

Book Reviews

Roots. ALEX HALEY. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1976. 688 p. ISBN 0 385 03787 2. \$12.50.

To review Alex Haley's *Roots* is not merely to examine a book but to confront a cultural phenomenon. The early reports of Haley's search for his African ancestor, the appearance of the book and the subsequent television serialization, have generated an incredible response not only among blacks, whose ancestry was obscured by racism and the slave experience, but also among whites, for whom the New World freedom from hereditary family and class distinctions, modern mass society and the youth cult has meant isolation and a loss of fundamental sense of identity and continuity with the past.

Much of this response results from the way in which the television version was presented. *Roots* was a "media event" of the first magnitude and touched a primal social impulse by returning to the oral tradition of pre-literate (now post-literate) society by gathering families around their television sets to hear the tales of their ancestors. In addition, this was the first time that many blacks, and even more whites, had been confronted with a vivid emotional portrayal of the slave system. Much of the popularity of the book results from the television dramatization rather than the reverse, a trend which perhaps may alarm the more bookish among us.

The response to *Roots* certainly does not derive from the revelation of new facts about black history. A vast body of documentary evidence, including personal accounts, is readily available and many vivid literary works have been based on these sources. But neither the historical nor the literary works have had the impact of Haley's *Roots*. One reason for this is undoubtedly the highly personal nature of Haley's search for his own past and the fact that, through the vivid and personal medium of oral history, he was able to trace his family back to a specific African ancestor and therefore claim that the book was non-fiction or at the very least "faction," a truthful blend of fact and fiction.

Haley based the book on two very general bits of aural history. The first was the account of the history of his mother's family from Kinte the African, who was brought as a slave to the United States in the eighteenth century, down to Haley himself. Questions regarding the American section of the book are less concerned with the skeletal facts of Haley's family tree than with the way Haley has embellished and dramatized them. There is no means of verifying whether these plantations and slaves with their particular activities and motives were anything like Haley's descriptions and, in fact, a number of striking anachronisms weaken this section's claim to veracity.

How ever untrue the American section is in the literal sense, it can claim to have what has been called "mythic veracity." The variety and depth of Haley's characters and

situations reflect some of the real responses made to the slave system by blacks and whites, and the book reveals much that is verifiable about the slave system. By and large, Haley has avoided the white stereotypes of good masters and happy slaves and the equally inaccurate image of evil masters and noble slaves. Without encouraging blind racial hatred, he also reveals the horrors of the system by putting the blame on slavery and not on the inherent racial characteristics of either group. While encouraging black pride and affirming white guilt, he encourages both groups to face and to accept a shared past in which they were both victims, and which continues to cripple the relations of blacks and whites to this day. It appears that "faction" has been able to achieve this breakthrough as no scholarly history has done.

The major source of the power of this book, however, is the information Haley discovered about his African ancestor. For this, Haley relied upon another form of aural history, the oral tradition preserved by the Gambian griot or hereditary oral historian trained throughout a lifetime in the history and genealogy of his people. Utilizing the griot's account of Kunta Kinte of Juffure combined with his American research, Haley believed he had established the identity of his ancestor and the direct link between his ancestor's African and American lives. British journalist Mark Ottaway believes, however, that Haley's single oral source, Kebba Fofana, was not a griot at all and may just have told Haley what he wanted to hear. There is no question that a real griot would be as sound a source as many a written document but Fofana did not have these flawless credentials. The impact of Fofana's account on Haley was so great that he apparently failed to go beyond it to find corroboration in other oral tradition and paper documentation. It may be that Fofana's story is accurate, but until this is proved, little can be said with certainty about the identity of Kinte the African.

