

SLAVERY

History and Historians

Peter J. Parish

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For Helen



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Preface

There are times when it is hard to avoid the feeling that historians may unintentionally obstruct the view of history. Our students are sometimes better equipped to reel off the views of the leading authorities in a particular field than to develop a genuine understanding of what happened in the past. Ever-increasing specialization, particularly in such popular and densely populated fields as American history, has encouraged historians to concentrate on conversation—and controversy—with their professional colleagues at the expense of their obligation to present a clear view of the past to a broader audience.

Controversy frequently sets the pace of historical inquiry. Adversarial history has been a powerful stimulus to new discovery and fresh interpretation, but its constructive achievements have not been without cost. Aspirants to membership in the guild of professional historians commonly seek to make a name for themselves by challenging the views of one of the established authorities. Professional historians, absorbed in their long-running controversies, have sometimes left their students and the wider history-reading public bewildered and confused in the face of yet more disagreement among the experts.

There is no better example of this general point than the historiography of slavery in the South. During the last three decades, there has been an unprecedentedly rich outpouring of new work on the subject. It has included some of the great books of modern American historiography. The dimensions of the subject have expanded dramatically as new or neglected aspects of it have been opened up—above all those relating to the lives of the slaves themselves. We

have all benefited from fresh insights and perspectives, new evidence, and new techniques for exploiting this evidence.

Controversy has operated as both cause and effect of this forward surge in the study of slavery. This is as it should be and as it must necessarily be. Our understanding of slavery has gained enormously from the cut and thrust of the historians' debates, but there is also a danger that real historical situations and the real participants in them may be obscured in the dust of the gladiatorial combat between one historian and another. There is no good reason why a wider readership should not have access to the riches amassed by the distinguished historians of slavery during recent decades. History has the enormous advantage that, unlike some of the social sciences, it has not yet completely wrapped itself in a professional jargon which serves to exclude those outside the inner circle. But how is a wider audience to tune in to the multiplicity of voices which have spoken so eloquently on the history of slavery? How is it to come to grips with the intricacies of the debate and share its real excitement?

The purpose of this book is a modest one. It examines some of the more important and illuminating recent work on slavery in the hope of identifying crucial questions and basic themes, and defining some of the main areas of controversy. Its aim—or at least its aspiration—is to offer a few signposts, perhaps even a simple map, to guide those coming afresh to this fascinating subject as they make their way through the thickets of rival interpretations and the fog of historical battle. At an early stage of the enterprise, I abandoned any pretense of comprehensiveness and chose to concentrate on some of the most conspicuous landmarks. The modern golden age of the historiography of slavery, ushered in by Kenneth Stampp and Stanley Elkins, came to a climax with the publication of the major studies of John Blassingame, Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman, Eugene Genovese, Herbert Gutman, and Lawrence Levine during the 1970s. One of my aims in this book has been to measure the conclusions of these outstanding landmarks in the study of slavery against the findings of recent and more specialized studies dealing with particular aspects of the history of slavery or with particular localities within the slaveholding South. If the seventies were the decade of the grand synoptic overview of the South's "peculiar institution," the eighties have been the decade of the in-depth study. With one or two exceptions, the telescope has given way to the microscope.

I come to this discussion of the controversial institution of slavery with views of my own, but, I trust, with no axe to grind. It may be some small advantage to the author of a study of this kind that he has not himself been a combatant in any of the major controversies—and that he is able to view the subject from a safe distance and a transatlantic perspective. I have tried to avoid succumbing too often to the temptation of a bland “much might be said on both sides” approach to areas of controversy, but it is important to establish common ground where it does exist. In the excitement of historiographical attack and counterattack, it is not altogether unknown for scholarly controversialists to exaggerate their differences, or even to erect targets simply for the purpose of knocking them down again.

I take this opportunity to express my deep gratitude to those who have helped me in the preparation of this book. My first and most conspicuous debt is to that large and distinguished band of historians of slavery, on whose work I have fed parasitically for many years. One of the justifications for a book of this kind, and one of the great pleasures in working on it, derives from the sheer quality of so much of the modern historiography of slavery. As my acquaintance with the work of the historians of slavery has broadened and deepened, so too has my admiration and appreciation increased.

