

Alice C. Royal with Mickey Ellinger and Scott Braley. *Allensworth: The Freedom Colony*. Berkeley: Heyday Books, 2008. Pp. 141. Paper \$17.95.

As Alice Royal sat in the refurbished house now a part of Allensworth State Historic Park, she remarked, “This is the bed where I was born....” (75) The town of Allensworth represented African American attempts to live free from racism and achieve independence through hard work and self-sufficiency during the first decade of the twentieth century. Today, Allensworth colony embodies the desire to preserve important cultural icons. Descendants of the town worked for more than a decade to create the state park where author Alice Royal was born.

This book provides a good introduction to black migration in California especially during the Great Migration, 1910-1930. Although not written by an historian, Royal uses oral history as well as the town’s buildings and institutions as primary sources, making it an excellent teaching resource. The park tells the story of Allensworth’s thriving community during the golden years of 1908-1918. Through refurbished cultural centers and first person narratives, the park and Royal’s book provide an important understanding of African American desires for self-sufficiency in the early twentieth century. Today the town is a shadow of its former self. Nearly destroyed by a lack of water access and the closure of the local train station today, Allensworth primarily exists as a state park despite being home to almost five hundred people. Royal’s book falls short, however, in providing a deeper analysis of Allensworth’s biggest problem, the lack of water. More data explaining the geographic difficulties would give a clearer picture of the town’s struggle. This is especially disappointing since Royal as an Allensworth native was familiar with the town’s original purpose, vision and struggles.

New efforts to preserve African American heritage found many supporters throughout the black community. Friends of Allensworth organizations formed in the late 1980s in Oakland, Bakersfield, Los Angeles, and San Diego. Royal’s work is part of this new vision of the town by offering a historical lens of black self-reliance. It provides scholars with an understanding of African American history and the history of the American west in the early twentieth century. Royal and others members of the Friends of Allensworth Society sought to preserve the town as critical to African American historiography at a time when many aging participants of the Civil Rights movement looked to educate future generations about America’s past and as a point of understanding and cultural pride. With photographs by Scott Braley, the book is an introduction to historical towns in California. But more importantly, Royal’s work is a valuable oral history that preserves the voices of African American cultural pioneers in California.

David Maynard