SLAVERY AND ANTISLAVERY IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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Slavery existed on American soil from the colonial period until the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865. Contemporary sources of information about this 'peculiar institution' include slave narratives, journals and tracts published by abolitionist societies, travellers' reports, political speeches, religious sermons, newspaper articles and advertisements, and works of fiction. The British Library has a rich collection of all of these materials.

The writing and recording of slaves' experiences go back to the latter part of the eighteenth century. During the nineteenth century the narratives of runaway slaves provided the antislavery movement with a highly effective weapon and after the Civil War many more of these narratives were published as were reminiscences by those who had spoken with slaves. Together these materials provide a rich source of information about the lives of the slaves, their work and relationships with their owners, their families and lives in the slave quarters.

Unlike later narratives, which were written by second and third generation slaves, The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano (London, 1789) contains a vivid description of a slave ship's journey to North America. On board Equiano found 'a multitude of black people of every description chained together, every one of their countenances expressing dejection and sorrow'. While below deck he 'received such a salutation in my nostrils as I had never experienced in my life: so that, with the loathsomeness of the stench, and crying together, I became so sick and low that I was not able to eat... I now wished for my last friend, death, to relieve me; but soon, to my grief, two of the white men offered me eatables; and, on my refusing to eat, one of them held me fast by the hands, and laid me across the... windlass, and tied my feet, while the other flogged me severely...' (see fig. 1).

Descriptions of the physical cruelty endured by slaves is a thread that links many of their narratives. The whip was the most common of the threats and punishments which helped to keep the slave system in place. Other methods included ear cropping, iron collars, imprisonment in tiny cells with few air holes, and extended isolation. The majority of narratives published before the Civil War were written by fugitive slaves who had risked escaping rather than continue a life led perpetually at the mercy of their master. While some slaves escaped alone, others were helped by the 'Underground...
Railroad', an extraordinary network involving thousands of individuals (including many former slaves) who were willing to break the law and/or endanger their own lives by feeding, hiding and disguising the slaves en route to freedom.

William Still’s *The Underground Railroad* (Philadelphia, 1872) contains hundreds of biographical sketches and third-person narratives of slaves who were helped by Railroad stewards. A much publicized narrative by another beneficiary was that of Henry Box Brown, so-called because he escaped from Richmond, Virginia, to Philadelphia in a box measuring three feet one inch long, two feet wide, and two feet six inches deep. Brown chose to escape from his master not because he was physically abused but because, after his wife and children were sold, ‘slavery now had no mitigating circumstances, to lessen the bitterness of its cup of woe’.

It has been estimated that between one quarter and one
third of slave families were broken up by the sale of one or more members due to their masters' debts, bankruptcy, relocation, or death. Many slave narratives echo Brown's assertion that these separations 'were more dreadful to all of us than a large number of lashes inflicted on us daily'; indeed they may have been worse than whippings because they could be demanded by even the kindest master.

Until 1850 fugitive slaves from the South fled either to the Northern states or to Canada. However, after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850, which made it easier for Southern slave owners to repossess their 'property' in both free and slave states, life for blacks in the Northern states became increasingly insecure. Austin Steward, who had been a slave in Virginia, witnessed the dreadful consequence of this Law. As he travelled by steamship down the Hudson River, a runaway slave who had been recaptured by a 'human blood-hound' and returned to his 'avaricious and tyrannical master' attempted suicide in front of Steward rather than face returning to his former life.

While many fugitive slaves later helped facilitate the escape of others, a large number played a crucial role as abolitionist agents and orators. The most famous of these is undoubtedly Frederick Douglass, who escaped from Maryland to Massachusetts in 1838 and joined forces with the abolitionists three years later. His *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (Boston, 1845) was a daring recital of his early life, and to avoid recapture by his former master Douglass fled to the British Isles where he spent two years lecturing. Upon his return he bought his freedom for $700, established an antislavery newspaper *The North Star*, and continued to lecture.

The pamphlets, newspapers, magazines and almanacs of the abolition societies provide much information by and about those who worked for slavery's demise. Organized activity against slavery, especially among the Quakers, dated back to the eighteenth century. Pressure from antislavery groups helped to achieve the abolition in the Northern states, and in the 1820s a manumission movement began in the Upper South. Benjamin Lundy, a New Jersey Quaker, was responsible for the organization of local societies in Kentucky, Tennessee, North Carolina and Virginia as well as for the antislavery newspaper *The Genius of Universal Emancipation* (Greeneville, Tennessee; Baltimore, Maryland). It was as a reporter for this paper that William Lloyd Garrison began his abolitionist career and on 1 January 1831 he launched his own weekly, *The Liberator* (Boston, Mass.), dedicated to the immediate abolition of slavery. In 1832 Garrison organized the New England Anti-Slavery Society and a year later helped to establish a national American Anti-Slavery Society. Among the latter's publications were *The Anti-Slavery Record* (New York, 1835), which included news items, speeches and letters documenting the abolitionist cause and *The Slave's Friend* (New York, 1836), a tiny periodical published especially for children. Owing to internal squabbles the abolitionist movement was only loosely organized at a national level after 1840, and hereafter the state and local societies became the driving force.