Second, I should like to thank my students at the universities of Glasgow and Dundee, and now at the Institute of United States Studies, University of London. They have always been ready to challenge my facile generalizations and to rescue me from at least some of my prejudices and misconceptions; they may even recognize in what follows ideas which I have begged, borrowed, or stolen from them. Year after year, they have also demonstrated how widely shared is the fascination with the subject of slavery. I treasure the comment of one student who, after a lively discussion on the slave family, said to her friend as she left (but within my earshot), “I didn’t know history could be about interesting subjects like that!”

My third debt is to the British Association for American Studies. It was for BAAS that I wrote a pamphlet titled *Slavery*, which was published in 1981, and that pamphlet served as the springboard for this project. BAAS has placed no obstacle in the way of this attempt to write a short book which takes the pamphlet as its starting point. I am particularly grateful to my good friend Donald Ratcliffe, of the University of Durham, who, as the first editor of the BAAS pamphlets

series, provided a superb critique—both rigorous and constructive—of the first draft of the pamphlet. It was Cass Canfield, Jr., of Harper & Row, who first saw the makings of a book in the original pamphlet, and who, with a judicious mixture of patience and firmness, has coaxed me toward completion of the project.

Finally, I thank my family for many things, from patience and moral support to practical assistance—and above all for their determination that I should retain something of that sense of proportion which is one of the historian's most essential qualities. My wife, Norma, has as always maintained a domestic environment which has robbed me of excuses to avoid or delay my work—and she has shown tact and restraint in limiting her references to domestic slavery in the Parish household. My daughter, Helen, remains healthily unimpressed by what I am attempting to do, but at least she has not been deflected by my poor example from her intention to read history when she goes to university. I dedicate this book to her as one of the coming generation of historians.

In a book which consists largely of discussion of the work of other historians, there is the obvious danger that any and every paragraph may give offense to someone. I offer my apologies to any of my fellow historians who may feel that I have been less than just or less than fair, and I accept responsibility for any errors of fact, judgment, or interpretation. If this book serves in some small way to broaden appreciation of one of the great debates among modern historians, I shall be more than content.

PETER J. PARISH

The Paradoxical Institution: Complexity and Controversy

In the American South, as elsewhere, slavery rested upon a basic contradiction: Its guiding principle was that slaves were property, but its everyday practice demonstrated the impossibility of living up to, or down to, that denial of the slave's humanity. The master learned to treat his slaves both as property and as men and women; the slaves learned how to express and affirm their humanity even while they were constrained in much of their lives to accept their status as chattel.

For all the harsh lines of status and class, race and color, which divided owners and slaves, both were caught up in a complex web of compromise, adjustment, inconsistency, ambiguity, and deception. Slave society was the society of the double standard, adopted for its own convenience by the slave-owning class and forced upon the slaves by the simple need to survive. For the master, there were the competing needs of profit and paternalism, economic interest and social standing. The master claimed the absolute right of an owner over his property, but he was also restrained by the conventional morality of his time, his own standards of decency, the precepts of his religious faith, and the pressure of the white community. Owners weighed both their interests and their principles when they debated the balance between kindness and severity, the carrot and the stick, persuasion and coercion, in their management of the slaves.

For their part, slaves were obliged to strike their own balance between resignation and rebellion, accommodation to the facts of

2 * Slavery

slave life and resistance to the dominance of their masters. In their daily lives they strove to reconcile the demands of survival with the impulse to assert their autonomy. They struggled with persistence and ingenuity to create and maintain a life of their own in a situation where, in the nature of things, a large part of their lives could never be their own. They hated slavery but could not maintain total hatred of slave owners and their families. They could fight or take flight or they could lapse into complete submissiveness, but for most of the time most slaves steered a complex, devious, opportunist, occasionally inconsistent, sometimes bewildered, often subtle course between those two extremes. While bracing themselves to support the crushing weight of the master's authority, they succeeded in creating out of their African heritage and their American environment a distinctive African-American culture and life-style, with its own institutions, its own pattern of relationships, and its own communal bonds.

Lawrence Levine has highlighted some of the more acute paradoxes of slavery for both masters and slaves.

