



This Our Dark Country: The American Settlers of Liberia

By Catherine Reef

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In the early 19th century, the American Colonization Society was formed with the sole intent of creating a colony for free blacks and former slaves. Both blacks and whites took passionate stands either for or against this proposal. Despite the controversy, the first group of settlers landed on the west coast of Africa in 1822. They faced numerous problems arising from the unfamiliar climate, hostile encounters with the indigenous people, and the failure of other nations to recognize their independence, but they managed to build a nation, naming it Liberia, for liberty. Today, partly because of these difficult beginnings, Liberia is a country plagued by unrest.

In this accessible and well-written book, award-winning author Catherine Reef presents a significant but as of yet relatively unexplored chapter in African American history. Her account is filled with excerpts from diaries and letters of the settlers and richly illustrated with period photographs and prints, many of which have never been published before. Photo gallery, endnotes, bibliography, index.

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This Our Dark Country: The American Settlers of Liberia By Catherine Reef Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #862520 in Books
- Brand: Clarion Books
- Published on: 2002-11-25
- Released on: 2002-11-25
- Ingredients: Example Ingredients
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.50" h x .62" w x 8.50" l, 1.60 pounds
- Binding: Hardcover
- 144 pages



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Editorial Review

From School Library Journal

Grade 5 Up-Reef presents this biography of the African nation from its birth in the early 19th century to the present day with the same attention to primary sources and visual materials as she did in her biographies of Sigmund Freud (2001) and Walt Whitman (1995, both Clarion). This account of the country's complex history is presented chronologically, making generous use of letters, diaries, photographs, and prints. In 1816, a group of wealthy and influential whites founded what became the American Colonization Society. The main purpose was to find a way to relocate free blacks to their own colony. The underlying motivations and the complicated arguments of the time for and against this volatile issue are discussed in great detail, taking care to explain not only the ignorance and prejudice that shaped the decisions, but also the hope and promise that relocation held for many. Reef does not hold back the ugly truths in Liberia's history, including the abhorrent treatment of people native to the region as well as recaptured slaves who were delivered to Liberia against their will. Although the chronology is occasionally choppy, jumping between different groups of settlers and the complicated state of affairs in America, the foundations of this seldom-explored topic are readily understood.

Genevieve Gallagher, Orange County Public Library, VA

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From Booklist

Starred Review Gr. 7-12. This photo-essay is a grim, disturbing history of Liberia, first in 1822 when it was an American colony for free blacks and former slaves and later as an independent nation. It's an account of racism and betrayal in the U.S and in West Africa, with no happy ending. Reef draws on letters and speeches to show that the whites, including Abraham Lincoln, saw the deportation of blacks as a way to solve racial problems in the U.S. In contrast, few African American leaders supported colonization: Frederick Douglass termed it the hateful, unchristian "twin-sister of slavery," and he called the U.S. the black American's native land. Just as ugly is the Americo-Liberian colonists' prejudice toward the local people: the new settlers regarded the Africans as uncivilized and inferior and denied them civil rights. Reef tells it in clear, plain style, always showing the connections between the two homelands. The handsome, very spacious design, marked by thick, quality paper and stirring black-and-white photos (many of them published here for the first time), makes the hard facts accessible, and many readers, adults as well as teenagers, will want to use the meticulous endnotes to find out more about the politics and the individuals in the portraits. A must for history collections. *Hazel Rochman*

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Review

"The handsome design makes the hard facts accessible....many readers will use the meticulous endnotes. A must for history collections." Booklist, ALA, Starred Review

"Taking care to explain the prejudice and promise that relocation held, the foundations of this seldom-explored topic are readily understood." School Library Journal

"Reef is. . .skillful. A well-selected gallery of maps, period lithographs, and captioned photos enhance the presentation." The Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books

"... an engrossing look for... all ages at both a continent and a chapter of American history too often ignored." --Ruminator Review Ruminator Review

"An unbiased, journalistic style...award-winning author...photographs...add interest...fills a void in African-American history collections and is highly recommended." VOYA (VOICE OF YOUTH ADVOCATES) VOYA (Voice of Youth Advocates)

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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Wanda Mason:

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