

*Confronting Slavery: Edward Coles and the Rise of Antislavery Politics in Nineteenth-Century America*, by Suzanne Cooper Guasco. DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2013. xxi, 293 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, index. \$28.95 paperback.

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According to author Suzanne Cooper Guasco, Edward Coles deserves greater credit for his role in crafting an “antislavery nationalism” that eventually led Americans to fulfill their revolutionary era destiny promising equal freedom. Born into a rather prominent Virginia slaveholding family (and educated at the College of William & Mary), Coles served as President James Madison’s private secretary before pursuing a private quest to emancipate his slaves en route to a new life in the “free state” of Illinois. His personal commitment to emancipation brought him to an early term as Illinois governor and made him an important symbol of antislavery action, culminating in a symbolic meeting with Abraham Lincoln on the way to his fateful inauguration in 1861.

The goal Coles seemingly sought through a long, eventful life reached fruition with the election of an Illinois president. Lincoln had embraced the view of the nation’s founders that Coles had zealously guarded (through rather extensive personal contacts): Jefferson, Madison, Monroe, indeed virtually all of the founders, saw slavery as morally wrong and within federal power (and intention) to restrict its growth and thus speed its demise. (Coles insisted that Jefferson had authored the antislavery Northwest Ordinance.) As a “Southerner,” though one who sought slavery’s death, Coles dreamt of a national vision to fulfill the founders’ antislavery hope, a mission to be pursued by an entire nation. Yet sectionalism, and eventually secession, undermined the unity that Coles sought.

Maintaining impressive family and professional connections with many people on both sides of the Mason and Dixon Line, he feared how partisan loyalties and sectional feelings would ruin his hope for a unified, free nation. Likewise, he dreaded the intense anti-black inclinations of those not only in his native Virginia but also in his adopted homes of Illinois and Philadelphia (the city of his later life). Coles had taken careful steps to establish (and support) the black families he helped to resettle in Illinois and Missouri in a rather successful experiment in emancipation. However, obvious and unrelenting white hostility to freed blacks eventually led Coles to accept the promise of the American Colonization Society of voluntary black emigration to Africa.

Despite the obvious pitfalls of this approach, Coles saw it as the only way to gain Southern support for emancipation and to avoid the national division he feared but that came anyway.

Coles's moderation and ties with colonization may taint his anti-slavery credentials, but he earned his place within the ranks of freedom's advocates. In addition to his personal efforts at emancipation (at the risk of his valued family ties, which he always sought to continue), Coles would be known for his fight to keep (or to make) Illinois a free state (under his beloved Northwest Ordinance). In 1822 (only a few years after relocating to the state), Coles emerged as a surprise winner in a four-way contest for the governor's office in Illinois. Declaring his intention to end slavery in Illinois by eliminating a thinly veiled system of indentured servitude, Coles emerged as a key leader in the 1824 contest to defeat a call for a state constitutional convention that threatened to establish slavery in the Prairie State. These valiant efforts in Illinois, and a lifelong campaign (primarily through a series of public letters) to safeguard the founders' antislavery vision, certainly earned Coles a warm handshake from president-elect Lincoln.

The author of this focused biography has clearly succeeded in reviving interest in the career of Edward Coles. Known to specialists, perhaps, Coles deserves greater public recognition as well. Guasco acknowledges her subject's personal flaws (a tendency to self-absorption if not pomposity and an interest in personal advancement if not comfortable living), but typically she shows his views and actions in a favorable light. She excels at demonstrating how Coles provided a key link to antislavery sentiment in the early republic through antebellum efforts to resolve America's dilemma with black servitude. Understandably, the author may overstate the actual impact Coles had on events and antislavery ideology (especially his nascent "free-labor" critique), but Coles was well connected (and not just with his mentor, Madison) and surprisingly involved in events from the War of 1812 through the Virginia slavery debates (of 1829-1832) and the onset of the Civil War. Emancipation through bloody civil war did not signal a triumph of Coles's approach (his youngest son died fighting for Virginia and the Confederacy), but his influence should not be ignored nor his role forgotten.