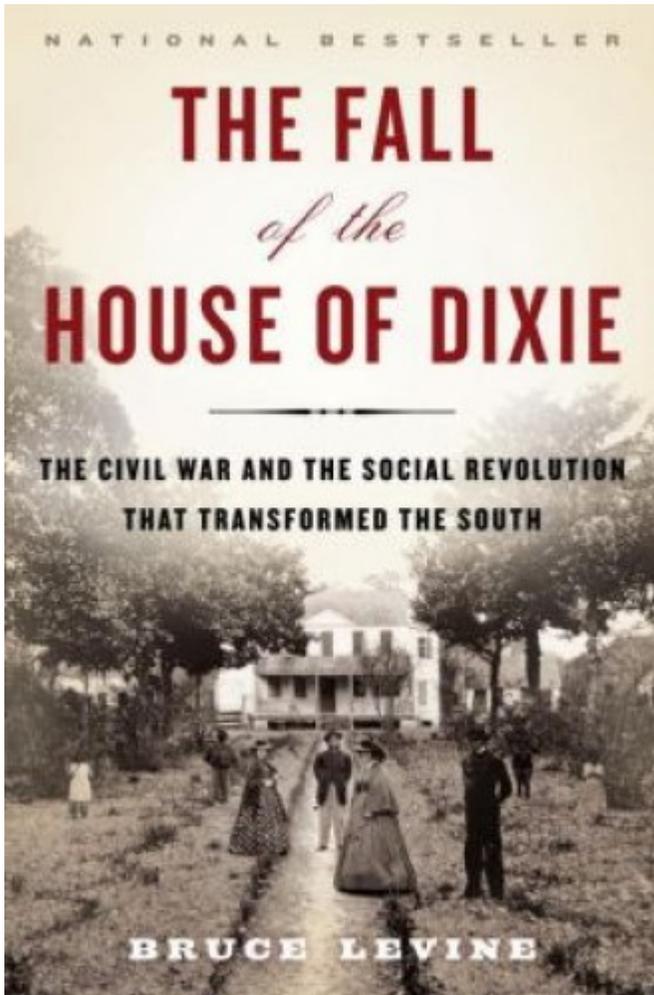


The Fall of the House of Dixie, by Bruce Levine

reviewed by [Paul Harvey](#) in the [May 1, 2013](#) issue

In Review



The Fall of the House of Dixie

by Bruce Levine

Random House

Bruce Levine begins this compelling book with a prologue recounting Edgar Allan Poe's famous story "The Fall of the House of Usher," setting up an elaborate metaphor for the demise of antebellum southern society through the unintentional

revolution wrought by the Civil War.

With chapter titles such as “Securing the Mansion,” “Cracks in the Walls Widen,” “A Ray of Light Shines Briefly through the Rafters” and “And the Walls Gave Way,” Levine uses the “Usher” analogy to suggest that white southern slave owners “resided in an imposing and outwardly sturdy structure” that even before the war “was already beginning to display deep fissures running through it”—fissures that “would widen” during the war “until the whole structure fell.”

The Fall of the House of Dixie fuses various strands of Civil War historiography. For the past generation, scholars have debated the question of who freed the slaves, and the traditional answer—Abraham Lincoln, the Emancipation Proclamation and the Union Army—has been challenged by those who argue for a self-emancipation thesis, suggesting that the slaves’ own actions during the war produced the conditions under which reluctant Union policy makers had no choice but to press for freedom. Levine deftly weaves together these explanations, showing how they are all connected.

Slaves “refugeed” themselves whenever they had the opportunity, which was usually when the Union Army was in the vicinity. Even when they could not escape, they found ways to work as spies for Union commanders or to malingering and otherwise disrupt southern cotton production on the home front. The actions of African Americans, slave and free, during the war undermined the foundation of the House of Dixie, because, of course, African Americans were that foundation. Moreover, what Frederick Douglass called the “inexorable logic of events” forced Union policy makers, particularly Lincoln, to go far beyond what they had originally intended to pursue a “violent and remorseless revolutionary struggle” against the slaveholders’ republic.

Another strength of the book is Levine’s excellent discussion of internal fissures within the House of Dixie that went mostly unnoticed until wartime pressures and stresses exposed them so vividly. The Civil War unleashed class conflict within the South, particularly between wealthier and poorer whites and between slave owners and nonowners of slaves, that at times exploded in the face of Confederate policy makers. The most famous instance was the Richmond Bread Riot of April 1863, when Jefferson Davis forcibly suppressed women who were breaking into food stores to acquire increasingly unaffordable basic necessities.

As the war progressed, the Confederate government found it increasingly necessary to resort to measures that seemed to many white southerners tyrannical and that certainly defied the political philosophy of local control and weak central authority that white southern political philosophers espoused. For example, under the policy of impressment, Confederate officials impressed goods from individuals, “paying” them sometimes less than what the market would bear—and in Confederate scrip that had little value. Even worse was the “20-negro law,” according to which men on plantations with over 20 slaves were exempt from conscription into the army. The length of the war and the frailty of the undermanned Confederate armies meant that ordinary Confederate soldiers and, even more, ordinary whites on the home front increasingly came to see the conflict as a rich man’s war, but a poor man’s fight.

Religion during the war receives less attention in the text than I would have preferred; for a fuller recent exposition, I recommend George Rable’s *God’s Almost Chosen Peoples: A Religious History of the American Civil War*. That being said, one character Levine follows throughout is Charles Colcock Jones, a Presbyterian minister famously called “apostle to the slaves” for his advocacy of conscious efforts to bring slaves to Christianity. Like many slaveowners, Jones held the public position early in the war that slaves would remain loyal, even as he and his neighbors desired “such a military force as will be sufficient to keep our colored population under supervision and control.” Jones’s efforts to practice the paternalist ethos consistently ran up against the coercion and violence underpinning the slave regime. One catechism used among slaves, for example, asked, “What did God make you for?” The approved response: “To make a crop.”

Little wonder that African-American Christians saw through the veneer of planter paternalism to the message of freedom articulated by their own religious leaders, often in secret. And little wonder, too, that when slavery’s demise came, the cracks in the walls of the House of Dixie revealed the deep fissures that had been there all along. Even as Jefferson Davis, attending Sabbath services at Saint Paul’s Episcopal Church in Richmond, got word that Richmond must be evacuated and began making preparations, slave dealer Robert Lumpkin desperately and unsuccessfully sought access to one of the last trains out of the city for himself and 50 shackled black people he had for sale.

And when the end of the war came, little wonder that after Jones died, his wife, Mary, was glad to be rid of Negro servants. “I shall cease my anxieties for the race,” she wrote to her children at the close of the war. “My life long I have been laboring

and caring for them, . . . and this is their return. . . . I am thoroughly disgusted with the whole race. . . . My heart sickens at a prospect of dwelling with them.”

Mary might have been cheered by the reimposition of a white supremacist order in years after the war and by the fact that even Lincoln displayed “little interest in fundamentally changing the pattern of land ownership.” And yet to reduce the story to “the more things change, the more they stay the same” is too simple. As W. E. B. DuBois wrote, the move back toward slavery in the late 19th century was not a move into slavery, and the fact that slavery was no longer a possibility was a sign of the revolutionary story contained in the fall of the House of Dixie.