

The Literature of Slavery: A Re-Evaluation

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In 1933, Ralph B. Flanders in his *Plantation Slavery in Georgia* pointed out that no satisfactory study of slavery in its several phases existed for a single southern state. It is interesting to note that in that same year Ruth Scarborough published a work on the *Opposition to Slavery in Georgia Prior to 1860* which is a valuable supplement to Flanders' work; and further, in 1933, Charles S. Sydnor published his *Slavery in Mississippi* which comes nearer to meeting the need which Flanders noted than does any other one book. But even here there was left much room for further study, and in some other areas the gap to be filled is even larger.

The study of the institution of slavery—a difficult task at its best—was complicated by the tons of material that were manufactured around the sectional controversy and the political aspects of the institution. This “cold war of sectional apologetics” brought many pieces of propaganda that would have done credit to the Hitlerian idea of racial supremacy and which give a mild tone to the language which the Russians and the Western powers hurl at one another. The truth of the situation was so obscured that only recently have we come to uncover it, and even to get some good works on the cold war itself. There are a few works, however, in this period before the end of the Civil War that have some value for us. James Stirling, James S. Buckingham, Claude Mackay, Frederick L. Olmsted, Nehemiah Adams, Frances A. Kemble, and a few of the other travelers or temporary sojourners contain observations or analyses that are penetrating from the social standpoint, though one must ever be wary of the inaccuracies of reporting then as today. Two of the travel accounts—Charles G. Parsons' *Inside View of Slavery* and Philo Tower's *Slavery Unmasked* afford an excellent opportunity for a study in plagiarism of the former by the latter, while Mrs. Mary H. Eastman's *Aunt Phillis' Cabin*, as an answer to the well-known *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, seems to have been neglected almost en-

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tirely by analysts of the sectional literary strife. On the other hand, Henry Chase and Charles W. Sanborn's *The North and the South: A Statistical View of the Condition of the Free and Slave States* seems much less well known than that of Hinton R. Helper, *The Impending Crisis of the South: How to Meet It*, who published in the following year. Perhaps the best work of this period came in connection with the studies on the law of slavery: Thomas R. Cobb, John C. Hurd, George M. Stroud; and the valuable compilation by J. D. B. De Bow: *Industrial Resources*. One other discriminating study, Daniel R. Hundley's *Social Relations in Our Southern States* (1860) presents the most accurate picture of the population structure of the South that was published prior to the 1930's. There should also be mentioned here the observations of John William DeForest before the war and during the reconstruction period in South Carolina. These analysts saw more than the slaveowners, slaves, and poor white divisions in the South. While the above are the best, the worst was John E. Cairnes, who in his first edition of *The Slave Power* found five million "mean whites" but lost one million of them for his second printing.

The works of the decades of the 1860's and the 1870's reveal the hangover of the great drunk of the preceding quarter century: Henry Wilson, Edward A. Pollard, and the others. But in the 1880's three works appear that are less colored by sectional animosities. These were William Still's *Underground Railroad Records*, George W. Williams' *History of the Negro Race in America from 1619 to 1880* (a rather remarkable work for the period—Williams was a Negro) and in 1889 Jeffrey R. Brackett's *The Negro in Maryland: A Study of the Institution of Slavery*. Brackett devotes ninety pages to the free Negro, and although there is no analysis of the relation of slavery to agriculture, nothing on town slavery and many other phases of the institution, this is a good political and social study which may be called the beginning of the scientific history as applied to slavery (even though preceded by twenty-three years by George H. Moore's *Notes on the History of Slavery in Massachusetts*). In the 1890's the influence of Herbert B. Adams and the Hopkins group came into prominence with studies on several of the northern original slave states, three works by John S. Bassett on North Carolina, further work on the underground railroad, a beginning on the study of the slave

trade, and a study on the southern Quakers and slavery.

