

A Conversation with Historian Charles Dew

Edited by Ellen Tucker, Ashbrook Publications Editor

Last spring, I spoke with Charles Dew, author of several seminal studies on slavery in America. We talked about a group of teachers in Ashbrook programs who had assigned Dew's *Apostles of Disunion: Southern Secession Commissioners and the Causes of the Civil War* in their history classes.

The book discusses previously ignored writing by “commissioners” sent principally from Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, and South Carolina to lobby other southern states to secede from the union in late 1860 and early 1861. This evidence challenges a longstanding theme of the historiography on the American Civil War: the claim that Southern states seceded in 1861, and fought a war defending their right to secede, because of their commitment to states’ rights. The commissioners’ speeches and letters plainly argue that secession was necessary in order to preserve the institution of slavery.

The teachers who assigned the book also joined in a project to survey attitudes toward the Civil War—its causes and its legacy—among students at their schools, in Florida, Louisiana, New Jersey, South Carolina, and West Virginia.

Delighted to learn that secondary school teachers were using his book, Dew asked us to “get the word out that I would be willing to engage with high school teachers and their students. I want us to understand and face our history.”

A native of Florida, Dew grew up accepting the view of the Confederacy as a “Lost Cause” waged for states’ rights. His views changed when he studied at Williams College as an undergraduate, and continued to mature at Johns Hopkins, where he was trained to conduct historical scholarship by C. Vann Woodward. Later he returned to Williams, where has taught since 1977.

During the spring of 2016, Dew was on sabbatical as he prepared a new afterward for a 15th anniversary edition of *Apostles of Disunion* while completing a new, very personal book, which he describes in the beginning of our conversation.

Charles Dew: It’s an odd hybrid of memoir and straight history. The title is: *The Making of a Racist (and that’s me): A Southerner Reflects on Family, History, and the Slave Trade*. The first chapter is “A Confederate Youth” and describes my growing up in an atmosphere heavy with memory of the Civil War and Reconstruction and being taught the states’ rights account of these. The second chapter is “The Making of a Racist.” I describe growing up in a Jim Crow culture and getting those cultural attitudes embedded in the marrow of my bones. The third is called “The Unmaking of a Racist.” I didn’t start to come out from under that cloud until I got to Williams as an undergraduate.

Then I recount a couple of things that happened to me as a historian. I call them thunderclaps. One of these occurred at a conference I attended as a speaker. A friend, Phil Schwartz, who teaches at Virginia Commonwealth University, ran a summer conference on slavery, held at Robert E. Lee's ancestral home, Stratford Hall. I had just published my second book, *Bond of Iron: Master and Slave at Buffalo Forge*. In it I studied industrial slavery, carrying the story down to the level of individual slave families and looking at them over time. Phil invited me down to talk about this. After I finished my talk, the first hand that went up belonged to an African American high school teacher. He looked me in the eye and said, "How did someone as white as you come to study *our* history?" (I'm blond.)

I didn't know how to answer. I had never put into words why I was so fascinated by southern history and why I'd spent so much time studying these black families. Thinking about it, I realized that while growing up in the Jim Crow South, I was essentially looking evil in the face everyday, yet I didn't see it.

Then there was a second thunderclap. The rare book librarian at Williams asked me to come over and look at a document they had just bought. It was a slave price list issued by a Richmond, Virginia slave trading firm, in August of 1860. On it were various categories of men, women, and children, and various prices for each category. I realized that this list embodied what slavery was: the commodification of human beings, turning men, women and children into chattel, treating them as merchandise. How did we as white Southerners come to do this and accept this? That led me to think, Okay, maybe if I can read the letters generated in the Richmond slave trade, and look at the books and see how the money changed hands, I can discover how *they* accommodated to this, and maybe that will lead me to see how I accommodated to Jim Crow as a white Southerner in my own day. Not that slavery and Jim Crow were the same, but it seemed to me that the process of "not seeing" what was right there in front of us was the same.

