A book review of Walter Kirk Wood’s *Beyond Slavery*

Shotwell Publishing in Columbia, South Carolina continues to turn out cutting edge books, both large and small that deal with subjects the establishment press would rather leave untouched.

This slim volume by Walter Kirk Wood, who holds a Ph.D. from the University of South Carolina is the precursor to a three-volume work to be entitled *Beyond Slavery: A New History for a New Nation and the Northern Romantic-Nationalist Origins of America’s Civil War, 1776-1865.*

Dr. Wood covers material in this little book that I have seldom seen anywhere else. Dr. Clyde Wilson, in a brief forward, notes the main thrust of Dr. Wood’s work. Of Dr. Wood he says: “He will show how the war became inevitable only because Northern society was infected by the revolutionary romantic nationalism that rocked Europe in the mid-19th century. The South remained loyal to the old American dispensation of classical republicanism, and thus had to be eliminated. It was not the South’s defense of slavery but the dominant North’s determination to redefine America that made conflict ‘irrepressible’.”

The North, in order to be able to work its agenda against the South had to create a “new history for a new nation in the making.” Wood notes: “Toward this end, did abolitionists, and later Republicans including Lincoln, reinterpret the principles of 1776 and 1787 to be more democratic, abolitionist, and nationalist than they really were? At the same time, did the South’s defense of original intentions—politically, economically, and culturally—have to be overcome to make the Declaration more about equality than independence and the Constitution and the union it formed less limited and more national? Thus, the Republican propaganda identification of the South and its Northern allies with the defense of slavery alone to the exclusion of other beliefs and values not slavery-related.”

Dr. Wood notes a letter from Lincoln to Henry L Pierce in April of 1859 where he referred to Jefferson as the man who introduced “national independency by a single people” and who introduced “into a merely revolutionary document an abstract truth, applicable to all men at all times…” Now I hate to burst Mr. Lincoln’s bubble (well, not really) but the last thing Jefferson had in mind was “a single people.” In Jefferson’s day, and for the next eighty-odd years, Americans didn’t think of themselves in those terms. You thought of yourself first as a citizen of the state you lived in and, only by dint of your state citizenship were you a United States citizen. State citizenship had pre-eminence.

It was noted by Dr. Wood, that, in the North, between 1815 and 1860 what he refers to as Romantic Revolution started to take place. In the North “There did newer and foreign ideas or ‘isms’ from Germanic idealistic philosophy emerge, seeking to perfect America. Manifested in Unitarianism, abolitionism, Transcendentalism, and evangelical-Arminian-latitudinarian-non-Trinitarian theology, the Northern perfectionist impulse was intent on making America anew, more egalitarian and democratic than previously.”

So what we had here was basically an effort to remake the country and to reinterpret its founding documents in such a way as to make them say something they were never intended to say and to mean something they were never intended to mean.
On page 15 reference is made to Francis Lieber. Lieber was a German revolutionary who ended up as a law professor at Columbia at the start of the war and as an advisor to Lincoln on the laws of war. Dr Wood observes that: “Lieber’s view of French liberty accurately describes Lincoln’s own reinterpretation of American government as being ‘of the people’ and as embodying Rousseau’s notion of the national ‘General Will’.” In other words, both Lieber’s and Lincoln’s views were influenced by French revolutionary thinking. In noting Lincoln’s “new Nation” Wood observed, quite accurately that it “delivered more to the Republican Party than to freedmen, white Southerners or American Indians during and after America’s Civil War.”

At Gettysburg, as Dr. Wood stated, Lincoln “did not refer to the ‘Union’ at all but used the word ‘nation’ five times to invoke a new birth of freedom and nationalism for the United States.” This reminds one of George Bush when he gave that famous (or infamous) speech in which he used the term “New World Order” for the first time in his push for world government. Bush had to push his agenda verbally at some point. So did Lincoln.

It would seem that Lincoln realized he was not going to get his wish for “national identity” without a war. Dr. Wood noted that: “Yet by resorting to warfare to compel a national identity that was clearly not going to be established by voluntary means, the North found itself in the paradoxical position of breaking the original contract of the Declaration of Independence in the process of defending it.”

Wood noted the Age of Revolution both in this country and in Europe. He observes how, in Europe, they “…experienced their own contest of ideas and struggle for power among competing political and social groups. On one side were the conservatives (monarchs, aristocrats, and capitalists) seeking to maintain the status quo against the liberal and radical demands of democrats, republicans, and socialists. In Europe, the forces for and against change clashed dramatically in the attempted revolutions of 1848.” Whether most will ever realize it or not, those European socialist revolts had a direct impact on this country.

The “Forty-Eighters” were centralizers. So was Lincoln. Wood says, on page 33, that “…America’s Civil War of 1861-65 was inevitable. It had to happen because Romantic Nationalism in the North demanded political unification. The creation of the states united was a first step toward the Reconstruction of America itself.” You have to wonder if this is what Karl Marx was talking about when, in regard to our South, he mentioned “the reconstruction of a social world.” Wood notes that “With the defeat of the South in 1865, the old republic and federal union of the states were no more.” In other words, as historian and theologian Rev. Steve Wilkins has so accurately stated: “Everything after Reconstruction is post-America.”

Wood noted comments by Timothy Roberts in Distant Revolutions: 1848 and the Challenge to American Exceptionalism University of Virginia Press, 2009 where Roberts said, in part, “the 1848 revolutions undermined faith in American ‘exemplarism’—the belief that America should merely preserve its status as a global model…The 1848 revolutions did not by themselves cause the Civil War, but they did contribute to its timing and meaning for many Americans.” And Dr. Wood notes, as if in conclusion: “Thus, I maintain that the role of revolutionary events in Europe directed Americans’ path to the Civil War. America’s ultimate response to the 1848 revolutions.” And he further states that: “The Southern view of Republicans as ‘fanatics,’ ‘Jacobins,’ and ‘black republicans’ was by no means an exaggeration in the context of world history since 1789…Far from preserving the Union as they claimed to be doing, Lincoln and the Republicans were very much about remaking it anew. Although couched in the language of the founders and framers, their principles of 1776 and 1787 now embodies not original intentions but very different ones informed by 19th century Romantic-nationalist philosophy. It was not the South that changed but the North (or a dominant part of it)…Revolutions have to be justified, of course, and this is what Lincoln and the Republicans accomplished with their new history for a new nation in the making between 1815 and 1865.”

In other words, they kept the old forms but ate out the real substance. Dr. Wood’s little book gives more than a little food for thought to what has actually happened in our history, a history we have really been told precious little about in our day, thanks to establishment “historians.” I can imagine that when his three volume set on this material comes out it will be a real block-buster.