There are many British publications which also provided a powerful voice in the crusade against American slavery. One such is *The Anti-Slavery Watchman* which was
first published in London in 1853 when 'Public attention [was] being directed to the existence of Negro Slavery in the United States, more than it has ever been before. [And] a feeling of just indignation, and abhorrence, at the maintenance of so foul a system in a professedly Christian Republic has thrilled through the heart of the British Nation.' This periodical was intended to supply 'such facts and information, as will show what the British people can do towards the overthrow of American Slavery'.

Newspapers provide a fascinating insight into slavery as it existed in both the Northern and Southern United States. One aspect of the institution which is abundantly evident is the sale of slaves either by auction or by private sale. Advertisements in early editions of newspapers such as the Boston News-Letter show that in the North as in the ante-bellum South, slaves were regarded as property to be advertised alongside farm equipment and animals. The value of this property is made apparent in the notices offering rewards for the return of runaway slaves. These notices invariably gave their subject a first name only, followed by a description of their appearance, clothing and temperament.

The Southern newspapers of the ante-bellum period clearly illustrate the region's increasingly belligerent defence of slavery and its refusal to eliminate the worst of the institution's abuses: the physical cruelty; its failure to give recognition to slave marriages; its disregard for family unity; and the callous practices of inter-state slave traders who were not adverse to stealing blacks from the free states and enslaving them in the South. As early as 1839 the western abolitionist Theodore Weld produced a powerful antislavery tract American Slavery As It Is: testimony of a thousand witnesses (New York), by simply listing incidents reported in Southern newspapers and court records.

Foreign newspapers may also be consulted for first-hand depictions of the South. The Illustrated London News covers the topic quite frequently and contains some excellent sketches of slave auctions (fig. 2). One particularly interesting interview in this newspaper throws light on a little known aspect of slavery: the lives of urban slaves. Like many of his contemporaries the well-dressed interviewee, a slave living in Baltimore, Maryland, was hired out by his owner and he worked as a waiter on a steamship. He told the reporter that he gave his owner 'half my wages, and she never asks no questions... I gets plenty of money... I'm a very good waiter... it's very easy getting along when you make it a rule never to give no sass to nobody' (fig. 3).

The reports of Northern and foreign travellers to the ante-bellum South provide another perspective on slavery. Taken individually these accounts could offer a limited and rather subjective view of the 'peculiar institution' that the authors found there, yet taken together their anecdotes and impressions enable us to understand more fully both the unusual and the commonplace as experienced by the slaves and their owners. The American Jesse Torrey interviewed a large number of Southerners for A Portraiture of Domestic Slavery (Philadelphia, 1817) and his depiction of the South is particularly evocative. Not only did Torrey confirm the barbarity of slavery to a Northern audience but he also illuminated the fragile status of Southern free blacks (those who had bought
their freedom or who were born to free parents). Not enslaved yet rarely treated as equals these people occupied a twilight world in which, as the Civil War drew closer, their liberty was increasingly curtailed.

Among the British travellers to the ante-bellum South were Frederick Law Olmsted whose classic The Cotton Kingdom (New York, 1862) is based upon three trips to the South in which he covered thousands of miles, Harriet Martineau whose Society in America (New York, 1837) includes commentary on the South as she found it in 1834–5, and Fanny Kemble. The latter married Pierce Butler, a wealthy Philadelphian, in 1834, unaware that the Butler family fortune was greatly dependent on its plantations in Georgia. Kemble finally went South in 1838–9 ‘prejudiced against slavery, for I am an Englishwoman in whom the absence of such a prejudice would be a disgrace’.¹³ What she saw there appalled her and she kept a detailed journal of her three and a half month stay. For personal reasons this Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation in 1838–1839 (London) was not published until 1863. By this time she was divorced from Butler and she believed that the publication of the Journal during the American Civil War could help both to diminish pro-South sentiments in Britain and to contribute to the public understanding of the struggle being waged in the United States.
For as long as the debate over slavery existed the Bible was invoked both by abolitionists and the pro-slavery forces as justification for their argument. Documents based on the Scriptures in support of slavery include William T. Hamilton, D. D., *The Duties of Masters and Slaves Respectively; or, Domestic Servitude as Sanctioned by the Bible: a Discourse* (Mobile, Ala., 1845), Ivesan L. Brookes, *A Defense of the South against the Reproaches and Incroachments of the North: in which Slavery is Shown to be an Institution of God* (Hamburg, S. C., 1850) and Josiah Priest, *Bible Defence of Slavery* (Glasgow, Ky., 1852). Those against it include James Gillespie Birney’s *The Sinfulness of Slaveholding in all Circumstances; Tested by Reason and Scripture* (Detroit, 1846), Cyrus Prindle’s *Sinfulness of American Slavery. A Discourse [on Is. lviii. 5–7]* (Middleburg
[Vt.], 1842) and W. P. N. Fitzgerald's *A Scriptural View of Slavery and Abolition* (New Haven, 1839).

