

# HISTORY OF STRUGGLE, OPPRESSION

## ROOTS SHOWS BLACK HERITAGE

One of the most powerful and significant literary developments recently has been the publication of Roots, a dramatized historical account of the family of the author, Alex Haley. The book has been made into an eight part TV movie which has drawn immense viewing audiences. The TV version is being billed as "the triumph of an American family." But what gives Roots its stirring impact is not its "happy ending" with the most recent generation of the Haley family who have acquired a certain degree of wealth and fame, but in its reclaiming of an inheritance shared by the 250,000 Blacks in this country and an exposure of slavery and the misery and exploitation that it meant for generations of American Blacks, and the remnants of which still scar the country.

Fully half the book is devoted to the life of Kunta Kinte, the author's ancestor who was dragged off in chains from his African village and sold to a Virginia plantation owner. Roots poignantly describes the forcible stripping away of his language, religion and customs—he is even forbidden to use his own name.

### RIPS APART HAPPY SLAVE MYTH

Bit by bit Roots tears asunder many of these long standing myths. While Haley does lapse into a somewhat romantic picture of tribal Africa, he successfully demolishes the picture of brutal savages. He replaces it with a far more accurate description of a people cultivating crops, raising families, scratching out at least a bare living, while all the time the constant prey of those who sought to enslave them.

Haley shows that the wealth of Southern planters

from their mansions to the vast cotton and tobacco crops, came off the backs of the enslaved. He blasts away at the trappings of culture and elegance of the master class.

Perhaps the greatest slander leveled against Black people is that the slaves never struggled for their own freedom. But throughout Haley's dramatization of the family's history a vivid image of resistance comes through from rebellion aboard the

South.

The narrative of Roots breaks off sharply shortly following the Civil War and the emancipation of the slaves. Then the whole of the "Murray family" moved to Tennessee, at which point Haley's family history of professionals and businessmen ceases to be the more or less typical story whose strength lies in what it reveals about the common plight and struggle of Black people. Thus the actual history of the great

weakness in Roots, and in numerous interviews and speeches, Alex Haley expresses almost an obsession with the need to know his particular family heritage. He declares, in the course of the narrative, that the biggest crime of slavery was keeping people from knowing "who they were," by which he means their family background and their African heritage. He even states the mystical belief that his deceased ancestors are



ROOTS SHOWED THE TRUE HISTORY OF SLAVERY - INCLUDING MASSIVE SLAVE REBELLIONS

slave ship to sly attempts to poison the masters, from attempts at escape despite the inevitable floggings—or worse—that inevitably followed failures to the more organized uprisings of slaves led by men like Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner. Haley shows how the "nigger problem" was the number one preoccupation of the slave-masters, and the joy and hope each act of resistance and rebellion held for the slaves who inevitably heard about them through whispers along a grapevine that stretched from plantation to plantation across the

majority of Black people over the 100 years since emancipation—of the betrayal of Reconstruction and the rise of the share-cropping system, enforced by terror, of the great migration to the industrial centers of North and South where Blacks still suffering national oppression found themselves, together with those of other nationalities, bound by a new type of slavery, where the personnel office replaces the auction block and the time clock and the bills replace the chains.

Perhaps the greatest

"up there" watching the completion of his research and writing.

Certainly part of what makes Roots exciting is that Haley was able to overcome the obstacles of centuries of slavery, lack of records and enforced illiteracy of his ancestors to document the history of his family. This also probably guarantees that his next book In Search of Roots (where he tells the story of his twelve years of detective work) will also be a best seller. But people learn from the past mainly what is useful for the present.