So in the book I use that document to transition to a reading of the correspondence of the slave traders, their agents, their customers. I looked at their record books and assessed the profits of a major Richmond slave trading firm. The book combines both my personal experience and my work as a historian studying these records. . . . I just got the dust jacket. I'll send you a copy. It's a photo taken the year I was born, of my mother with my brother on her left side and I, an infant, sitting on her knee, holding a silver baby rattle. The designer at the University of Virginia press cropped the photo to focus on my face, with the title *The Making of a Racist* right underneath. It's an arresting photograph.

[We talk about this. The baby is wide-eyed, ready to absorb everything around him. All you see of the mother is her very proper attire, a white blouse with a dark bow tie, and her steadying hand.]

That's my point; I absorbed the racism in my culture really without even knowing. I wish it weren't still going on, but I'm afraid it is.

Ellen Tucker: [I had shared with Dew a transcript of the webinar discussion among high school students in the joint read project facilitated by Professor Dan Monroe. Now I mentioned the Baton Rouge students' disapproval of the planned removal of Confederate memorials from public spaces in New Orleans.] One of the ideas I grew up with, as a child in North Carolina, was a reverence for Lee as a good man, no matter the cause he fought for.

CD: I thought Professor Monroe gave a superb answer to that. He indicated his ambivalence. I would have to share that. I ended my essay in the new afterword with something from my morning newspaper, an AP story from Alabama. An Alabama state senator had proposed a bill stipulating that before any historic monuments or memorials could be taken down, there had to be a committee of state lawmakers to approve the removal. Well, the bill got proposed because Birmingham, Alabama—a predominantly African American city—was considering removing one of the major Confederate memorials from a city park. The legislator claimed his bill was not aimed specifically at Birmingham, that it was measure needed to protect all memorials. Then the AP reporter interviewed a member of the Sons of Confederate Veterans. He complained about political correctness, about people coming into the state trying to rewrite history: “They’re going to dishonor and disrespect our fathers and grandfathers.” Then the reporter interviewed a black minister who is head of the Montgomery NAACP chapter. He said, “There are always two stories to history. Should a memorial be placed in the center of a city where the community is offended by that memorial? A memorial that essentially honors people who tried to continue my enslavement?”

This story beautifully encapsulates what [the students in Baton Rouge] were grappling with: the memory of the South as a decent honorable place, where we made mistakes, but are a God-fearing people who don’t harbor those pro-slavery views today—whereas the African American kids see the memorial as the white South continuing to thumb their noses at black people. I based the conclusion of my afterword on a remarkable editorial that appeared in the *Richmond Times Dispatch*, a very conservative newspaper, in the wake of the killings in Charleston at the AME church. The editor said, “It’s time for us in the South to have a truth and reconciliation commission. We need to come to grips with our history, and we need both parties at the table. We have got to do this to get beyond where we are now.” In the original introduction to my book, I made the point that we had never had a truth and reconciliation commission, so we’re still there.

ET: I get the sense from some of my black friends that it’s hard for them to talk about, for fear that going over this painful history will drag them back into it and perhaps limit their advancement in today’s world.

CD: You’re absolutely right. I don’t know if you know about an outfit in Montgomery, Alabama called the Equal Justice Initiative. A man named Bryan Stevenson, an African American Harvard-trained lawyer, founded this initiative to help death row

inmates who had been unfairly convicted. He's embraced the cause of juveniles convicted as adults and sentenced to life without parole. Last year he published a book about his work, *Just Mercy*. He had the idea that the sites of lynchings should be commemorated. Obviously if you forget the past, it's easier to repeat it. But when they went into these communities they got as much push back from African Americans as from whites. They didn't want to stir up the past.

ET: In our teacher programs at Ashbrook, we use primary documents. I would say your book is a succinct demonstration of the revelatory power of primary documents. I wonder if you assign them in your own teaching at Williams?

