

***The Kidnapping Club and A Shot in the Moonlight* reviews – slavery's long shadow**



Enslaved people escape from the eastern shore of Maryland before the civil war, in an engraving of 1872.

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Two books on the pre- and post-civil war New York and Kentucky deal with dark but also more hopeful episodes in US history

History is seldom neat. Two books, one on antebellum New York and the other on 1890s Kentucky, illustrate the tension, showing despicable behavior relieved by the stalwart courage of a few.

New York had a long history of slavery (abolished beginning only in 1817) but also a thriving Black community as well. Yet because of its financing of southern cotton, much of the city was pro-southern, led by the Democratic Tammany Hall political machine. The US constitution included a clause on the return of fugitive slaves.

In his new book, *The Kidnapping Club: Wall Street, Slavery and Resistance on the Eve of the Civil War*, Jonathan Daniel Wells quotes Harriet Jacobs describing New York in the 1830s as a “city of kidnappers” waiting to seize Black people, free or enslaved, and deliver them to slavery. The stories are shocking: 26 abductions in December 1837 and January 1838 alone, an arrest of a boy at his school desk, all aided by police, officials, lawyers representing slaveholders and racist judges.

The anti-slavery activist David Ruggles called this the “New York Kidnapping Club”. Parallels with the modern era abound. Then as now, policing practices harmed Black

citizens already facing pervasive racism. Nor was the small police department able to protect citizens fully in any event, permitting lawlessness to flourish.

This is a story of municipal corruption heavily fueled by racism, as officials reaped income on the side from slave catching and associated fees, even more after the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. As Wells writes, “Professional slave catchers made money – and a lot of it ... kidnapping rings knew they had little to fear from white politicians, judges, and constables.” Some worked with a Virginia sheriff and took cuts.

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Wells has also written important history about the surprising number of New York shipbuilders and merchants involved in the illegal transatlantic slave trade. In 1859 and 1860 as many as 53,000 people may have been transported to Cuba. Here again courts and lawyers rarely held criminals to account despite overwhelming evidence. Only one person was hanged for this capital offense driven by “cursed greed of gain” and indifference to human life.

For Wells, “Wall Street” is “convenient shorthand for the nascent business world of antebellum Manhattan”, designed to make a point: Wells states that 80% of cotton was moved through New York “at least on paper”. But there was racism enough among those without financial power to make the Black community suffer. Wells’s continued invocation of the then prejudicial moniker “Gotham” shows his anger at the realities of the time. Only a few prominent citizens and white and Black evangelicals supported the “higher law” of abolition.

Ruggles is deservedly the hero of the book: an activist who led a full life as a merchant, community leader, journalist and agitator for Black rights, suffering arson from a mob and constantly traveling and appearing in court to support the kidnapped.

The tale ends with the New York city council voting in favour of an independent republic but, in a surprising twist, with resounding support for war with the southern states after the firing on Fort Sumter. In no way did this end racism – a proposal for Black male suffrage was defeated in 1860 – but it also undercuts Wells’s thesis a bit. That capitalists wish to make money is no surprise. In the end, “Manhattan’s business community wanted peace if possible [but] cast their lot with the Union cause.”

Wells could have used another edit. For instance, the telegraph, from 1844, could not have informed southern readers of a trial in 1836. Details should matter to an academic historian.

Ben Montgomery’s *A Shot in the Moonlight* is the better read. His subject is a murder trial in 1897 but it is also the story of some white leaders at a brief progressive moment who supported the rights of a Black man to self-defense in the face of white violence.

It’s a powerful story of a farmer, George Dinning, wrongly accused of theft, who fired in self-defense from his daughter’s bedside at a mob come to force him to leave town or face lynching. The shot hit one of the mob that had been firing at Dinning’s home.



A 19th-century lynching.

Dinning turned himself in and the farmhouse was burned – destroying evidence that the mob had fired first – while Dinning’s family was exiled. A deputy said he believed Dinning and the sheriff could not find anyone to testify against him, but he was indicted for murder.

The Republican governor, Bill Bradley, trying to stop lynchings, transferred Dinning to Louisville to await trial. He also proposed a bill that counties would be financially liable for lynchings. Surprisingly, it passed. A former Confederate soldier commanded, superbly, the regiment protecting Dinning.

False testimony possibly agreed in advance for the prosecution and powerful testimony for the defense from Dinning himself, his 12-year-old daughter Eva from whose bed the father shot, and one brave white farmer produced a verdict that did not satisfy either side. Nor did the case end there, thanks to an outpouring of pro-Dinning sentiment among many white Kentuckians and, importantly, the press. Col Bennett H Young, a prominent lawyer, took the case.

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Young had led a Confederate raid on St Albans, Vermont, in 1864. He was an enigma. He strongly supported Confederate monuments but “also began to establish himself as someone who was interested in helping Black people across Kentucky”, who would

“go out of his way to help a person of color in hard times, with no motivation of any explicit benefit to himself”, including defending poor Black people in court.

Young’s advocacy led to a pardon for Dinning, the first by a southern governor of a Black person for killing a white person. Dinning moved to Indiana, changed his name, then sued for civil damages for the loss of his house and farm, again aided by Young. In what one newspaper termed “glorious justice”, they won.

The gruesome stories of lynchings that Montgomery recounts show what fate awaited Dinning had it not been for the integrity and courage of a few.

“I plead for more kindness and more justice,” Bradley wrote. His call faded over the next decades, with terrible results.

Montgomery and Wells’s books illustrate that so much of African American history lies in court records, with important cases and names that should be better known. But Montgomery, an investigative journalist, has better learned the lesson that the story should tell itself. His book is artfully written and he is wise not to inquire too deeply into the psychobiography of Bennett H Young. Instead, he simply lets the facts speak, illustrating sinister forces of human nature but also the hope that some can change and that justice remains a possibility.

Meeting Dinning’s descendant, Montgomery again lets his source speak.

“How do you thank a man you never knew, who died decades before you were born? How do you honor a man who came before you? Is it enough to be a good man yourself?”

Remembering the bitter moments in our history, that is an excellent place to start.

- *The Kidnapping Club* is published in the US by Bold Type Books; *A Shot in the Moonlight* is published by Little Brown, Spark