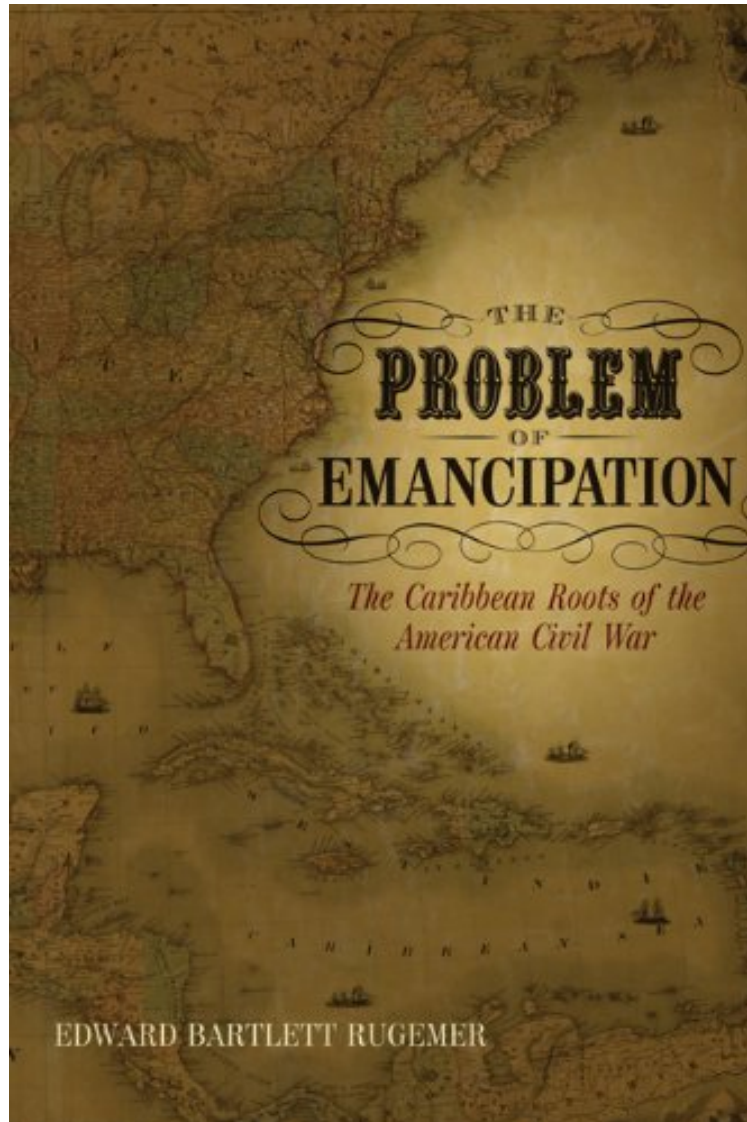


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## The Problem of Emancipation: The Caribbean Roots of the American Civil War (Antislavery, Abolition, and the Atlantic World)

*Edward Bartlett Rugemer*

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**Edward Bartlett Rugemer : The Problem of Emancipation: The Caribbean Roots of the American Civil War (Antislavery, Abolition, and the Atlantic World)** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Problem of Emancipation: The Caribbean Roots of the American Civil War

(Antislavery, Abolition, and the Atlantic World):

