

History

BLACK ATHENA REVISITED.

Mary R. Lefkowitz and Guy MacLean Rogers, eds. Univ. of North Carolina Press. 544 pp. \$55 cloth, \$19.95 paper

According to the Italian historian Mario Liverani, “*Black Athena* must be the most discussed book on the ancient history of the Mediterranean world since the Bible.” But if Martin Bernal’s *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization* (Vol. I, 1987; Vol. II, 1991) has captured the imagination of the public, it has earned the author the enmity of many of his fellow scholars.

Bernal is the half-Jewish grandson of the eminent Egyptologist Sir Alan Gardner, and a Cornell University political scientist whose specialty is China. As Bernal tells it, *Black Athena* began in a search for his own ethnic and intellectual roots. That query brought him up against what he regards as the systematic anti-Semitic and racist bias of 18th- and 19th-century historiography. Hence his crusade, in *Black Athena*, “to lessen European cultural arrogance” by radically revising ancient history.

Lefkowitz, the co-editor of *Black Athena Revisited* and a professor of humanities at Wellesley College, has written another critique of Bernal’s work called *Not Out of Africa*. But the present volume contains the assembled commentaries of leading classicists, Egyptologists, historians, archeologists, and physical anthropologists. At stake are two vital questions: First, is there any truth to Bernal’s bold claim that the real cradle of Western civilization was not classical Greece but Africa? And second, what is the standard of truth by which such scholarly (some would say pseudoscholarly) claims can be measured?

Fired by a sense of injustice, Bernal pronounces on the modern—and historically irrelevant—concept of biological race. With a certain cynicism, he agreed to title his book *Black Athena* rather than *African Athena*, knowing that it would stir up controversy. He makes the misleading assertion that “many of the most powerful Egyptian dynasties . . . were made up of pharaohs whom one can usefully call black.” This combustible topic gets cool-headed treatment from C. Loring Brace and a team of biological anthropologists at the University

of Michigan. Having compared Egyptian human remains statistically for a variety of traits, they find that Egyptians have changed very little since Predynastic times. No wonder a baffled Egyptian official, confronted recently by the peculiar racial politics surrounding the American discussion of ancient Egypt, felt obliged to protest that “Ramses II was neither black nor white but Egyptian.”

Bernal also claims that Egyptians twice colonized Greece, citing not archeological evidence (none has ever been found) but “massive” linguistic borrowings. Cornell professors Jay H. Jasanoff and Alan Nussbaum (a linguist and a classicist, respectively) demonstrate that most of Bernal’s proposed etymologies are based on no more than surface similarities. At one point, faced with Bernal’s notion that the Greek *labírinthos* comes from the Egyptian *Ny-mə^ɛ t-R^ɛ ntr*, the authors throw up their hands: “We confess to finding this derivation wildly far-fetched even by Bernal’s standards.”

Bernal has injected new life into a field too frequently dry and arcane. But his scholarship, imposing though it might appear to the nonexpert, is highly dubious. As a professor at a great university and the grandson of a great scholar, he should know better. *Black Athena Revisited* will make it possible for others to know better as well.

—Elizabeth Sherman

A TWILIGHT STRUGGLE: American Power and Nicaragua, 1977–1990.

By Robert Kagan. Free Press. 903 pp.
\$37.50

Robert Kagan served as assistant secretary of state for Latin American affairs during the Reagan administration, and he regards U.S. support for the contras as essential to the eventual triumph of democracy in Nicaragua in 1990. But this book is more than an apologia for that policy. An insider’s unvarnished account, it recalls the adage that if one likes sausage, one should not inquire too closely about how it is made. Kagan argues persuasively that the decision-making process was “chaotic, lurching, changeable, and often

inherently contradictory."

Initially, Kagan writes, Reagan's policy-makers were no more eager to "get tough" with the Sandinistas than Jimmy Carter had been. They decided with some reluctance to support the contras only after several diplomatic overtures had failed. At first, their goal was limited to pressuring the regime not to aid the rebels in El Salvador. But as the contras grew in number and strength, an incipient split within the administration widened between the "conservatives," who saw the contras as a force for expelling the Sandinistas, and the "pragmatists," who insisted that the contras were a political liability. During this battle, which lasted until well into Reagan's second term, the Sandinistas learned to their frustration that the policy's only durable element was agreement between the White House and a shifting congressional majority that the contra option should be retained as insurance that the Sandinistas would keep promises made at the negotiating table.

Kagan regards this policy of limited aid to the contras as a necessary but not sufficient condition for the Sandinistas' eventual demise. Military pressure alone would not have sufficed either to topple them or to force them into elections. But combined with other factors—the Sandinistas' mismanagement of the Nicaraguan economy, growing diplomatic isolation, and doubts about sustained Soviet support—contra aid sharply narrowed the regime's options. By 1989, the Sandinistas came to see free elections as the only way they could keep power, but by then it was too late. Throughout the 1980s they had passed up too many opportunities to make peace on terms that would have saved their revolution. In the end, Kagan notes, they were "their own executioners."

Regrettably, several hundred pages of unnecessary detail make *A Twilight Struggle* one of those books that would have been twice as good at half the length. And it is curious to see this former Reagan administration official use certain phrases without

apparent irony—such as "North American aggression" and (for U.S. encouragement of democratic elections) "hegemony." Nevertheless, this is an impressive achievement that will surely become the standard work on a troubled chapter in U.S. foreign policy.

—Timothy Goodman

MOTHERS OF INVENTION:
*Women of the Slaveholding South in
the American Civil War.*

By Drew Gilpin Faust. Univ. of North Carolina Press. 344 pp. \$29.95

"The surface of society, like a great ocean, is upheaved, and all relations of life are disturbed and out of joint." So announced the

Montgomery Daily Advertiser in July 1864.

For Faust, a historian at the University of Pennsylvania, the key word in this passage would be "all." Obviously, the Civil War disturbed the relations between blacks and whites. But it also disturbed those between men and women. Faust admits that "historians' use of the analytic categories of race, class, and gender has moved from being regarded, first, as innovative, then as fashionable, to, recently, verging on the banal." But she does not

apologize for using these categories herself, and for good reason. As her book makes clear, "these were the categories by which women of the South's slaveholding classes consciously identified themselves."

Drawing on the letters, diaries, memoirs, poetry, and fiction of 500 women belonging to "the privileged and educated slaveowning class," *Mothers of Invention* tracks the myriad ways these women were forced by war to redefine their social role—even as they struggled to preserve it. When their menfolk departed for the front, delicate ladies were thrust into positions as heads of households accustomed to male authority backed up by physical force. For example, many women were terrified to punish their increasingly