As well as the speeches and sermons based on the Bible, the Library holds a wide variety of political orations, some of which are general speeches while others are based upon specific events or aspects of the slavery debate. Among the latter are Alexander Samuel Diven's *No More Slave States...the Great Wrong of the Decision in the Dred Scott Case...*, which refers to the U.S. Supreme Court's 1857 decision that slaves were property not citizens; and Charles Calistus Burleigh's *No Slave Hunting in the Old Bay State* (i.e. Massachusetts), a protest against the practice sanctioned by the Fugitive Slave Law of recapturing fugitive slaves in free states and returning them to slavery. Speeches by members of Congress in opposite camps on the slavery issue include Senator Charles O'Conor's 'Negro Slavery Not Unjust' [1859] and Senator Charles Sumner's *The Crime Against Kansas on 19-20 May 1856*. In the mid-1850s the question of slavery's expansion into the western territories was reaching crisis point and for both sides in the debate the future of Kansas became especially symbolic. Pro-slavery forces flooded into the territory to rig election results, and violence was provoked by both sides. Outraged by events in Kansas Sumner, of Massachusetts, poured invective on the South, in particular on South Carolinian Senator Andrew Pickens Butler. Two days later Butler's nephew, Congressman Preston Brooks, also of South Carolina, beat Sumner unconscious in the Senate chamber leaving him unable to participate in Senate debates for several years. In the wake of the bloodshed in Kansas this incident seemed to reinforce the near impossibility of compromise between the North and South.

Some works of fiction may also be used to further understanding of both American slavery and the increasing national tension during the 1850s. Of these undoubtedly the best-known is Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Boston, 1852), which more than any religious, moral or political tract furthered the abolitionist cause by its graphic portrayal of slavery. Partly inspired by the moral outrage that greeted the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, Stowe conceived of this work in February 1851. It first appeared serially in *The National Era* and was published as a novel in March 1852. It sold 10,000 copies within the first week and 300,000 copies by the end of that year. It has since been published in more than forty languages. As a response to Southern opposition and challenges to the accuracy of the novel Stowe wrote *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* (London, 1853), which documented case histories that supported what she had portrayed in fiction.

In the wake of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* a number of works were written by those more sympathetic to the South. One such was *Uncle Tom's Cabin: contrasted with Buckingham Hall, the planter's home* by Robert Criswell (New York, 1853). The author hoped his work would help 'allay the great agitation on the Slavery Question between the North and South...by representing the Planter and Slave in a more favourable light' than Stowe's novel. His depiction of the South portrays slaves who 'as a general thing...have reason to be, and are, contented with their condition'. Not surprisingly the story
closes with a Northern visitor admitting to his hosts that he will ‘not go home as strong an abolitionist’ as he was on his arrival.16

Yet clearly the slavery issue was finally settled not through dialogue but through violence and bloodshed and more than six hundred thousand lives were lost in a bitter Civil War that determined the future of the nation. The British Library’s collections of materials on American slavery published before 1865 are extraordinarily rich and diverse. They provide a vivid sense of the place occupied by the ‘peculiar institution’ in both the North and the South, and amply illustrate how this institution was to become absolutely central to the nation’s definition of its self and its future in the nineteenth century. For more information about the collection readers are directed to my American Slavery: pre-1866 imprints (London, 1995).

1 See, for example, Octavia V. Rodgers Albert, The House of Bondage (New York, 1891), and B. A. Botkin (ed.), Lay My Burden Down (Chicago, 1945).
3 Ibid., pp. 73–4.
4 The Narrative of Henry Box Brown (Boston, [1849]), p. 56.
5 Ibid., p. 13.
6 Austin Steward, Twenty Two Years A Slave (Rochester, N.Y., 1859).
7 The Anti-Slavery Watchman (Nov. 1853), p. 2.
8 See, for example, The Boston News-Letter (Boston), 31 May–7 June 1708, p. 2.
9 See, for example, The Sun (Baltimore), 3 July 1850, p. 3.
11 It has been estimated that up to 5% of the black population of the ante-bellum South did not live as slaves in rural areas. This group included free blacks, slaves in towns and cities, industrial slaves, and slaves hired out to employers other than their owner. For more information see Peter J. Parish, Slavery: History and Historians (New York, 1989), pp. 97–123.
14 Robert Criswell, ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin’ (New York, 1853).
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid.