

## THOMAS ERSKINE CLARKE

Erskine Clarke is Professor Emeritus of American Religious History at Columbia Theological Seminary. He has lectured or served as a consultant at a number of places including Wesley Theological Seminary, Washington, D.C.; McCormick Theological Seminary, Chicago; Garrett Theological Seminary, Evanston, Illinois; United Theological College of the West Indies, Kingston, Jamaica; University of Debrecen, Debrecen, Hungary; Nanjing Theological Seminary, Nanjing, China; and University of Stellenbosch, Stellenbosch, South Africa. During the last several years he has lectured at Clare Hall, University of Cambridge; Queens College, University of London; Yale University; the University of Virginia; the Georgia Historical Society; and the Morris Museum of Art, Augusta, Ga. He has been a Visiting Fellow, Clare Hall College, University of Cambridge, and has been elected a Life Member of Clare Hall. He has been a frequent lecturer for seminars sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities.

His primary scholarly interest has focused on religion and slavery in the American South. His publications include *Wrestlin' Jacob: A Portrait of Religion in the Old South* (1979); republished by the University of Alabama Press with a new Introduction in 2000; *The Seminary Presidency in Protestant Theological Seminaries* published in 1995 as a monograph in a special supplement of *Theological Education* by the Association of Theological Schools in the U. S. and Canada; *Our Southern Zion: Calvinism in the South Carolina Low Country, 1690-1990* (University of Alabama Press, 1996). *Wrestlin' Jacob* was selected by *Choice* magazine of the American Library Association as an Academic Book of the Year. He received Author of the Year Award for *Wrestlin' Jacob* from the old Dixie Council of Authors and Journalists. *Our Southern Zion* received the Francis Makemie Award from the Presbyterian Historical Society for "the most outstanding published book-length contribution to American Presbyterian or Reformed history."

His most recent and important work is *Dwelling Place: A Plantation Epic* (2005, Yale University Press). This is an "upstairs-downstairs" history of a white, slave-owning family and of a black slave family over four generations. At the center of the white family was a Presbyterian minister, Charles Colcock Jones, who became known among whites as the "Apostle to the Negro Slaves" for his work among the Gullah-speaking people and his advocacy of humane treatment of slaves. The focus of the "downstairs" story is on the family of Lizzy Jones. Her sons Cato (a driver), Cassius (a basket-maker and laborer), and Porter (a skilled carpenter) are at the center of a dense network of slaves in the rice-growing region of the Georgia coast. Together with Cassius's wife Phoebe (a seamstress) and Porter's wife Patience (a cook), they helped create a remarkable African American community and struggled in a variety of ways against the deep oppression of slavery. *Dwelling Place* received the 2006 Bell Prize from the Georgia Historical Society for the best book on Georgia History; the Bancroft Prize given by Columbia University for a work "of exceptional merit" in American history; a Mary Lawton Hodges prize from the Institute of Southern Studies, University of South Carolina; and an "Award for Excellence in Documenting Georgia's History" from the Georgia Historical Records Advisory Board. Steven Hahn, in his review in *The New Republic* called *Dwelling Place* "one of the finest studies of American slavery every written," and David Brion Davis of Yale called it in the *American Historical Review* "one of the best and most important studies of American slavery I have ever read."

Clarke is presently completing a manuscript of a composite biography to be published by Basic Books in 2012. The study focuses on John Leighton Wilson and Jane Bayard Wilson who freed their inherited slaves in 1836 and provided for their settlement in "Maryland in Liberia" at Cape Palmas. The Wilsons were the first missionaries to West Africa of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. They vigorously opposed the international slave trade, the imperialism of the French in Gabon, and finally what they came to perceive to be the imperialism of American colonies in Liberia. In turn they were regarded by some Liberian settlers, especially Governor John Russwurm at Cape Palmas, as whites who reflected the deep assumptions of US racism. Leighton Wilson wrote an important history of West Africa and was an early explorer of many concerns later taken up by anthropologists. The experience of the freed slaves, especially the family of Paul Sansay, is explored in interaction with the story of the Wilsons. Their lives as slaves in Savannah and on a coastal rice plantation and their experiences as free people at Cape Palmas help to illumine fundamental and long-standing issues in American society. Finally, the stories of indigenous peoples are explored as they reacted to African American settlers, white missionaries, and French imperialism. In particular the Grebo King Freeman and his brother William Davis at Cape Palmas and the Mpongwe King Glass and the brilliant trader Toko in Gabon are central characters in this composite biography. Their struggles with the enticements of Western culture and the power of Western societies and their reactions to missionary challenges to deeply held beliefs and traditions are part of the larger struggles of Non-Western peoples in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.