

Liberating the Family?



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著者:Scully

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"Liberating the Family?" is a pioneering attempt to unite recent understanding of race and gender as historical and cultural constructs with extensive archival research. In so doing, Scully has produced a sensitive and intelligent study which bridges social and intellectual history and suggests new ways of understanding key categories of colonial history. The ending of slavery in the Cape Colony marked the beginning of an era of exceptional struggle over culture and consciousness. Far from simply abolishing bonded labor, slave emancipation reshaped the relations between men and women, and the individual and society. "Liberating the Family?" examines how the ideas held by slaves, missionaries, abolitionists, and colonial officials about the capacities and roles of men and women crucially influenced slaves' experiences of freedom. Gender is a key category in the author's analysis. Scully argues that the very concepts of freedom and wage labor that guided the abolition movement were fundamentally shaped by ideas about men's natural right to dominate women. Slave emancipation liberated slave women into legal inequality. Postemancipation labor and social legislation reinforced freed women's subordinate status in the era of freedom. Throughout the book, the author analyzes Cape slavery and emancipation primarily through the views and actions of the former slaves themselves. Slaves brought to emancipation ideas about masculinity and femininity developed both under the regime of slavery and

through discussions with peers about the meanings of freedom and family. Historicizing the archival sources and reading them "against the grain," Scully brings to life ex-slaves' lived experience of emancipation. The book pays particular attention to the ways in which freedwomen struggled in different social and economic settings with ascriptions of what it meant to be a black woman. It details too how freedwomen negotiated and sometimes sought to transform beliefs about masculinity and femininity, about meanings of work, family, and sexuality.

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