Hinton Rowan Helper Biography

Hinton Rowan Helper

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Biography

Hinton Rowan Helper (1829-1909), American author and railroad promoter, wrote a brilliant antislavery tract based on economic analysis, as well as producing several denunciatory books on the African Americans.

Hinton Rowan Helper was born on a small farm near Mocksville, N. C., the youngest of six children. Upon the father's death, the family was forced to turn to a maternal uncle who ran the farm and paid for Hinton's education at the Mocksville Academy. Helper worked as an apprentice to a storekeeper in Salisbury until 1850, when he left for California with $300 in embezzled funds, which he agreed to pay back.

Helper's California adventure failed, and he returned home to write his first book, *The Land of Gold,* perhaps the most derogatory account of California ever written. Complaining that the proslavery publisher of the book had deleted his comments on slavery, he decided to write a criticism of the slave system. *The Impending Crisis: How To Meet It* was an instant success despite the 1857 depression. Using the census statistics of 1850, Helper developed a superb economic critique of slavery, a version of which the young Republican party distributed for campaign purposes in the 1860 election.

Helper was destitute in late 1861, when President Abraham Lincoln made him consul to Buenos Aires. He served competently until 1866, married a well-born Argentinian, but plunged deeply in debt.

Distraught at the failure of middling Southern whites to assume control of the South during the early Reconstruction period, he produced *Nojoque* (1867), a vitriolic attack on African Americans. He followed it the next year with *Negroes in Negroland,* another catalog of disaffection.

After limited success as a real estate promoter and agent for Americans with claims against South American republics, Helper turned to railroads, which occupied his attention for nearly 40 years. He inspired essay contests, compiled statistics, wrote tracts and letters, lobbied incessantly, and produced a visionary feasibility study of intercontinental railroads. During this period he authored three books: the semiautobiographical *Noonday Exigencies in America,* an acerbic treatise on South American nations; *Oddments of Andean Diplomacy;* and *The Three Americas Railway*. He also tried to organize a third political party, encouraged the growth of the American Anthropological Society, and traveled extensively abroad. His wife, childless and blind, returned to Argentina. Helper committed suicide at the age of 79 and was buried in a pauper's grave.