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Trenton Hizer
Library of Virginia

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Hizer, Trenton, "Shifting Proslavery Ideology: Review of *Balancing Evils Judiciously: The Proslavery Writings of Zephaniah Kingsley*, ed. Daniel W. Stowell." (2000). *Documentary Editing: Journal of the Association for Documentary Editing (1979-2011)*. 496.
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Shifting Proslavery Ideology

TRENTON HIZER

Balancing Evils Judiciously: The Proslavery Writings of Zephaniah Kingsley, ed. Daniel W. Stowell. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000. xviii & 127 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 0-8130-1733-5

Balancing *Evils Judiciously* is a volume in which quality more than makes up for a lack of quantity. In this slender work, Daniel W. Stowell, director and editor of the Lincoln Legal Papers, presents the unique proslavery writings of Zephaniah Kingsley, Jr., of Florida: eight letters, articles and documents by Kingsley, and one published letter by L. Maria Childs, the noted New York abolitionist with whom he was acquainted. Kingsley's few works on slavery would easily be lost in the volumes of antebellum proslavery writings, if not for the singular position he took on the peculiar institution. His personal experiences, drawn from living and working in the Caribbean and Spanish Florida, led Kingsley to conclusions about race and slavery that differed from the theories of the day. Kingsley rejected the prevalent notion that blacks were inherently inferior and suited only for slavery and contended that they possessed the same intelligence as whites. Anticipating George Fitzhugh and Henry Hughes, Kingsley argued that slavery was a class, and not a racial, construct.¹ Unlike them, he did not believe slavery was a perpetual condition for laboring classes, but, as Eugene Genovese writes in his introduction, viewed the institution as an evolutionary step for a people (p. xiii).

Zephaniah Kingsley, Jr., was born in Bristol, England, in 1765, and emigrated with his parents to Charleston, South Carolina, in 1770. At the end of the American Revolution, Kingsley's parents, both loyalists, departed Charleston for Canada and sent Kingsley to England for his education. Becoming a merchant, he returned to Charleston in 1793 and declared himself a citizen of the United States. During the 1790s, Kingsley traveled throughout Haiti and the Caribbean region, and observed race relations and slavery in that area. He also became involved in the slave trade, and in 1798, he became a

Danish citizen. In 1803, he changed his citizenship yet again, settling in Spanish Florida, where he became a planter. He eventually owned about one hundred slaves on four plantations on which he grew cotton, provisions, and oranges. In 1806, he purchased a group of slaves in Cuba and found among them one, Anna Madgigine Jai, who became his wife. She bore him four children, and Kingsley had at least five other children by three other women who were either his slaves or ex-slaves. Kingsley manumitted Anna and their children in 1811 (pp. 23–25); his other children were either born free or emancipated with their mothers (p. 4).

With the Adams-Onís Treaty of 1819, Florida became an American possession and the society in which Kingsley and his interracial family lived changed. Slavery existed in the Caribbean islands and in Spanish Florida, but the lines between slave and free were fluid. Racial distinctions were blurred, and a healthy caste of free blacks served as a buffer between slave and owner, providing stability. With the establishment of U.S. authority, however, racial lines hardened. Territorial laws were passed that restricted the rights of free blacks, virtually collapsing the distinctions between them and the slave population. Kingsley and other long-time Spanish Florida residents considered this a mistake. Rather than having a free colored population that shared the interests of the planter class, Kingsley argued that these laws forced this caste to align itself with the slave population. Kingsley's first foray into the debate on Florida's racial policy came in 1826 with the "Address to the Legislative Council," just before the territorial government passed a law prohibiting the immigration of free blacks. Over the next fifteen years, Kingsley wrote first to reverse what he considered a flawed policy toward the free black population, then, when he realized that effort had failed, to encourage colonization.