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Compare with Rothman's *Beyond Freedom's Reach* by RDD Both Edward Bartlett Rugemer, in *The Problem of Emancipation*, and Adam Rothman, in *Beyond Freedom's Reach*, reframe the history of the American Civil War as a conflict that was part of the larger debate over emancipation in the Caribbean world. Rugemer argues that British abolition changed the social landscape of the British West Indies while giving power to American abolitionists' work in a way that threatened southern slaveholders. Rothman's narrative, set during the twilight of slavery in Union-occupied Louisiana, shows how slaveholders looked to Cuba in a desperate attempt to maintain their human property. Both engage with the historiography of the Atlantic world, with Rugemer linking the American experience of slavery to that of the broader Atlantic in which ideas were not circumscribed by national borders. Rothman, on the other hand, portrays Louisiana as a city connected to the world through the Caribbean and follows the lead of Rebecca Scott's *Freedom Papers* or Carlo Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worm* in using microhistory to explore larger themes. To both Rothman and Rugemer, the American Civil War extended beyond the borders of the United States. Rugemer argues that a full understanding of the American Civil War demands an understanding of British abolition and its effect on the American South. Rugemer lays out his approach in his introduction, writing, "An Atlantic approach to the antebellum United States demands the recognition of two contemporary realities. First, the boundaries of the United States were permeable... Second, American society had much in common with the societies of the Atlantic world, especially their divisive struggles over slavery and its abolition." These permeable boundaries allowed West Indian newspapers to circulate in the United States and spread fears of slave uprisings throughout the South. Additionally, Southerners closely monitored the influence of abolitionists and maintained contact with their slaveholding counterparts in the West Indies. Rugemer uses this framework in *The Problem of Emancipation* to write an Atlantic history while engaging the scholarship of the Civil War and abolition in the Atlantic world. Rugemer identifies Bryan Edwards's 1797 book, *An Historical Survey of the French Colony in the Island of St. Domingo*, as crucial to slaveholders' perception of the threat to slavery throughout the Atlantic world. This volume "argued that the Amis des Noirs, the French abolitionist society, was entirely responsible for the insurrection in Saint-Domingue." Edwards's book, translated and distributed throughout the English-speaking world, became the model by which slaveholders understood abolition's impact on their societies. Planters linked abolitionists' actions to the Barbados rebellion of 1816 and the Demerara Rebellion of 1823 and, coupled with the Haitian Revolution, these stories served as dire warnings to Southern planters in the United States of the threat of British abolition to the institution of chattel slavery. Expanding on this framework, Rugemer writes, "Southern leaders feared that even the slightest agitation of antislavery belief would cause slave insurrections, and beginning in South Carolina, they acted to forestall abolitionism that caused such mayhem in the British West Indies." The later Jamaican insurrection, with the press coverage surrounding the arrest of missionaries supposedly involved in fomenting the rebellion, presented a greater threat and Southerners could present it as proof positive of their fears. The press coverage of the Jamaican insurrection, especially that focused on the missionaries, gave additional attention to the abolitionists' cause, further stoking Southern fears. Finally, British abolitionists' actions led to a concerted effort to avoid discussing slavery in Congress due to Southern politicians' fears that such discussions would legitimize abolition and pose a threat to their way of life. According to Rugemer, Southerners looked to the Spanish empire as an example of how to prevent the threat of the uprising in Jamaica. Robert Monroe Harrison, the U.S. consul to Jamaica, "cited the case of Cuba, who had recently appointed a consul in Jamaica to keep an eye on British activity." Rugemer writes, "The Spanish consul shared Harrison's conviction that the British sent emissaries to both the United States and Cuba to 'unhinge the minds of the slaves' and cause insurrections." This demonstrates how Edwards's argument about the cause of the Haitian Revolution had spread to both the United States and the Spanish authorities in Cuba, linking the two in an Atlantic and Caribbean system determined to preserve slavery. Rugemer's discussion of First of August celebrations adds an Atlantic context to slave celebrations and further demonstrates the permeability of America's borders and the ability of West Indian abolition to influence popular political life. After the British Parliament's abolition of slavery on 1 August 1834, African Americans organized celebrations to commemorate the date and link the cause of abolition to the types of celebrations typically held on the Fourth of July. Rugemer argues, "...The fortuitous proximity of the Fourth of July and the First of August... allowed black and white abolitionists, often together, to project their movement into the public square." These celebrations spread throughout the North and Rugemer argues that William Lloyd Garrison's suggestion that the gatherings of black Americans "were absurd and monstrous" led to the split between he and Frederick Douglass, whose 1848 Fourth of July speech in Rochester, New York was simply a First of August speech presented a month early. That this speech occurred in Western New York further demonstrates the reach of Atlantic and Caribbean ideas. Writing seven years after Rugemer, Rothman uses the medium of microhistory to focus on Rose Herrera's story and, in so doing, to explore Louisiana's connection to Caribbean slavery. In responding to the historiography, he writes, "Historians have tended to write about slavery in the aggregate rather than to delve deeply into the experiences of particular enslaved people." He argues that a more focused approach humanizes the narrative of slavery and that "the story of Rose Herrera's life, the kidnapping of her

