

Book Review

Edited by Tom Costa

Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America*. Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1998. Pp. x, 497. \$29.95, ISBN 0-674-81092-9.

With *Many Thousands Gone*, Ira Berlin, an established scholar of slavery, has given us a sweeping synthesis of the origins and development of slave societies in North America. Berlin has long been an advocate of understanding slavery in terms of its evolution over time and, in this latest work, he pulls together material that has informed his writings for a number of years.

Central to Berlin's analysis is the distinction between what he terms "societies with slaves" and "slave societies." The former, in which slavery was just one among a number of different forms of labor, were characteristic of most regions of North America in the earliest years of settlement. With a few notable exceptions, these "societies with slaves" then moved along the temporal path toward "slave societies," in which slavery becomes the mainstay of the economic system, and the master-slave relationship becomes the model for social and political relationships.

According to Berlin, works that do not recognize this evolution of slavery offer a misleading picture of a static slave system, a slavery "frozen in time," in which the master's hegemony forms the beginning and end of any analysis. Such a picture tends to impose too rigid a view of the slaves themselves, denying their agency by reducing them to mere chattel totally in bondage to the master's will.

Berlin, on the other hand, wishes to acknowledge that slavery, even at its most oppressive, was a constant negotiation between master and slave, in which the slave, though operating from a much less advantaged position to be sure, still retained a limited sphere of action. In Berlin's words, "Knowing that a person was a slave does not tell everything about him or her. Put another way, slaveholders severely circumscribed the lives of enslaved people, but they never fully defined them." (p. 2)

Probably the most contentious part of the book is Berlin's examination of the "charter generations" of slaves: the first persons of African origin to come to North America. Dubbed "Atlantic Creoles," these early trans-Atlantic migrants took their places in the nascent Euro-American societies developing on the North American mainland. Most came involuntarily, but did not face the same kinds of rigid discrimination and categorization as did later masses of African immigrants. Indeed, a few were able to gain their freedom: African Anthony Johnson, who settled on Virginia's Eastern Shore, even owned slaves himself. Because of the weakness of early colonial legal, political and social institutions, a significant number of Berlin's Atlantic Creoles were able to manipulate the system to achieve a measure of independence and even financial security.

By the turn of the eighteenth century, however, this first generation of African-Americans in North America found itself increasingly besieged by new restrictions as the various regions of the American colonies evolved into slave societies. This evolutionary scheme establishes the organization of the book. From "the charter generations" of Atlantic Creoles (societies with slaves), North Americans moved through "the plantation generations" (slave societies), and finally "the revolutionary generations," as slavery underwent momentous changes in the wake of the American Revolution.

Added to his temporal scheme is Berlin's emphasis on geography. Thus to his evolutionary outline he includes sections on four regions: the Chesapeake, northeast North America, the low country of South Carolina and Georgia, and the lower Mississippi Valley. Each underwent an evolution of slavery unique to the region.

In the Chesapeake, a "tobacco revolution" saw the development of larger farms worked by increasing numbers of African and African-American slaves. The nascent generation of Atlantic Creoles gave way to a slave society, in which a system of racially based slavery cemented the near-complete rule of the white planter. Likewise in South Carolina and Georgia, the exigencies of rice cultivation created a similar pattern, different only in the greater extent of planter domination.

In the northeast, on the other hand, the same development proceeded less dramatically and less evenly. The Northern and Middle colonies were not driven by the requirements of a staple agriculture; rather, their economies developed more variety, in which a mixed agricultural

economy grew along with the commercial and allied sectors of shipbuilding and insurance. Thus slavery north of the Chesapeake never achieved the status of the slave societies of the South. The incorporation of the northeast into the developing Atlantic economy of the eighteenth century did, however, mean that some of the rigidity and race-based labor and social systems did develop in the large cities, especially in New York.

By contrast, the lower Mississippi Valley developed very differently. Limited by closer control from the mother country, the French settlers of the region only began importing slaves in the second quarter of the eighteenth century, bringing them direct from Africa. Instead of the initial piecemeal influx of Africans that marked the other regions of North America, the French colony intended the creation of a slave society from the very start, but were unable to do so. Because of the relatively few white emigrants, the presence of hostile native Americans forced the French settlers to make reluctant concessions to their bondsmen. Thus, at the same time that the initial societies with slaves were coalescing into slave societies in the seaboard colonies of the South and to a lesser degree in the northeast, the lower Mississippi was moving from a slave society to a society with slaves.

The American and French Revolutions changed dramatically the lives of slaves and their masters in North America. In the northeast, where slavery was least woven into the fabric of society, the libertarian challenge to bondage thrown up by the revolutionary ideology eventually resulted in the end of slavery. But class distinctions soon emerged between a growing respectable black middle class leadership that was mainly urban, and the legions of newly freed African-Americans who aspired to a better life. In the Chesapeake, on the other hand, while numerous slaves achieved their freedom, the underlying slave society formed in the colonial period did not break. Instead, free and enslaved blacks developed a common identity that tended to mute the class differences between poor and better off, slave and free. By contrast, in the lower South planters moved to strengthen their control over their slaves, and expanded the lower South's slave society westward, as upland cotton cultivation became the leading sector of the economy.

As his work ends only a little after the American Revolution, Berlin has chosen to say little about the development of slavery west of the Appalachians. Citing important articles by Ellen Eslinger and Gail Terry¹, among others, on the westward movement of slaves, the author finds

that numerous Chesapeake slaves moved west with their masters in the period after the Revolution. Berlin also mentions the large natural increase among Chesapeake slaves that led Virginia slaveowners to take advantage of the growing demand for slaves in the deep South, but he says little about the dynamics of slaves being separated from their families as they moved west and south.

This should not, however, deter scholars interested in trans-Appalachian migration and the establishment of societies in the backcountry from reading the book. For anyone interested in the crucial formation of what can be termed Euro-African-American society, Berlin's book offers an excellent model for the understanding of how geography, economics, and immigration patterns help to determine the historical development of labor and social systems so important in our early history.

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Endnote

- ¹ Ellen Eslinger, "The Shape of Slavery on the Kentucky Frontier, 1775-1800," *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society*, 92 (1994), 1-23; Gail Terry, "Sustaining the Bonds of Kinship in a Trans-Appalachian Migration, 1790-1811: The Cabell-Breckenridge Slaves Move West," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, 102 (1994), 455-80.