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Review of *The Seminole Freedmen: A History.* By Kevin Mulroy

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The Seminole Freedmen: A History. By Kevin Mulroy. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007. xxxii + 446 pp. Maps, photographs, charts, notes, bibliography, index. $36.95.

One is dumbstruck, upon completing Kevin Mulroy's *The Seminole Freedmen: A History* that it took more than thirty years after the publication of Daniel Littlefield's *Africans and Seminoles: From Removal to Emancipation* to bring new light to this fascinating saga of race in the Great Plains region. Mulroy's book is sure to become the definitive account of the Seminole Freedmen experience, and his interpretation challenges long- held myths concerning black-Indian relations in the American West.

Mulroy portrays a society in which Seminole Freedmen enjoyed far greater privileges than blacks in other regions of the United States. They were able to retain the fruits of their labor, practice their religion without interference, participate in politics, educate their children, and live their lives without fear of violence and overt racial discrimination. Yet Mulroy notes that a large number of the freedoms that Seminole Freedmen enjoyed resulted from their physical isolation from Seminole Indian society. Most Seminole Freedmen lived among their own people and interacted with Seminoles and other Indians infrequently. Mulroy notes that while Seminole Indians were content to allow the freedmen civil rights denied them elsewhere in the United States, they refused to admit them into their bands and clans. Despite the seeming racial toleration in the Seminole Nation, it was no racial utopia.

Mulroy refuses to label the Seminole Freedmen black Indians; instead, he consistently refers to them as maroons. He argues that they fit this categorization because they lived apart from both white and Indian societies, maintained their own leaders and social organizations, and were willing to take up arms to preserve their independence. In these ways, Mulroy maintains, the Seminole Freedmen had more in common with Jamaican maroons, the "Bush Negroes" of Suriname, and the Border maroons of Haiti than they did with the Freedmen of the other Five Civilized Tribes whose lives were intimately linked to their Indian masters and, later, the massive number of whites who intruded into Indian lands after the Civil War.

The most controversial argument Mulroy presents is that racial intermixing between

Seminoles and their freedmen was rare. Mulroy's detailed research of Seminole documents and court records reveals that both groups preferred to marry among themselves, and thus biologically there were few black Indians living in the Seminole Nation. Virtually all historians until Mulroy (myself included!) had fallen prey to the myth that racial intermixing was common between blacks and Seminoles and that this was what accounted for the relatively benign race relations between the groups in the West. Mulroy argues that the myth was propagated mostly by white academics, humanitarians, and politicians who felt they needed to explain why Seminole Freedmen enjoyed rights denied blacks elsewhere.

Kevin Mulroy's study of the Seminole Freedmen gives the modern-day conflict between the Seminole tribe and its freedmen a historical context. Proponents of disfranchisement of the Seminole Freedmen will no doubt take heart in the lack of black-Indian racial intermixing Mulroy's study demonstrates. On the other hand, proponents of freedmen adoption will note the long-standing relationship and cultural interchange between Seminoles and their freedmen. Nonetheless, we should all be thrilled with the arrival of this long-awaited study of the Seminole Freedmen. Kevin Mulroy has written a marvelously challenging, engaging, and entertaining account of this important saga in the history of the American West. This is history the way it should be written.

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