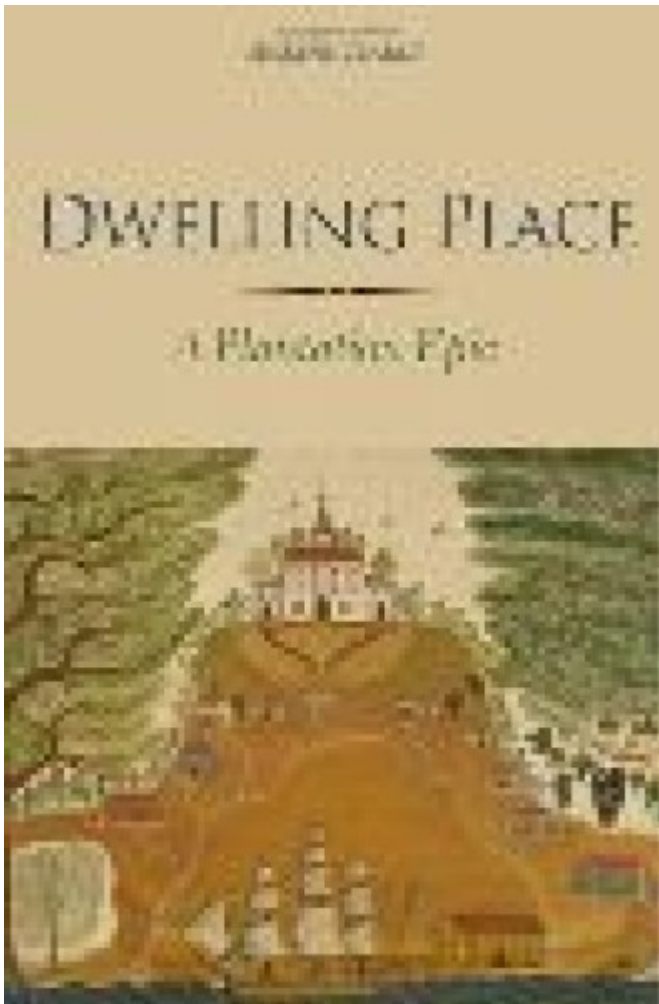


Dwelling Place

reviewed by [Anne Blue Wills](#) in the [May 30, 2006](#) issue

In Review



Dwelling Place: A Plantation Epic

Erskine Clarke
Yale University Press

Thirty years ago Robert Manson Myers sifted through the letters of Georgia planter Charles Colcock Jones (1805–1863) to produce an award-winning book, *The Children*

of Pride: A True Story of Georgia and the Civil War, focused on the white planters' experiences. Erskine Clarke returns to Jones's plantations to take their measure as places in which both landowning whites and enslaved blacks lived and moved and had their being.

Jones's substantial holdings of land and slaves supported his work as a Presbyterian minister, denominational official, theologian, church historian and occasional professor at South Carolina's Columbia Theological Seminary (the institutional forerunner of the Georgia seminary at which Clarke now teaches American religious history). Jones led the way in promoting religious education for slaves, in 1831 organizing the Liberty County (Georgia) Association for the Religious Instruction of the Negroes, the first such organized effort in the South.

Clarke details Jones's early insistence that slavery is evil, but he also reveals his resistance to abolition, which Jones considered too radical because it placed too much trust in uneducated blacks' ability to join productively in civil society. Jones saw Christianity as a transforming agent that would make blacks not only more obedient in the short term of slavery's continuation, but also better citizens in the long term after emancipation. He also viewed Christianity as a brake on the brutality of white masters: though he was ever mindful of the need to cultivate his white patrons so his teaching work among their slaves could continue, he indicted the slave owners for the absence or insincerity of their religious commitments.