CD: I do. I use them all the time. In fact that slave price list is a single sheet of paper that I've gotten Xeroxed. I hand it out at the beginning of my history of the Old South class and at the beginning of my Civil War and Reconstruction class. I don't tell them what it is. I say, look at this and tell me what you see. It leads to a fascinating discussion. They are astonished and dumbfounded by it. Then we start talking about what it means, what happens when you turn human beings into property. I tell them that the dollar figures on the 19th century price list can actually be turned into contemporary dollar figures. There's a website, measuringworth.com, run by a group of economists at the University of Illinois in Chicago, that helps one calculate current equivalents of past dollar amounts. The top price for an "extra number one" man on this price list is \$1625 in 1860. The website tells you to multiply that by 29.4. The result is something in excess of \$47,000 in today's money. When they see that, they realize how important slavery is to the South, showing how much money was to be made off slave labor. One of the categories is "good young woman and first child." I ask them, "why is that description in there?" They kick it around and then finally someone will say, "Oh! She's given birth to a child who is worth money, and she could have more children. They're buying not only her, but also her fertility." Boy, do their eyes open wide and their jaws drop. Nothing works more powerfully than this one document.

ET: Do you find that using primary documents diffuses tension in a mixed-race classroom?

CD: Yes. These documents are something both sides can talk about—they simply show what was going on at an earlier time. It gives us a bit of distance between then and now. The issues are still with us, yet not in the same way.

ET: What impression of the causes of the Civil War do Williams students bring to your classes?

CD: Most of them educated in the North know that slavery is critical. But they still have a kind of states' rights idea in the back of their brain. Students who are from the South tend to have a much more states' rights orientation. They recognize slavery was important and they don't like it—they're embarrassed by it. But they're much more inclined to think that the South was being harassed by the North and

forced to accept things they didn't want to accept about tariffs and so forth. If you ask them, they will tell you that's what they learned in high school. This is essentially a way to sanitize the origins of the war. If you put slavery front and center, it's a different picture and much less complimentary to the South than if you talk about Constitutional principles, what the Founders wanted, what the Jefferson-Madison argument was in the Virginia and Kentucky Resolves and so forth. There's still a sectional tendency.

[I mentioned that this was less evident among students in the joint read project, no doubt because of the teachers involved. I explained that Ray Tyler said his ancestors came from a county in northeastern North Carolina where much of the population was pro-Union, and that this was his family tradition. I explained Adena Barnette's Masters thesis on the creation of West Virginia, and explained that Amy Parker said her experience as a Southerner was much like Dew's, growing up with the states' rights thesis, then reading Dew's book and changing her mind.]

CD: Well, that's encouraging to hear. I have a colleague who teaches at Texas A & M. He uses my book, and he says it has a profound impact on his students because they come from that sort of Confederate place. He said one of his students who had been part of reenactments of Civil War battles, wearing a Confederate uniform, came up to him after class and said, "I don't think I can do that anymore. I don't think I can continue pretending I'm a Confederate soldier after reading the arguments of the secession commissioners."

ET: The account of the conversation Southerners had among themselves given in *Apostles* suggests that they knew, just as Jefferson had said, that they had the "wolf by the ears." Even though they had been arguing for several decades that slavery was a positive good, when they saw that it could soon end, they were scared. Do you think they really were—or were they just making an exaggerated argument to protect their economic interests?

CD: I think they really were scared. One reason I say that is because I heard much the same argument while growing up in the Jim Crow South. On the one hand: "They're happy on their side of town. White folks know best, we understand the Negro better than he or she understands him or herself." Yet it was incumbent on white men to protect the purity of the white race, which meant you needed school segregation. "You can't allow white girls and black boys in the same classroom, because they're going to be socializing and we all know where that's going to lead." They had this remarkable view of the Negro as the happiest, merriest person on the earth—*unless* an abolitionist, or in my time a member of the NAACP, came and started whispering in their ear about freedom, about how things could change and be better. Well, they *couldn't* change and be better if white folks knew what was best for them. When these men (the secessionist commissioners) are talking to each other, I think they're speaking from their gut.