Most of the above were confined to the political and social aspects of slavery, and it remained for Philip A. Bruce's *Economic History of Virginia* (1895) to turn the attention of historians to other phases of study. This work, followed in 1913 by Charles A. Beard's *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States*, had the effect of greatly broadening slavery studies, though some of a considerably later date revert to politics as their main theme. Respectable production increased as the scientific historians—led by James C. Ballagh, John M. Vincent, William Dodd, Ulrich B. Phillips, and Bassett—became more numerous and stress was placed on the publication of documents. Phillips' *Plantation and Frontier Documents* had a decided effect here, and the three decades of activity were temporarily capstoned by his *American Negro Slavery* in 1918. The dozen and a half contributions of the 1910 decade were followed by a dozen in the 1920's and by two dozen in the 1930's. In the middle 1930's an even broader basis of study was provided through the influence of Frank L. Owsley. This newest approach involves much more digging and laborious research, but gives a more nearly accurate picture of the antebellum period.

With this very brief account of the trend of the study of the institution, one should turn to see in what fields slavery has been adequately examined and what remains to be done. The relation of the institution to the political fabric of the country has been the subject of more diatribes, polemics, and respectable historical works than any other single phase. Within this orbit, the most widely studied segment (the word studied is used with studied reserve) has been the abolition crusade and the "slave conspiracy." The works of Albert B. Hart, Hilary A. Herbert, Jesse Macy, Gilbert H. Barnes, Dwight L. Dumond, Asa E. Martin, Arthur Y. Lloyd, Alice D. Adams, Justin H. Smith, Eugene C. Barker, Chauncey S. Boucher, Ruth Ketring-Nuermberger, and William S. Jenkins are the main ones; the lesser ones are too numerous to mention. The reorientation of the line of study after the publication of Barnes' *The Antislavery Impulse, 1830-1844* does not seem to have been as complete as it should have been; at any rate, the newer approach is still foreign to many textbook writers. But even in the political field there has been inadequate study of the colonization movements in the southern

states, and the thesis that the South shifted to a whole-hearted defense of slavery after 1831 needs further investigation within almost every state. It was unfortunate that most of the literary talent of the South was expended in supporting slavery, but to say that there was suppression of freedom of thought and speech seems unjustified. The climate of opinion may not have been too favorable for these freedoms, but to go much beyond this is dangerous. Too many of the earlier writers, on the abolition crusade particularly, have injected their own moral judgments—generally twentieth century judgments—into their supposedly scientific analyses. This is outside the province of the historian.

The foreign slave trade has been discussed briefly by several authors and at length by some others in the light of the great inhumanity of it all, but the works of Henry C. Carey, John R. Spears, and W. E. B. DuBois must be listed as contributions. The most comprehensive work here is the set of documents edited by Elizabeth Donnan, *Documents Illustrative of the History of the Slave Trade to America* (4 volumes), whose introductions to the various parts of her study reveal a better understanding and keener analysis than do the monographs devoted exclusively to a discussion of the trade. The domestic slave trade is still without an accurate unbiased student. Frederic Bancroft's figures are directly traceable to Cairnes, and Cairnes' are only a little more than a decade from the report of the American Anti-Slavery Society. The pseudologic and mental gymnastics that these authors engage in to prove their preconceived ideas leave one with misinformation that is worse than no information at all. It should be added, however, that as long as Bancroft confines himself to the mechanics of the trade, he is sufficiently at home to make a contribution. It is unfortunate that there has been such a constant repetition of the propaganda figures of the mid-nineteenth century.

The existence of the underground railroad doubtless influenced some owners of the border states to sell to the Lower South, though this connection has too often been overlooked by students of the interstate slave trade. This multi-tracked line has received considerable attention in the biographies of several individuals, in reminiscences, and in the works of Still, Wilbur H. Seibert, and William M. Cockrum. In recent years it has had virtually no reworking; its history does not have

too great a bearing on an understanding of the history of slavery.

Williams in his *History of the Negro* in 1882 viewed the underground railroad as the escape valve of slavery, without which he said there could well have been a repetition of the San Dominican trouble. Revolts, or threatened revolts, were naturally of great concern to the slaveowners and to the other members of the southern society. Here, however, a sound study is lacking. William S. Drewry has treated the Virginia revolts; Joseph C. Carroll dealt principally with the Gabriel, Denmark Vesey, and Nat Turner disturbances, with more than the permissible number of errors; and Herbert Aptheker is so subjective and lacking in discrimination that the book—in any of its forms—scarcely deserves to be classed as history. At any rate, the room for the study is still there.