At the time Kingsley began writing, proslavery ideology was shifting. The Revolutionary generation had based its rebellion against Great Britain on the doctrine of natural rights. According to natural rights theory, all men, as Thomas Jefferson wrote, were created equal; this proposition included slaves. Therefore the institution of slavery was a mark against the ideals of the Revolution which troubled men like Jefferson. Samuel Johnson asked, "How is it that

Trenton Hizer received his Ph.D. in history from the University of South Carolina. He is currently a private papers archivist at the Library of Virginia in Richmond.

we hear the loudest *yelps* for liberty among the drivers of negroes?"² To blunt charges of hypocrisy, Americans countered that slavery was a necessary evil. The institution had been foisted upon reluctant colonies against their will, but, for the time being, had to be tolerated for the safety of society. Eventually slavery would die out in the new nation. In the meantime, slaves would benefit from the benevolent paternalism of their masters and be civilized and christianized. When slavery could be eliminated with little economic or social damage, blacks would be returned to Africa to spread civilization throughout that continent. Once they were raised up in the distant future, Africans would be welcomed as equals into society.

However, by the 1820s, natural rights began disappearing from discussions of slavery, replaced by theories of social control and hierarchy. Fortunes were being made in the cotton boom that spread slavery throughout the South. Slavery became an economic and moral blessing, no longer a "necessary evil," but now a "positive good." Proslavery theorists contended that African-Americans were an inherently inferior class of people and perfect for servitude. They still needed the guidance and protection that a benevolent master class provided, but that distant future when blacks would eventually become equal to whites disappeared. Slavery was justified on religious and political grounds. "Christ himself gave a sanction to slavery!" cried South Carolina's William Smith on the floor of the U.S. Senate.³ Moreover, other slavery

advocates contended that black slavery guaranteed white equality. Concomitant with this argument was that free people of color constituted a danger to society. They were lazy and shiftless, unwilling to work. Free blacks also incited slaves to malingering, run away, or rebel. They were an undesirable class of people unable to handle the responsibility of freedom. To proslavery ideologists, free blacks should either be removed from the country or enslaved.

As a proslavery theorist, Kingsley tended toward the "necessary evil" position. A number of factors worked into his acceptance of black slaves as a labor source. First, he believed that blacks were well suited for working in the hot climes of the American South and the Caribbean; whites were not. Second, blacks did need the guidance of the planter class to help them become civilized. Like many of the Revolutionary generation, Kingsley accepted the institution as necessary in his time for social control. And like them, he believed that black slavery eventually had to end. Unlike them, he did not believe that deportation of African-Americans back to Africa was right. Nor did Kingsley agree with the "positive good" theorists. He did not consider blacks as inherently inferior. African-Americans possessed the same intelligence and natural rights as whites, and were enslaved merely because of circumstances. Kingsley was proud of his African wife and their interracial children; capable and competent, they proved that he was right about people of color. Kingsley also disagreed with the proslavery theorists who argued



Main house, Kingsley Plantation, Fort George Island, Florida. Kingsley owned the island plantation from 1814 to 1839, and this house was his primary residence during most of his life in Florida. Courtesy of Jane F. Upton, photographer. By permission of the National Park Service, Timucuan Ecological and Historic Preserve, Jacksonville, Florida.

that free blacks were a danger and detriment to society and should be deported. Kingsley contended that they should serve as a buffer between owners and slaves, providing stability to the community. He encouraged the creation of a black caste whose economic and social interests were tied to the dominant white planter class. The dangers of free blacks to the social fabric were created, he argued, by laws which restricted their actions.