The places defined by Jones's plantation and his ministerial enterprises are central to the story in *Dwelling Place*, and they name each chapter. These places grounded and nourished the identities of their various inhabitants. The land—owned by the whites, worked by the blacks—represented for all of Clarke's subjects different kinds of constraint and conflict. Clarke particularly wants to show that blacks as well as whites found in these locales the constancy and belonging that all human beings attach to a home place. Clarke tells how blacks shaped the low-country landscape and so became connected to and shaped by it. In his telling, Clarke does not present a simple vision of happy slaves at home down on the plantation. Rather, he gives Jupiter, Robinson, Sandy Jones, Cato, Cassius and their families their due as fully human agents negotiating a dehumanizing system in and through the land they tamed.

Clarke places his accounts of white plantation and black settlement life in counterpoint to one another in order to show the similarities and vast differences

between free whites' and enslaved blacks' experiences of the land. He details the sights, sounds and conversations of both the plantation piazza and the settlement stoop, and juxtaposes the education of planter children in their grand house—classical training overseen by a paid tutor—to that of slave children in their cabins, where the wisdom of folktales was passed from one generation to another around the communal fire. He describes the celebrations enjoyed by whites at weddings and holidays, then devotes a chapter to the arduous, ingenious work that the slave cook, Patience, performed to prepare for such gatherings.

In spite of these composite views, however, the Jones family dominates the volume, much as they dominated their region of antebellum Georgia. They were the ones who left behind written sources, of course, and who participated in the enduring institutions that have preserved their stories. This sense of white primacy, perhaps unavoidable given the availability of sources, pulls against Clarke's intention of showing the integrity and full humanity of the slave settlement community.

Cornel West and Eddie Glaude Jr. have written that "historical work is . . . ethical work," accomplished by telling "thick stories" that provoke reexamination of one's way in the world. The ethical edge of Clarke's historical work emerges as he gazes beyond the plantation house and into the settlements. The convicting force of his reconstruction gathers almost imperceptibly as the story unfolds at an unhurried, low-country pace. The length and density of this epic may deter some readers—it covers more than 60 years and is peopled by more than 100 characters—but Clarke does not intend for readers to churn quickly through the book. He wants us instead to dwell for a time in this world of white privilege and veiled anxiety, of black servitude and covert resistance, where whites sometimes felt the constraints of the morally incongruous system they had engineered, and where blacks carved out—from the considerable physical and ideological constraints slavery placed on them—opportunities to resist.

As I read, I found myself treading treacherous moral terrain in the vividly drawn Georgia landscape. I felt for these characters in ways I might feel for beloved but flawed family members, hoping for the best, expecting the worst. Through his evenhanded portraits, Clarke elicited my compassion not only for the settlement-dwellers as they endured the humiliations of slavery, but also for Charles and Mary Jones, whose apparent good faith issued in execrable choices. Clarke's fully realized portrayals of both blacks and whites led me to mourn the inexorable tragedy of slavery for all of them—for the slaves bound by the evil system, and for the whites

pitifully hamstrung by their own hypocrisy.

Of course, slaves' physical and emotional terror far outstripped the whites' bind of prevarication. That is where I catch myself, where my sympathy with the Joneses gives the lie to my belief that I am enlightened on matters of race. This is where I find that I have assumed my place in the story—not in the settlement cabins or in the kitchen toiling with Patience, but on the plantation piazza, having tea with Charles and Mary. Waxing sympathetic for them, I hear myself sounding callow at best, racist at worst.

Yet here is where the ethical force of Clarke's historical work lands. He challenges me to contemplate the slaves' unaccountable perseverance and the whites' blind persistence, to credit the distance between them, and to recognize finally that the former was rooted in truth and the latter in nightmarish deception.

Whatever sadness I may feel for the Jones family's epic wrong-headedness, then, stands paired with and outshone by a sense of triumph at the renewed possibilities for Patience and her husband, Porter; Syphax and his wife, Elsey; and the other freed slaves. Perhaps Clarke has succeeded most powerfully by producing in a 21st-century white reader an understanding of emancipatory joy, which begins with the tiniest inkling that something tectonic was fractured 140 years ago, something that continues to give way as the book sends tremors through my view of race, self and world.

"Our years come to an end like a sigh," says Psalm 90, from which Clarke takes his title. The book ends in very much the same way—quietly, like a breath—and my melancholy gives way, also like a breath, to rejoicing.