Slaveholders who considered Afro-Americans to be little more than sub-human chattels converted them to a religion which stressed their humanity and even their divinity. Masters who desired and expected their slaves to act like dependent children also enjoined them to behave like mature, responsible adults. . . . Whites who considered their black servants to be little more than barbarians, bereft of any culture worth the name, paid a fascinated and flattering attention to their song, their dance, their tales, and their forms of religious exercise. The life of every slave could be altered by the most arbitrary and immoral acts. They could be whipped, sexually assaulted, ripped out of societies in which they had deep roots, and bartered away for pecuniary profit by men and women who were also capable of treating them with kindness and consideration and who professed belief in a moral code which they held up for emulation not only by their children but often by their slaves as well.¹

In their sharply different ways, whites and blacks, masters and slaves, learned to live with slavery by learning to live a lie. They divided their lives into compartments, did not prize consistency too highly, evaded rather than confronted some of the inherent contradictions of slave

society, and blurred the harsh lines of the system by bargain and compromise.

Slavery abounded in further paradoxes and contradictions. It owed its very existence in North America to the rise of capitalism in Europe, and yet it provided the foundation for a distinctive Southern social and economic order which lived uneasily with full-blown nineteenth-century capitalism—or, indeed, in the opinion of Eugene Genovese and others, was basically incompatible with it.² The products of slave labor, cotton above all, were crucial to the northern Atlantic economy in the mid-nineteenth century and constituted by far the most important item in the export trade of the free-enterprise capitalist American economy.

There was an even more tangled relationship between slavery and American liberty, republicanism and democracy. If the American colonies were in most respects the freest society in the eighteenth-century world, that society already bore within it the malignant tumor of a well-established system of racial slavery. The irony of a Declaration of Independence affirming that all men were created equal, but drafted and signed by large-scale slave owners, was not entirely lost upon the Revolutionary generation, but may have seemed less blatant than it does today. Be that as it may, slavery marched on into the nineteenth century, advancing in area, numbers, and economic performance. But increasingly it became an anachronism in a rapidly changing world, and an anachronism above all in a country which saw itself—and was perceived by others—as the standard-bearer of liberty and democracy. For Southern whites, however, slavery and liberty were inextricably intertwined; indeed, their conception of the latter depended upon the preservation of the former.³ When the states of the Deep South seceded in 1860–61, they did so in defense of their freedom as they understood it. That freedom included the right to hold their slave property, and to take it with them into the western territories. It is the final paradox of the history of Southern slavery that this dramatic bid to defend it in fact sealed its fate during the next four years. Without secession and Civil War, it is virtually inconceivable that slavery would have been abolished during the 1860s.

Some of the contradictions and paradoxes of slave society were inherent in the system. Others may have been more apparent than real, in view of the remarkable diversity of slavery in the American South. There can be no greater mistake than to regard slavery as

monolithic. It evolved more than two centuries before it reached its prime in the pre-Civil War decades, and some major interpretations have given too little weight to this most important historical dimension of change over time. Indeed, it has even been suggested that intense concentration on the study of slavery in the immediate antebellum decades has placed undue emphasis on certain features which may have been atypical of the history of Southern slavery as a whole.⁴ What is beyond all question is that slavery was, throughout its history in North America, a growing, changing, mobile, flexible, and variable institution.

It varied greatly not only from time to time but from place to place—from the border states to the deep South, from Virginia and the Carolinas through Alabama and Mississippi to Texas. In fact, the slave population was spread very unevenly across the South, and even within individual states. There were large areas of “slave” states which contained few slaves, if any at all, in their population. This was most conspicuously true of the Appalachian region, including western Virginia and North Carolina, eastern Kentucky, and Tennessee; but it occurred elsewhere, too—for example, in those large areas of the state of Missouri which were not close to the Missouri or Mississippi rivers. Even in the heartland of the Deep South, there were marked contrasts within Georgia and Alabama, for example, between those areas with a heavy concentration of slaves and those with only a scattered few. The spectrum ran all the way from Appalachian counties, where there were no slaves at all, to Adams County in Mississippi, where there were fifty slaves for every white person. One consequence of these variations was a considerable degree of geographical separation between white yeoman farmers and Negro slaves in some, but by no means all, regions of the South.