Ottaway raises an equally serious question about Haley's depiction of Juffure and the circumstances of Kinte's disappearance. He found that Juffure in 1767 was not, in fact, the isolated, simple, idyllic village of the book, but a trading post familiar with white men of at least three nationalities and in continuous contact with a nearby British post. Moreover, the region had once been part of the highly sophisticated African empires of Mali and Songhai and the Europeans were in Juffure only under the sufferance of a powerful local king who forbade them taking slaves in the area. Haley ignored these details because of his need to link the Kunta Kinte story with a slave ship sailing to Annapolis, Maryland, in 1767 and because he wished to portray an Eden in Africa with "our culture in its pristine state." Thus his devotion to what he believed to be truth in one instance apparently led him to a grave and unnecessary offence against that truth in another. This is unfortunate, for Haley might have found a valid account of his African heritage which would have reconciled the African facts and the major points of the oral history preserved by his family if he had just been more thorough and careful in his African research. Surely a slight alteration of time or place and a more realistic portrayal of the Africans (who seemed rather more like middle class American suburbanites than Moslem Africans from a highly developed society) would have enhanced his claim of truth and the pride blacks could take in their African past. At the moment, however, these questions of fact still remain to be resolved.

Nevertheless, criticism has not diminished the impact of *Roots*, and the fact that a black work has been so strenuously attacked by whites, in ways rarely equalled with similar white works, has only made their valid objections seem suspect. Rather, by using oral history and oral tradition to trace the history of a real black family, Haley has been able to give black history back to black people and show how one family's pride in their ancestry was preserved, forming a stable link among a people supposedly divided and dehumanized by their slave experience.

The final message of *Roots* and its attendant controversy applies to the writing of history in general. Before the late nineteenth century, the line between scholarly history

and literature was not clearly drawn. In addition to thorough scholarly research, historians attempted to penetrate a period by immersing themselves in it as much as possible, and from this, dramatizing events. For them, the recreation of the spirit and emotion of a time was as important as the facts. This powerful, compelling and still remarkably readable form of historical writing virtually disappeared when scholars attempted to make history a science and to remove irrationality, emotion and bias in favour of the cold facts which they believed would reveal eternal laws of historical behaviour. Yet the emotional and the factual are but two aspects of the same human experience and now, in large part because of the revival of aural history, the two are being reunited in a new humanist history which is both soundly factual and humanly passionate. This work, however, is being carried out largely by journalists and creative writers rather than scholars, and while this provides a fresh perspective, the soundness of research and judgment in cases such as Haley's has not been sufficient to give the works the status they deserve.

Nevertheless, the increasing faith of the scholarly community in the truth and value of oral tradition and aural history is revealing the history of groups such as blacks, women and aboriginal peoples and the personal lives of ordinary and famous people neglected by paper-bound historians. This trend can only improve the writing of history and restore to all people a reassuring sense of their own identity and a common human link to the past. Whatever the verdict on its factual basis, Alex Haley's *Roots* is a significant step in the regeneration of black American pride and in the movement toward a new and, perhaps better, humanist history.

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The Written Word Endures: Milestone Documents of American History.

Washington, D.C.: Office of Educational Programs, National Archives and Records Service, General Services Administration, 1976. 112 p. illus. (part col.) \$12.50 and **Sounds of History from the National Archives** (Audio cassette) Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Service, General Services Administration, 1976, 58 min. \$3.50. Both *The Written Word Endures* and *Sounds of History*: \$14.00.

The Written Word Endures is a free translation of *littera scripta manet* on the seal of the National Archives, but we are offered much more than a collection of textual manuscripts. The editors have singled out twenty-five "milestone documents" from the Declaration of Independence (1776) to the Marshall Plan (1948) each of which, they claim, has cast its shadow over events in American history. These events are themselves represented by archival materials which are not, however, limited to the written or printed word. The captions are graceful and informative. A brief narrative provides the story line.

The claim of the press release publicizing the book, that this is "the first comprehensive illustrated history of the nation told exclusively through archival materials," is rather pretentious. Essentially we have here a series of twenty-three portraits not of people but of documents. The oldest are in colour set off against period inkstands, faded flags, and time-worn leather volumes. The documents show their lines and creases as befits their age and, if the compositions are reminiscent of certain advertising techniques, I have no quarrel since this is the current fashion; portraits seeking a wide appeal must be fashionable, as every artist knows. The younger documents are usually in matter-of-fact businesslike black and white scattered in artful disarray or simply revealed *en face* as facsimiles usually are. Others