

What Kind of Historian: A Tribute to Erskine Clarke

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In the preface of *Dwelling Place: A Plantation Epic*, Erskine Clarke explains what he believes is necessary to write a good history book. I paid close attention when I first read these words several years ago and begin my tribute sharing his wisdom: “Any history, of course, involves not only intense research and analysis but also an act of imagination as the ‘facts’ of research are arranged and interpreted in the mind of the historian.” In addition to finding the relevant primary sources and strenuously poring over hundreds, if not thousands, of diaries, letters, and other documents, Clarke finds that it is important for historians to ask penetrating questions when seeking to engage the past and understand the actions, beliefs, and motivations of the persons and communities we choose to chronicle and interpret. Even when historians successfully compile the documents we need, there is a distance between the past worlds represented in the written records before us and the present day in which we historians reside. In *Dwelling Place*, one of Clarke’s questions revolves around how the lives of both white enslavers and enslaved Black persons were “linked and interwoven by the power of slavery and by the responses of particular men and women to that power.”¹ Clarke has powerfully demonstrated throughout his long and illustrious career what happens when a historian asks hard questions and answers them with clarity, depth, nuance, and vigor.

What kind of historian is Erskine Clarke? I surmise that no one tribute alone can fully capture Clarke’s brilliance and his scholarly contributions in the field of American religious history. But allow me to offer three insights that illumine Clarke’s significance as a historian. Firstly, I believe Clarke is a historian who has engaged serious subjects and weighty matters. Clarke has unflinchingly delved into the histories of slavery, segregation, and racial discrimination. In doing so, Clarke invites his readers into a past marked by complexity and abounding in contradictions. For example, Clarke limns sophisticated narratives of southern white Presbyterians from the nineteenth century, including pastors such as Charles Colcock Jones and missionary couples such as Leighton and Jane Wilson, that illustrate their deep commitments to Christian ministry and their affection for both the white and Black persons they encountered in their lives as well as their support of evil and racist systems that enslaved, oppressed, and brutalized millions of Africans and African Americans.

Secondly, Clarke is a historian who knows how to write compelling stories. Here is a secret that is widespread within the theological academy: a substantial number of professors do not write well. A person with a PhD has a distinguished record of comprehension in a given field and especially knows a lot about the scholarship related to one’s dissertation, but the degree does not require one to be a skilled writer. (Trust

me, there are scores of dissertations that prove my point.) But Clarke is the rare historian who is as gifted with his prose as with his research. Clarke presents richly textured narratives and stunning reconstructions of the past such that his readers can feel the yearnings for freedom within Lizzy Jones, an enslaved Black woman, and witness how enslaved families endeavored to maintain their dignity and sustain hope in a world filled with terrible racial trauma, sexual violence, and family separation. Clarke is the kind of historian who writes books that elicit intricate discussion of his work in scholarly guilds and evoke the full gamut of human emotions in his readers.

Finally, Clarke is a Christian historian. This is simultaneously an obvious and complicated statement. Perhaps my observation is most clearly and plainly seen at two levels. Clarke is a Christian historian because he has devoted his scholarly career to examining the many forms and theologies of Christianity as expressed and practiced in white and Black communities. Clarke is also a Christian historian because his own faith commitments have inspired his pursuit of grace and truth. Clarke writes honest histories that do not obscure the sinful realities and painful contradictions of the Christian past. Rather, Clarke is the kind of historian who takes the call to discipleship seriously and confronts the failures of white Christians in slavery and segregation. At the end of *To Count Our Days: A History of Columbia Theological Seminary*, Clarke asks whether the seminary's history, "with all its revelations about the human capacity for self-deception and about faith struggling to be faithful," can be a "great resource for Columbia's engagement in the *Missio Dei* in the twenty-first century."¹ This is a challenging question that defies an easy, ready-made solution. And at least one answer raises a host of other vexing questions for faithful Christians. What if some readers of Clarke's history of the seminary ultimately discern that Columbia's past is an impediment to be dismantled and nothing more? It is certainly a testament to Clarke's scholarship that every Christian reader of his work encounters stories of compromise, courage, despair, and hope. Erskine Clarke is a marvelous historian, but a more precise description of Clarke is that he deserves acclaim as one of the finest historians today, if not ever. If my tribute has failed to convince you, all you need to do is read one of his books.

Notes

¹ Erskine Clarke, *Dwelling Place: A Plantation Epic* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005), x-xi.

² Erskine Clarke, *To Count Our Days: A History of Columbia Theological Seminary* (Columbia: The University of South Carolina Press, 2019), 292.