These local variations within the South were a reflection, in part, of the demands imposed by the cultivation of various staple crops. Here, another complication—and even another contradiction—in the overall pattern of Southern slavery presents itself. In the picture of the South during its antebellum maturity, cotton occupies the dominant position, and rightly so. Yet, on the other hand, some of the areas with the largest concentrations of slave population and of slave ownership, and areas which conjure up the most vivid and enduring images of Southern plantation society, were not provinces of the realm of King Cotton. The tobacco plantations of the Chesapeake Bay area (espe-

cially of Virginia), the rice plantations of the coastal areas of South Carolina and Georgia, and the sugar plantations of Louisiana were the backgrounds from which emerged many of the *grandees* of the Southern slaveholding aristocracy. All may well be regarded as quintessentially Southern, and yet all were exceptions to the rule. Indeed, one historian, James Oakes, has depicted these very areas as outmoded outposts of an older paternalist tradition of slave ownership, increasingly isolated from the dynamic, expanding, business-oriented slave society, based mainly on cotton, which prevailed elsewhere.⁵ It is questionable whether such significant parts of the total picture, which happen to have been geographically on the margin of the old South, can be pushed quite so far to the margin in other respects.

Of all the sources of the diversity of Southern slavery, none is more important than the size of the individual slaveholding unit. This was influenced by both regional and historical factors, and also the requirements of particular crops. Understandably, but in some ways misleadingly, historians have given most of their attention to the larger plantations, many of which have left extensive records behind them, whereas the small farmer, owning perhaps one family of slaves, seldom had the time or need or perhaps the ability to record farm activities in detail. The stock image of the slave environment is the great plantation, with its scores or even hundreds of slaves. In fact, in the mid-nineteenth century, half of the total number of slaveholders owned no more than five slaves each; on the other hand, a majority of bondmen and bondwomen belonged to holders of twenty or more slaves. As in so many other matters, the distribution of the slave population looks very different according to whether it is viewed from the slave's or the owner's point of view. If "typical" is taken at its simplest to mean membership of the majority, then the typical slave did not belong to the typical owner. Clearly, for the slave who was one of a handful working for, and often alongside, a master cultivating a family farm of modest size, every aspect of daily life, including any sense of belonging to a slave community, was very different from the experience of a slave who was one of thirty or fifty or one hundred on a large plantation.

Slavery was a system of many systems, with numerous exceptions to every rule. In addition to the typical field hands, there were domestic servants, craftspersons and artisans, and overseers and

drivers. Beyond the farms and plantations, there were urban slaves, industrial slaves, and hired slaves, and there were a quarter of a million free blacks in the South who lived constantly in the shadow of slavery. The individual slave might well have experienced a variety of owners, environments, and occupations during a lifetime.

Finally, the variety of slavery arose from the variety of human nature. Slave owners and slaves, like other people, could be honest or dishonest, weak or strong, responsible or irresponsible, humane or sadistic, puritanical or lecherous, sober or drunk, stable or neurotic, intelligent or stupid. If the impact of slavery on the slave depended on the character or the mood of the master, the response of the slave to his or her situation depended on individual resources of character, will, endurance, and adaptability, and the sustaining power of the slave's family, community, faith, and way of life. Behind all the generalizations, the models, and the stereotypes about the planter class, the slaveholding mentality, the slave personality, and the slave community, there lies the history of millions of individuals living out their daily lives. One of the peculiarities of the peculiar institution of slavery is to be found in the distinctive pattern of human relationships it required or encouraged.

Both the multifaceted character and the inner tensions and contradictions of Southern slavery have colored the historical debate on the subject. They have helped to stimulate controversies of great intensity and to produce something of a roller-coaster effect, as successive schools of interpretation have soared into prominence and then plunged into the critical depths. Some of the major American historians of the second half of the twentieth century—Kenneth Stampp, John Hope Franklin, Eugene Genovese, Herbert Gutman, Lawrence Levine, and John Blassingame,⁶ for example—have contributed powerfully to the modern debate about Southern slavery. Curiously, however, much of the modern historiographical argument has been shaped by three major but deeply flawed works which aroused such a powerful critical reaction that they rewrote the agenda of slavery studies.