In the new afterword to the book I say that I don't think I paid adequate attention to the economic argument. I read back through all of the commissioners' speeches and public letters—with the book I'd just written in mind, in which I'd examined the slave trade and seen how important it was to the economy, how essentially lucrative slave labor and cotton production had been. I did reemphasize something I'd said in the first edition—how two commissioners from Alabama to NC had reassured their listeners, “we are not going to reopen the African slave trade; we will continue to get our Negroes from where we've gotten them in the past—from your surplus population.” Reopening the transatlantic slave trade would have depressed the prices of slaves in this country.

ET: That strikes me as a subtle bribe.

CD: Correct; it was a bribe. Robert Hardy Smith went to the Confederate Constitutional Convention as an Alabama delegate. After they drafted their constitution and broke up, Smith gave a speech in which he discussed the Confederate Constitution and the slave trade. He pointed out that it closed the transatlantic slave trade and contained a clause that gave the Confederate Congress the power to interdict the sale of any slave from a state that had not joined the Confederacy. Henry Lewis Benning, addressing the Virginia secession convention, closes his long speech with reference to these clauses. Yet while the domestic slave trade was a matter of some importance, it wasn't the core of the commissioners' argument. I still stand by the original argument: it was about race, race war, the end of white supremacy.

ET: There was one commissioner in your book who wanted to keep the transatlantic slave trade open.

CD: The South Carolinians were worried that white southerners who did not own slaves might not be trustworthy. One of their arguments for bringing in more slaves from Africa was that it would depress the price, so that every white family could own a slave, and they would spread slave ownership across the totality of Southern society. The commissioner to Florida, Leonidas Spratt, was one of the leaders of this proposal. But wiser heads prevailed, pointing out that this wouldn't help the pro-secessionist movement in border states like Virginia and Kentucky, who were shipping slaves down. They also argued that it wouldn't look good in Europe, where suppression of the slave trade had been going on for decades. The Confederacy very much wanted European recognition and intervention. Jefferson Davis's caution about talking too much about slavery is a reflection of that.

ET: It's rather curious that the nation that led the way in suppressing the African slave trade could have for a while seriously considered recognizing the Confederacy.

CD: It is. I think it reflects British concern about American commercial competition. One of the reasons they were interested in the Confederacy was that it would divide the American commercial power in half. But it's interesting that British cotton mill

workers in the Midlands were pro-Union. Even though they were hurting badly, they rallied essentially to the Union cause.

ET: Professor Dan Monroe told the students that when Harriet Beecher Stowe and her husband toured Britain, they collected about \$20,000 in pass-the-hat contributions from working-class British people.

CD: Fascinating. I did not know that.

ET: I also was struck in reading your book that the commissioners falsified Lincoln's arguments, seeing his election as threatening immediate abolition and equality of the races. Lincoln had not advocated that—and yet these Southern slaveholders could see that, logically, Lincoln's arguments proving slavery wrong would lead in that direction. What a balancing act Lincoln had to maintain to keep that realization at bay.

CD: Lincoln was very much a moderate. He thought that the abolitionists were counter-productive. He argued against John Brown's raid. He was very willing to support the original 13th Amendment in 1861, which would have guaranteed slavery in perpetuity. He was trying to keep the border states in the Union, and though he didn't like this amendment, he would stomach it, because he was hopeful that if it passed, he could use it as leverage to talk the secessionists back into the Union. He had a reverence for the Union, thinking of Henry Clay as his model, and thought that Southerners in their heart of hearts felt that too. It wasn't until late in the game—March, just before Fort Sumter—that one of the agents he sent to South Carolina to take the temperature came back and said, these men are gone; there's no way they're coming back to the Union.

I think the abolitionists had essentially panicked the slaveholders. Garrison's *Liberator* began publication in 1831, and later that year the Nat Turner insurrection occurred. White southerners insisted that *The Liberator* was the cause of that rebellion. The Republican Party, founded in 1854 to check the spread of slavery into the territories, was the first party founded as a sectional party. There was virtually no Republican support in the South. They were talking about blocking the spread of slavery, and Lincoln gave the "House Divided" speech, which Southerners took very seriously. So they simply read him as an abolitionist, against everything he could say and everything in his record that suggested otherwise. They saw him as a Trojan horse, coming in disguised as one thing when really he was something else. In the book I talk about Stephen Hale, who made one address in which he singled out Hannibal Hamlin for specific mention. Rumors were swarming across the South that Hannibal Hamlin was a Negro. They said Hamlin had Negro blood in his veins, that one of his children had kinky hair, that "Hannibal" was a plantation name reflecting that the family had black blood. So there was a rumor in the South that Lincoln's Vice President, a heartbeat away from the presidency, was a Negro.