Legal prohibitions on assemblage were one of the safeguards against potential revolt and these restrictions tended to curtail religious instruction. Among those who have prepared articles or monographs on some aspect of the slave and religion—or some church and its position on slavery—are Stephen B. Weeks, David Rice, John S. Bassett, Walter Posey, Mary Putnam, Charles Swaney, and Marcus W. Jernegan. The palm must go to Mary Putnam for her work on the Baptists (prepared under William Dodd) and to Charles Swaney for his study on Episcopal Methodism with sidelights on church politics. For the actual workings of the churches among the slaves, especially on the plantations, the only valuable work is that by W. P. Harrison (ed.), *The Gospel Among the Slaves, a Short Account of Missionary Activities Among the African Slaves of the Southern States* (Nashville, 1893), which deals with the activities of the Methodists. Apparently, they are the only denomination for which there are any extensive records available. The article, or piece-meal, approach is probably the only possibility of securing a reasonably accurate picture for this part of the mosaic, though it is probable that prohibitions on religious instruction were more honored in the breach than in the observance.

The status of the slave—according to the letter of the law—was fairly well defined even before the Civil War by such works as Cobb, Hurd, and Stroud. The actual interpretation of these statutes has been put into readily accessible form by Helen T. Catterall's *Judicial Cases Concerning American Slavery and the Negro*, while Howell M. Henry, *The Police Control of the Slave in South Carolina*, and B. R. Holt, *The Supreme*

Court of North Carolina and Slavery, have made specialized studies on the police control of slaves in South Carolina and on the attitude of the North Carolina Supreme Court toward the institution. There are still too many writers on slavery who view the statutory position as the actual position of the slave—and would probably be sufficiently naive to say there actually was prohibition from 1919 to 1933; on the other hand, there are others who will not quite go along with Phillips on the idea that the government of slaves was one part by law and ninety-nine parts by men. The legal position can best be studied in relation to slavery in a particular state, for the code was an evolutionary one, determined in large measure by local conditions. One must exclude from the evolutionary process the original South Carolina code, and, of course, the Code Noir of the early 1700's in Louisiana. Where the institution has been studied, the legal position has generally been treated with competence.

The building materials for the over-all study of slavery must be the monographic treatments of the institution within the several states, and it is somewhat discouraging at this date to find several of the more important foundation stones missing. The tobacco kingdom was the first area to receive the attention of the scientific historians, and, in general, is the only area that is yet at all adequately treated.

Brackett broke the ground with his 1889 study of slavery in Maryland, a considerable portion of which it will be remembered was devoted to the study of the free Negro. The study has a number of shortcomings in that it omits several phases of the institution, but some of the gap has been filled by works or articles on the free Negro, labor controls, and related topics.

Ballagh's work on Virginia is still standard for the state, but it is slightly inferior to the Maryland study. In the Old Dominion state, however, there have been more important supplements than there have been in Maryland: Bruce's *Economic History* (1895), Thomas J. Wertenbaker's *Planters* (1922), Avery O. Craven's *Soil Exhaustion* (applicable of course to both of these states), and significant portions of the biographies of several individuals, as well as a number of specialized articles. The most thoroughly covered portion of slavery in Virginia is the famous debate of the assembly and the slavery agitation of the early nineteenth century.

North Carolina has better coverage than any of the other southern slave states. Bassett's works on the colony, the state,

and the antislavery leaders have been supplemented by Rosser H. Taylor, *Slaveholding in North Carolina: An Economic View*, Henry M. Wagstaff, *Minutes of the N. C. Manumission Society, 1816-1834* (volumes XVIII and XXII in the James Sprunt Historical Publications), Holt, *The Supreme Court of North Carolina and Slavery*, and numerous good articles in the *North Carolina Historical Review*. Nor should one overlook Weeks's book on the *Southern Quakers and Slavery* published the same year (1896) as Bassett's work on slavery and servitude in the colony.

