead on how the Lockean concept of natural rights—often displayed so admirably by these early generations of slaves and freedmen—played out even before the publication of the *Second Treatise*, and with increasing vitality until the slave trade at least was finally abolished under a Constitution that scrupulously avoided any direct countenance of slavery. Despite the best intentions of George Washington, James Madison, and other key founders, slavery itself would flourish until the Civil War and 13th Amendment put an end to it.

Although Schaub does not want to beat "the polemical gong too hard," others should certainly bang away and use Fischer's book to obliterate the 1619 Project's lies, underscoring not, as the subtitle has it, *How Enslaved People Expanded American Ideals*, but rather how enslaved people *exemplified* those ideals.

Ken Masugi  
Rockville, MD

*Diana Schaub replies:*

I am glad Ken Masugi shares my admiration for David Hackett Fischer's *African Founders* and that he, for the most part, approves of my review. His objection seems to be to my favorable mention of Montesquieu and Tocqueville, along with my failure to mention Locke and natural right. I gather that he regards these two things as somehow connected. Let me say a few words in my defense. As someone trained in political philosophy

reviewing the work of a genuine historian, I feel an obligation to acknowledge the historian's perspective, while not sacrificing my own. Accordingly, I emphasized points of contact between our two guilds, so to speak. That was made all the easier by Fischer doffing his cap to Tocqueville in his Introduction. My remarks about both Frenchmen indicated how those two historically-minded political philosophers could help elucidate (even "theorize") Fischer's project as an inquiry into the formation of national character.

Montesquieu and Tocqueville are simply closer to the spirit of Fischer's enterprise than John Locke is, especially because, as Masugi admits in his letter, Fischer speaks disparagingly of Locke. To give the specifics: In his two very brief mentions of Locke, Fischer refers to Locke's role in protecting slavery in the Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina. In reviewing a 900-page work of cultural rather than intellectual history, I didn't think it appropriate to spend precious space squaring Locke's colonial involvement with the doctrine of his *Second Treatise*. Nor did it seem quite right for me to praise Locke without acknowledging Fischer's blame of him. Furthermore, as Masugi's own chronology unintentionally reveals, it seems odd to call "Lockean" anti-slavery actions that began in the early 1600s. To the extent that resistance to slavery was fostered by moral and religious views, Fischer credits the interplay of Puritan, Quaker, and African Akan ethics. It is, of course, quite possible for individuals to be Lockean or Rousseauans or Nietzscheans without being cognizant of those makers of modernity, but it is harder to be so *avant les lettres*. Hence, no mention by me of John Locke, despite my own keen appreciation of the *Second Treatise*.

I take it that the bigger issue here is natural right. Locke is clearly a natural rights thinker.

Whether Montesquieu and Tocqueville follow suit is a more contested matter. My own view is that both Frenchmen belong to the liberal tradition, while having good, prudential reasons to be more recondite about their subscription to the notion of universal natural rights—reasons linked in part (although not entirely) to the special needs of their native land, in both its pre- and post-revolutionary periods. Suffice it to say, I don't share Masugi's allergy to those spokesmen for moderate modernity.

As for Fischer and natural right: I don't believe he uses the phrase. Nonetheless, the reference to "American ideals" in the book's subtitle assuredly includes our inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. The burden of his book is clear in the passage I quoted: Fischer documents "the role of Africans born in slavery, and the children of slaves, in enlarging fundamental American rights in New England and through the United States." For Fischer, "fundamental rights" include the natural right to liberty, as well as the political rights of citizens. Without insisting on the theoretical distinction between natural and civil rights, Fischer traces the contributions of our African founders to the primary work of abolishing slavery and the further work of securing equal citizenship. I summed up both sets of rights-based activities under what Lincoln called "the principle of 'Liberty to all.'" I'm sure Masugi knows that Lincoln went on to describe that "apple of gold" principle as one "that clears the path for all—gives hope to all—and, by consequence, enterprise, and industry to all." I take it that we are agreed that the well-being of our nation depends on a renewed dedication to that founding principle and that Fischer's study of the hopeful, enterprising, and industrious American past should inspire such renewal.



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