Slavery and the Slave Trade

A Short Illustrated History

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JAMES WALVIN

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Introduction

Many modern readers will automatically think of slavery in terms of that institution which was responsible for taking so many Africans from their homelands and using them as slaves in the Americas. The public image of slavery, conveyed by television, films and popular literature, is of a largely black phenomenon. Yet in spite of the importance of black slavery (and the bulk of this book is concerned with that particular form of slavery) it would be to distort recorded history to think of slavery uniquely in black or American terms. Forms of slavery were commonplace and ubiquitous long before the importation of black slaves into the New World. Similarly, it ought not to be thought that slavery ended when the last slave was freed in Brazil in 1888, for certain types of slavery have survived (and sometimes thrived) to the present day. Stories periodically appear in the press about the 'white slave trade', child 'slave labour' or slavery in various parts of the developing world. One difficulty in assessing these stories, however, is to know what commentators mean when they use the terms 'slaves' and 'slavery'. In fact this problem is not very different from that faced by historians when studying the history of slavery. For instance, it is extremely difficult to provide a definition of slavery which is equally applicable to all the varied historical situations where slavery existed. To put the matter crudely, an African slave in eighteenth-century Jamaica cannot easily be compared with a Roman slave or a medieval serf.

To a degree the difficulty is one of terminology. The term 'slave' has often been used very loosely to describe and to lump together many different types of non-free people. In part this has been due to the difficulties of translation; of finding suitable words for Latin and Greek categories which do not easily translate. This has led to a consequent blurring of distinctions. But it is also true that many difficulties in understanding the wider history of slavery are partly due to the fact that people in the west tend to think of slaves largely, if not solely, in terms of black slaves. In fact there is a strong case for arguing that slavery in the Americas is, in many respects, the exception and ought not to be compared with other forms of human bondage.

Slaves and slave systems varied enormously. Slave experiences were incomparably different in law, social custom and economic practice, not merely between the different slave societies but sometimes even within the same society. The rights and obligations of a slave in one society might seem more like the lot of a free man in another slave society. In part, this brief history is designed to illustrate that diversity of slave experience. But it is also intended to suggest how widespread – indeed ubiquitous – was slavery in a number of societies.

It is a bold project, its ambitiousness compounded by the limitations of space and the restrictions of the author's own expertise. In the fields of classical slavery and medieval serfdom I have been guided by other people's researches and in trying to distil their complex arguments for a general readership I trust that I have not traduced their scholarship. I have benefited from the guidance and editorial comments of Barrie Dobson, Alan Hall and John Parker in those areas where I felt uncertain. Although much more familiar with the work on black slavery, even here the author faces difficulties. The subject is so vast and the literature so profuse – and expanding – that no single author can claim to be master of the total subject. It is then inevitable that my own research interests will influence the shape and direction of this book. If what follows seems to be particularly British – or British Caribbean – I trust that will in no way detract from its strengths.

If the book has one overall purpose, it is to present for a wide readership a reasonably comprehensive view of an important historical topic, drawing upon the most recent historical research and presenting it in a format that makes that research comprehensible to a non-specialised audience.

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JAMES WALVIN