The three major works on Kentucky do not paint as clear a picture as do those of North Carolina. Ivan E. McDougale's study, *Slavery in Kentucky, 1792-1865* (1918), is rather general in nature—development, legal, and social—with not too much information that gets to the heart of the institution. In that same year Asa Martin published his work on *The Anti-Slavery Movement in Kentucky Prior to 1850*; a good study which he has not carried on to 1860 as originally intended either because he was distracted to other activities or because he has found there was not room for another monograph in the last pre-Civil War decade. J. Winston Coleman's *Slavery Times in Kentucky* (1940) is a colorful and appealing study which seems to catch much of the spirit of the period, but does not give us enough of the flesh and bones of the institution. A number of professional articles helps to fill some of the gaps in the Kentucky quarter. A study has just been published on the hemp industry which may also supplement the earlier works.¹

Harrison A. Trexler's *Slavery in Missouri, 1804-1865* (1914), preceded by an article on slavery in the territory, is as good coverage by a single book as will be found, with the exception of Sydnor's. Trexler seems to have been the first individual to use numerous types of local records in his analyses, and also the first to employ the manuscript census records in any way. The value of his work would have been greatly increased by an exploitation of the census records.

Tennessee must be content at the present time to get her story of slavery from the compilation of materials—a first conning over, one might call it—by C. P. Patterson, *The Negro in Tennessee, 1790-1865* (1922), from the study of Charles E. Hedrick on *Social and Economic Aspects of Slavery in the Transmontane Prior to 1850* (1927), from several articles, and from Blanche H. Clark's *Tennessee Yeomen, 1840-1860*

¹ James F. Hopkins, *History of the Hemp Industry in Kentucky* (Lexington, Kentucky, 1951).

(1942). The last mentioned is a very valuable piece of work, but its special emphasis is on the nonslaveholder. Two works, now in progress, on slavery and the free Negro should go far to round out the picture in that state.

The work is well along in the Upper South and the border region, but such a good report unfortunately can not be given for the Lower South. In South Carolina, there has been a study in Americanization of the Negro in the colonial period,² a forty-two page summary of slavery from 1670 to 1770,³ and a study of the police control of slaves.⁴ Also, there have been some articles—though not many—and some documents, but the institution in that important state is still without a historian.

Up until 1930 slavery in Georgia seems to have been practically "unknown" to the historians. An article or two had appeared before that time, some more in that year, and in 1933 Flanders and Scarborough published their studies. Both are good works, though Flanders is confined to plantation slavery and thus omits a very large part of the slaveholding population from its scope.

Floridians must glean a meager diet from an article by Wilbur H. Siebert, two by Dorothy Dodd, and the Phillips-Glunt records of the Noble Jones's plantation. The introduction and the notes of the last-mentioned work do prevent the void from being as great as it might first appear.

Alabama was without a work of any consequence until the publication, in 1939, of Charles Davis's *The Cotton Kingdom in Alabama*. The emphasis here is on plantation slavery, though the other types come in for corollary attention. Davis made extensive use of tax lists, assessors' lists, and other local records, as well as newspapers, planters' records, and the manuscript census schedules. Several of the gaps left by the Davis book have been filled by James B. Sellars, *Slavery in Alabama* (1950). This work follows closely the line laid out by Owsley (see below), and taken together with Davis's work, the Owsleys' article, and Weymouth T. Jordan's study it limns a very good picture of the peculiar institution in the Yellowhammer state.

² Frank J. Klingberg, *An Appraisal of the Negro in Colonial South Carolina* (Washington, D.C., 1941).

³ Edward McCrady, "Slavery in the Province of South Carolina from 1670 to 1770," in American Historical Association, *Annual Report . . . for the Year 1895* (Washington, 1895), 631-673.

⁴ Howell M. Henry, *The Police Control of the Slave in South Carolina* (Emory, Virginia, 1914).