The first of these was the work of the pioneer Southern historian of slavery, Ulrich B. Phillips, which was based on extensive research in plantation records but also on a deep attachment to the old South and a belief in black racial inferiority. In *American Negro Slavery*, published in 1918,⁷ he treated the slave as the beneficiary of a

patriarchal but unprofitable institution designed to maintain the South's cardinal principle of white supremacy. The framework established by Phillips and his followers cast the slaves themselves primarily in the role of objects, whether as victims or beneficiaries. The focus was on slave "treatment," as well as on the performance of the slave economy and the efficiency or inefficiency of slave labor. One of the remarkable features of the Phillips interpretation was its longevity. It survived for thirty years, at least, as the conventional wisdom on the subject, but the critical reaction against it eventually gathered momentum and found its definitive expression in 1956 in *The Peculiar Institution*, a work by distinguished Northern historian Kenneth Stampp.⁸ Basically, Stampp accepted the framework Phillips had constructed, but, more than matching his predecessor's research in the plantation records, he completely overturned Phillips's conclusions. Stampp saw the slave as the maltreated victim of a profitable economic system; in a nutshell, where Phillips had viewed slavery as mild but inefficient, Stampp saw it as harsh but profitable.

Just a few years after Stampp had set his seal on the debate over a slavery conducted according to one set of terms, Stanley Elkins shifted the argument to very different ground. His *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life*, first published in 1959,⁹ was a work of great intellectual audacity, based on a methodology which had little connection with conventional historical research and arriving at conclusions which were challenging or outrageous, according to one's point of view. Elkins depicted the slave as the psychic casualty of an all-embracing repressive system and sought to emphasize his point by comparing the psychological damage suffered by slaves on the Southern plantation to that inflicted upon inmates of the Nazi concentration camps. Elkins's *Slavery* is the supreme example of a book which has exercised a profound influence, not by the persuasiveness of its arguments, but above all through the questions it raised, the massive critical response it elicited, and the new work it stimulated. Whatever the gaps in his arguments and the flaws in his methodology, Elkins did more than anyone else to set the agenda for the next generation of historians of slavery. His influence is to be measured not in the band of disciples and converts he inspired, for their numbers were few, but in the army of critics he goaded into fresh thinking about a whole range of different questions.

Ironically, for one who had stressed the depersonalizing impact of

slavery upon the slaves, one consequence of Elkins's work was to encourage long-overdue recognition of the slave as a person. In the thirty years since Elkins's book first appeared, historians have discussed not only the extent to which the slave personality resisted, or succumbed to, the extraordinary stresses of bondage, but the means by which slaves succeeded in constructing and maintaining a life-style, a set of values, and a culture which was distinctively their own. Phrases such as "the slave personality," "the slave community," and "slave culture" have become part of the common parlance of the historians' debate. Instead of appearing as the victim or object to whom things happened or were done, the slave has emerged, in the work of historians such as Genovese, Gutman, Levine, Blassingame, and many others, as an active participant not only in the development of his or her own life-style, but in the overall history of the peculiar institution. The presentation of a slave's-eye view of slavery has raised many questions, and so far has perhaps produced rather fewer answers, but it has irreversibly altered our understanding of the whole subject.

If any one book has matched or even surpassed Elkins's *Slavery* in the furor its publication provoked, it was surely Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman's *Time on the Cross*, which appeared in 1974.¹⁰ In what was intended to be a model of the application of quantitative methods to a major historical problem, *Time on the Cross* returned the focus to the economics of slavery, but their work ranged widely over many aspects of slave life, from diet and housing to opportunities for individual advancement, and from sexual morality to religious observance. Fogel and Engerman claimed that slave-based Southern agriculture was both efficient and profitable, and that the slave benefited in many ways, not least because considerate treatment of a valuable capital asset was to the financial advantage of profit-seeking slave owners. Breaking both the Phillips and Stamp mold, they described an institution which was at once mild, efficient, and profitable.

Like Elkins a decade and a half earlier, Fogel and Engerman found that the sensation which publication of their work had initially produced was followed by a barrage of criticism and counterattack questioning both their methodology and their conclusions. What had at first sight seemed provocative and innovative struck many historians, on further reflection, as misconceived or simply mistaken. On the other hand, however much some of Fogel and Engerman's conclusions have been rebutted or even discredited, it is surely true to