ET: So that explains that strange phrase, "Black Republicans"?

CD: Right. “They are black to the core, they have black members and they have black sympathizers.” “Black” is of course a way to say “evil” and “repulsive” and all that, so it serves multiple purposes. It’s a racial epithet.

ET: The other thing that struck me was the fact that so many of the commissioners were coming from the west and going back to the states on the eastern seaboard where they’d been born. They had to have had a lively awareness of the westward expansion, and the importance to the South that as the nation moved westward, slavery must spread westward also.

CD: Good point. They also felt that they could talk to those in their home states—basically that notion that “the home boy” is going to be more persuasive. You know how important family is in the South—as they would say, “We know his people.” They didn’t give much importance to the previous party affiliation of the commissioner. That was very telling.

ET: Before we close, I want to be sure we cover questions the teachers asked me to pose. Robin Deck in Baton Rouge said, “Ask Professor Dew more about the controversy over removing the Confederate memorials. My students are still talking about that.” And Ray Tyler said, “Ask him the why he thinks that the states’ rights argument persists even in the North. My son and I attended the 150th anniversary commemoration of the Battle of Gettysburg, where we met some ‘Lost Cause’ dudes from New Jersey, and it dumbfounded me.”

CD: With regard to the first question, I think the best way to help students is to approach it as that newspaper article on the controversy in Birmingham approached it. The Sons of Confederate Veterans are on one side and those represented by the minister who is an NAACP activist are on the other. They both have meaningful arguments. What you must do is try to get them to the table to talk, to let the other person know how they feel, to let the person across the table who is hearing them express their own point of view, and to speak rationally and not emotionally. Then to see what could be done. Could these statues be put in a museum setting, where the interpretation could be more holistic? Could the interpretation be offered in the public setting where the memorials now are—could you install some sort of sign that would give both sides of the argument, and say that the memorial has been left in place as an indication of the history of this part of the world, which has been contested, and is still being contested; so that the two arguments can be presented side by side? It seems to me that there is a chance to educate people, if we can get them to listen to each other. That’s not easy, but if we can, maybe there’s a chance for greater understanding, and maybe for some sort of reconciliation.

With regard to the Northern embrace of the “Lost Cause” theory, there’s a lot of nostalgia about the Old South based on myth. Many impressions of the Old South were garnered from things like *Gone With the Wind*. There’s nostalgia for an elegant

America where men were men and ladies were ladies. Of course, you have to erase slavery from that picture. Then you can keep the loyalty and bravery and love and all the rest. That sort of nostalgia whitewashed of slavery has a lot of appeal, particularly as the present gets more complicated. Dan Monroe made a good point when he said you see a lot of Confederate flags flying in rural Illinois. It's sort of an in-your-face statement. "I'm not politically correct, and I'm gonna fly this flag because I'm me and you're not me." There's a chip-on-the-shoulder quality and a little bit of anti-government feeling. It's probably tinged with racism, although the people who are flying that flag would deny it. They are feeling nostalgic for the myth of the Old South, and to do that they are setting aside the history of slavery and everything that that means.

ET: I don't know if you knew what went back and forth in the email chain among the teachers when we heard from you. One of them said, "I feel like we have just heard from the LeBron James of history scholarship!"

CD: No, I didn't see that! But I was touched when the wonderful teacher from West Virginia said that the 15th anniversary edition of *Apostles* was a testament to the fact that a lot of people have gotten a lot out of this book. You tell them that if they were pleased by my interest, I am pleased back. I was delighted to hear what they had done and so impressed with what their students had done. I couldn't be happier about it.