By the 1830s, Kingsley's efforts to encourage the creation of this free black caste had failed, and he began to consider other solutions to race relations. His advocacy of a fluid multiracial society in which the line between free and slave was not hard and fast contradicted the reality of race relations developing in the United States. Therefore, he realized the necessity to find some place where blacks could relocate and live peacefully. Although he did not prefer colonization, Kingsley began encouraging it in his writings. While many proslavery theorists argued for the deportation of free blacks because they were a danger to society, Kingsley began searching for colonization opportunities to help them. His search led him to the island of Haiti, where he hoped that free blacks and former slaves from the United States would be able to settle. Kingsley sent his son George (by his wife Anna) to Haiti in the 1830s to see whether colonization there was viable. Kingsley's half-acceptance of colonization as a solution to the dilemma of slavery and race relations reveals to what extent he was attempting to "balance evils judiciously." Despite his efforts to find it, Kingsley seemed aware that eventually there would be no middle ground on slavery and race relations and that they would never be separated in the United States.

Stowell offers a well-edited volume to the historian. Only two of the original documents, "Address to the Legislative Council of Florida" and "Memorial to Congress," are in Kingsley's own handwriting, and Stowell wisely retains the punctuation, spelling, and capitalization untouched since, as he notes, they "offer the only direct evidence of Kingsley's writing style without editorial changes" (p. xvii). Kingsley's "Letters on Haiti" and Lydia Maria Child's "Letter from New York" appeared both in newspapers and in pamphlet form. Except for Letter IV on Haiti, which apparently only appeared in newspaper form, Stowell presents the pamphlet editions of these works. However, he footnotes where textual differences occur (except for printer error or punctuation) between the two, and gives the newspaper text in the note. The most significant of Kingsley's works, "A Treatise on the Patriarchal, or Co-operative System of Society," was published in four different editions between 1828 and

1834. Stowell, faced with the difficult task of presenting four different versions, arrived at the best possible solution for presenting the changes from version to version. Using one edition of the text, he brackets the changes and uses superscripted dates to note in which edition they appear. At first, this might seem disconcerting, but the reader quickly adjusts and appreciates having the alterations side by side. Throughout the work, Stowell skillfully uses his footnotes to identify and clarify references made in Kingsley's texts, using them to put Kingsley's writings in the context of his times. Stowell also uses his notes as a bibliography to direct readers to works that provide more information and analysis on topics Kingsley mentions.

Balancing Evils Judiciously is a worthwhile volume that provides insight into proslavery theory and into racial relations in the American South and the Caribbean. Kingsley is revealed as a man torn between defending the labor institution of the South and contending that people of color were not inherently inferior to whites and therefore not destined to remain in bondage. Proud of his wife and family, he considered them perfect examples of what people of color were able to achieve. Kingsley rejected race as the basis of slavery and argued for the creation of a caste between owner and slave to stabilize society. While Kingsley anticipated George Fitzhugh and Henry Hughes in arguing that slavery was a labor system, he did not concur that it was the best. Like Thomas R. Dew, he believed that free labor was cheaper than slave labor. Yet Kingsley was unable to convince his fellow citizens of the South to accept his racial views, and unable to convince abolitionists that slavery in some form was necessary. *Balancing Evils Judiciously* demonstrates that proslavery ideology was not monolithic and is a recommended work for any historian of the South and slavery.

Notes

1. For proslavery thought in general, see Eugene Genovese, *The World the Slaveholders Made: Two Essays in Interpretation* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1969), and Larry E. Tise, *Proslavery: A History of the Defense of Slavery in America, 1701-1840* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987). For George Fitzhugh, see George Fitzhugh, *Sociology for the South; or, The Failure of Free Society* (Richmond: A. Morris, 1854), and *Cannibals All! or, Slaves Without Masters* (Richmond: A. Morris, 1857). For Henry Hughes, see, Stanford M. Lyman, ed., *Selected Writings of Henry Hughes, Antebellum Southerner, Slavocrat, Sociologist* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1985).

2. Samuel Johnson quoted in Peter Kolchin, *American Slavery, 1617-1877* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), 76-77.

3. William Smith, Speech on the Admission of Maine and Missouri, January 26, 1820, *Annals of Congress*, 16th Congress, 1st session, part 1, 259-69.