Sydnor's study on Mississippi is the most comprehensive single book on a particular state, and it has been admirably broadened by Herbert Weaver's monograph on *Mississippi Farmers, 1850-1860*. Sydnor's economics have been questioned by Thomas P. Govan,⁵ and some of Weaver's analyses throw new or different light on portions of Sydnor's work. Be that as it may, these two studies go far toward bringing a full understanding of the institution in its basic aspects. One should not leave Mississippi without mention of Sydnor's article on the life span of slaves which is most revealing, namely that the Negro had a longer life in comparison with the white during slavery times than he did in later years.

Louisiana was favored with a good study on the sugar plantations by V. Alton Moody in 1924, and a more comprehensive analysis touching on the late antebellum period by Roger W. Shugg in 1939. The newest and broadest approach is represented by Harry Coles's "Some Notes on Slaveownership and Landownership in Louisiana, 1850-1860"⁶ which are the first fruits of a more elaborate study.

Studies for Texas and Arkansas are lacking. The institution has been examined as it related to the colonization of Texas, to the Texas revolution, and to the War with Mexico, but the investigation has been confined to these political angles. If historical production were to be taken as a criterion of existence, there was no slavery to speak of in Arkansas.

Excellent studies of slavery exist for Pennsylvania (Edward R. Turner, 1911), and for Illinois (N. Dwight Harris, 1904), while satisfactory ones are available for the colonial period in New York (E. V. Morgan, 1891) and Samuel McKee, 1935), for Massachusetts (George H. Moore, 1866), Connecticut (Bernard C. Steiner, 1893), and New Jersey (Henry S. Cooley, 1896), with a less satisfactory study by Mary Tremain (1892) on the District of Columbia. Lorenzo Johnston Greene's *The Negro in Colonial New England* (1942) makes admirable use of previous works and adds materially to the understanding of slavery in the northeastern part of the country.

Before proceeding to a brief description of what yet needs to be done, mention should be made of Phillips' *American*

⁵ Thomas P. Govan, "Was Plantation Slavery Profitable?," *Journal of Southern History* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana, 1935-), VIII (1942), 513-535.

⁶ *Journal of Southern History*, IX (1943), 381-394.

Negro Slavery and his *Life and Labor* as well as Lewis C. Gray's monumental work on southern agriculture prior to 1860. The achievement of Phillips in 1918 is indeed impressive and his *Slavery* will not be replaced for many years—if at all. But there is need of continuing the supplementing of this work and of broadening the basis of study. His *Life and Labor* is more mature than the *Slavery*; it is broader and more interpretative. Gray disagrees with Phillips on a number of points, but he has assembled and interpreted such an incredible amount of material that his work is far more than the title might suggest.

Still not all the cotton has been chopped nor all the tobacco suckered, and for the last decade and a half Owsley and his students have been offering "new" or "slightly used" tools for carrying on the work. These implements are a spade, fork, and abacus (or maybe a calculator), and a dogged determination to plow the dirt of the various depositories of local records and to clear a portion of the almost-virgin forests of the federal manuscript censuses. There are sinks and quagmires in these records as in most others, and these "short and simple annals of the poor" are almost incredibly long and complicated, but through them—along with the long-used records—one can come nearer to the true picture of the antebellum South than in any other way. The emphasis is shifted, under this newer program, to a more statistical analysis and to the yeoman group, which was and is the most numerous element of the population. The first fruits of this newer method—articles by the Owsleys, and his *Plain Folk*, along with the "Notes" by Coles, and the works by Weaver and Clark—attest to the soundness and desirability of continuing on those lines. One must also continue the documentary and semi-documentary studies such as those by E. Merton Coulter, Wendell H. Stephenson, J. Carlyle Sitterson, Edwin A. Davis, and J. H. Easterby (to mention only a few) and, among other things, pursue the study of hired labor (begun by Sitterson), the agricultural reform movement (with articles such as James C. Bonner's), and analyze slavery as an industrial system (in the line of Jernegan).

It may not be possible, or desirable, to write the *one* satisfactory book for each state—as Flanders put it—but if the voids indicated are filled by studies carried out along the lines of the most recent ones, the road to an understanding of the true conditions of the antebellum South will be paved with more than good intentions.