children, and her efforts to get them back dramatizes the struggle between slaveowners and slave parents over the possession of slave children.” Rothman briefly alludes to the work of Rebecca Scott and his book uses a similar approach through legal documents. Rothman argues that the Herera’s “singular case draws attention to widespread, subterranean fears that newly freed people in the United States were in danger of being kidnapped and sold into slavery in Cuba and Brazil.” In this manner, Rothman incorporates the Atlantic world into the narrative of the American Civil War, but he still writes primarily for American historians. Rothman’s discussion of Rose Herera’s husband, George, a free person of color demonstrates how free African Americans were as much a threat to race-based slavery as British abolition. According to Rothman, Southerners wished to ensure that all people of African descent were enslaved “along with such causes an annexing Cuba and reopening slave importation.” The laws in New Orleans presumed that those classified “Negroes” were enslaved, while those termed “Mulatto” under the law were assumed free. This system, though similar to the gradated racial system of some Atlantic and Caribbean countries, was more rigid than that in the Caribbean. While those of mixed race may have had the benefit of presumed freedom, laws like the 1859 Act to Permit Free Persons of African Descent to Select Their Masters and Become Slaves for Life demonstrated that Southerners could not tolerate any threat to their institution, whether ideological in the form of abolition or physical in free people of color. Similar to Rugemer’s contention that the permeability of the United States allowed rumors of abolition to spread, Rothman demonstrates the power of hearsay and rumor in maintaining the threat of the Atlantic world even as slavery gradually ended in the United States. Rothman writes, “Throughout the [former] slave states, newly freed people stared down the prospect of renewed enslavement as white Southerners tried to resuscitate their power. The fear of a return to slavery found expression, above all, in stories and rumors of kidnapping that circulated across the South in the early days of Reconstruction.” Even as slavery ended in the United States, kidnapping remained an ever-present fear based on freedpeople’s “knowledge of the persistence of slavery and the slave trade outside the United States, and the ties of trade and travel that linked Southern ports to the Atlantic’s last remaining slave societies, Cuba and Brazil.” Emancipation in the United States, like British emancipation, was not the end of Atlantic and Caribbean slavery, but served to focus former and remaining slaveholders’ determination to maintain the practice. Further, “even after the war ended, the consuls continued to track ex-Confederate movements in and through Havana as the losers fled into exile.” Though the Civil War had ended, Cuba remained a bastion for those Americans unwilling to relinquish the institution of slavery and with the means to beguile their former slaves into the Caribbean. Rothman explains that Cuban planters “tried to keep their slaves from getting wind of the slave revolt in St. Domingue in the 1790s and abolition in the British West Indies in the 1830s” and now feared the results of emancipation in the United States. Rothman pushes the boundaries of his Americanist perspective in his coverage of the fears of abolition that swept through the Atlantic and Caribbean worlds. Rothman’s discussion of the legal proceedings following the kidnapping of Rose Herera’s children reveals a complex conflict in legal discourses in Reconstruction-era Louisiana much like that Scott discussed in *Freedom Papers*. Initially, a civil magistrate dismissed Herera’s case, but she successfully appealed to the military court, resulting in the arrest of her former owner for kidnapping. Rothman writes, “From Mary De Hart’s perspective, the proceedings in the provost court must have seemed deeply unjust” as it represented an inversion of the racial hierarchy. Alternately, for Herera, “the injustice was that anyone would deprive a mother of her children by kidnapping them and holding them as slaves in a foreign country.” To further complicate matters, the court had to determine at what point Herera and her children were freed and under which laws to try the case with the result that the court invoked Louisiana’s Code Noir, which no longer applied to the general populace following abolition. Rothman, like Scott before him, demonstrates the complicated process by which slavery ended and the attempts to define freedom in a society in which slavery played such a crucial role. Between the two, Rugemer offers the most to the increasingly Atlantic-oriented historiography of the Civil War. While Rothman writes with felicity and conveys a fascinating narrative, the Atlantic and Caribbean contexts of his work appear as an afterthought and little of the narrative explores the connections between Louisiana and Cuba that made such a kidnapping possible. Nor does Rothman examine the conditions facing the Herera children in Cuba except at the dock when they disembarked. Rothman’s narrow focus locks him into an American perspective. On the other hand, the Atlantic and Caribbean worlds play a critical role in Rugemer’s argument. To Rugemer, only English abolition and the pressures of the British West Indies can explain the tensions that led to the Civil War. Both historians encourage Americans to look beyond their own borders in examining the history of the Civil War, but only Rugemer successfully argues that the conflict was part of a greater pattern in the Atlantic world.

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Excellent international perspective  
By Neil Asher Silberman  
This is more than comparative history; it shows how the West Indies, the American South, British and American abolitionism and slave resistance and adaptation in Caribbean and North America are not only comparable, but deeply intertwined with enormous causative implications. Essential for understanding the emotional worlds of slaveholding and abolitionism.

5 of 5 people found the following review helpful. Loved the Book  
By Jason J. Mckee  
The book has a very different perspective to the causes of the American Civil War. Instead of the traditional causes, Rugemer looks into the effects of the abolition of slavery abroad, particularly in the British Caribbean. He does a great job of bringing this new idea to light, and it was an entertaining book to read.

"A most persuasive work that repositions the American debates over emancipation where they clearly belong, in a broader Anglo-Atlantic context." -- *Reviews in History* While many historians look to internal conflict alone to explain the onset of the American Civil War, in *The Problem of Emancipation*, Edward Bartlett Rugemer places the origins of the war in a transatlantic context. Addressing a huge gap in the historiography of the antebellum United States, he explores the impact of Britain's abolition of slavery in 1834 on the coming of the war and reveals the strong influence of Britain's old Atlantic empire on the United States' politics. He demonstrates how American slaveholders and abolitionists alike borrowed from the antislavery movement developing on the transatlantic stage to fashion contradictory portrayals of abolition that became central to the arguments for and against American slavery. Richly researched and skillfully argued, *The Problem of Emancipation* explores a long-neglected aspect of American slavery and the history of the Atlantic World and bridges a gap in our understanding of the American Civil War. "Most discussions about the roots of the American Civil War seldom stray beyond the nation's borders, but Rugemer makes a persuasive case for why that should change." -- *Charleston (SC) Post and Courier* "A tremendous contribution to the greatest issue and ongoing controversy in pre--twentieth-century American historiography: the causes of the American Civil War. I was quite unprepared for Rugemer's crucial discoveries as he studied the way dozens of southern and northern newspapers responded to the British West Indian slave insurrections, to the British act of emancipation, and to the consequences of this so-called Mighty Experiment. Few historians have shown such sophistication in analyzing the rapidly changing pre--Civil War media and the shifts in public opinion." -- David Brion Davis, author of *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World*

"A most persuasive work that repositions the American debates over emancipation where they clearly belong, in a broader Anglo-Atlantic context." -- *s in History* "Most discussions about the roots of the American Civil War seldom stray beyond the nation's borders, but Rugemer makes a persuasive case for why that should change." -- *Charleston (SC) Post and Courier* About the Author Edward Bartlett Rugemer is an assistant professor of history and African American studies at Yale University.