

Acknowledgements

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I have been assisted in the research for this book by many libraries in many places – Columbia Seminary in Georgia, The College of Charleston (especially from its former Archivist Dr Harlan Greene), The Avery Institute in Charleston, Boston Public Library, The Mitchell Library, Glasgow. Gladstone's Residential Library in Hawarden, Wales, has been a haven for me and many scholars on a number of occasions. But I have spent the most time in the peaceful Reading Room of the National Library of Scotland in Edinburgh. The kind helpfulness and friendly atmosphere amongst the staff towards readers in the NLS makes it a superb venue.

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The encouragement of friends on this venture has been so appreciated, not least the African American writer, distinguished musician, pastor and my friend Jimi Calhoun who has kindly contributed a note for the cover.

Finally I wish to dedicate this book to the memory of two people. My late wife Isabel (1943-2002) who for more than 55 years has been amongst so much else a companion in the cause of human rights and a better vision of the world, and someone that I would have loved her to meet, Albert Peters (1869-1965) a friend for two of the most significant weeks in my life.

Note on Terminology

I have tried to be as sensitive as possible in the use of terminology. When I was involved in Civil Rights in the Southern States in 1964 the accepted term in the Movement was 'negro.' I have used the later description 'African American' throughout with a few exception when 'black' seemed appropriate. The hated and despicable 'n....er' word has only been used as a direct quote from slavers or racist speeches or from formerly enslaved people referring to themselves.

From the African American Institute in Boston I learned much about the language that gives dignity and respect. Although 'slave' is occasionally used and 'slavery' is used to denote the system, I have tried to refer to people as 'enslaved', thus putting the emphasis on the treatment rather than the identity. In the same way the term 'self-liberated' has been used, testifying to deliberate action by people to gain their freedoms, rather than the tags 'runaway', 'fugitive' or others used by those who held them captive. For the latter I have used inverted commas so as not to give legitimacy to their right to own humans as property. If that appears in the text as slightly awkward, so be it. I felt that it was more important to acknowledge our common humanity than keep to strict semantics.

I have deliberately included the names of all formerly enslaved men and women whose testimony forms Chapter 7, but not extended the index to include the passing references to those who held them captive.

Iain Whyte
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SAMPLE

Introduction

Vladimir Lenin once was reputed to say ‘War is a terrible thing. It is also a terribly profitable thing.’ The same epithet could apply to the institution of chattel slavery which for several hundred years helped to enrich and develop an expanding world, and where human beings in Africa were transported in their millions to North and South America and condemned to a fate for them and their descendants, when other human beings, mainly of European descent, held absolute power over every aspect of their lives and deaths, with no prospect of an ending.

This has rightly been recognised as one of the greatest of crimes against humanity in human history, and one which lasted for hundreds of years. The twentieth century has been judged to be one that has hardly been surpassed in the sickening disregard for human life and in providing regimes that at times plumbed the depths in human cruelty. Slavery, it is true, could provide examples of humane and caring ‘owners’, but to read the accounts of the almost unimaginable cruelties, tortures and terrors visited on millions of enslaved peoples, is to realise that modern dictators have invented very few techniques in denying humanity to other human beings.

Although the trade in and transportation of enslaved people was not exclusive to one religion, overwhelmingly chattel slavery was an institution controlled by those who claimed to practise Christianity, and whose countries of origin were part of Christendom. Many of those who went to what became known as the New World had travelled there to shake off the shackles of religious or political persecution. They embraced the concept, as stated in the eighteenth century in the constitution of the most significant of new nations,

that ‘all men are created equal and have the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness’.¹

The question of the incompatibility of slavery and a faith founded in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, was only raised, to any great extent, when the movement for the abolition of the slave trade and slavery itself began in the mid-eighteenth century. Many historians have been unwilling to recognise that the work to have this practice banned by law was led in the main by groups of Christians, in which the Society of Friends (Quakers) played a role well beyond their numbers. It was a mixed picture in England, Scotland and the United States, since many churches were often driven by protection of self-interest rather than humanity. Overall, without the contributions of individuals and groups of people of faith, slavery would in the end have ended, but the human agony that it produced would have been more protracted.

‘Was the offer of Christianity and religious education to those who were enslaved in America a tool for control of those enslaved, or was it a means of liberation?’ This was a question posed by me some years ago, to the African American historian Professor Bernard Powers in his study in Charleston, South Carolina. He thought for a few moments. ‘Overall,’ he said, ‘it was the latter.’² That question is the subject of this book and in answering it the histories of many famous and unknown participants in the ante-bellum period are explored, both black and white. Because religious education was a passion and priority for the Reformers in Europe in the sixteenth century, and especially for those in the Calvinist tradition, many of whose descendants were Scottish and Northern Irish emigrants to the Americas, that tradition is an obvious focus for examining that question.

The starting point is the contribution of John Calvin’s most renowned disciple, the fiery Scottish reformer, John Knox, who more than any other helped to lay the foundation of universal education and take seriously the pastoral and evangelical responsibility for the people of the nation, a work which became vital in what emerged as the national Church of Scotland. Calvinism was a curious blend of strict doctrinal control and civic organisation alongside the encouragement of personal faith, evangelism, and opportunity to learn and improve by knowledge. A key factor was the vision of universal literacy, closely

1. United States of America, Declaration of Independence, 4 July 1776.

2. Conversation with the author, College of Charleston, 11Apr 2013.

tied in with the ability to read the scriptures, something which, the Reformers claimed, had been denied by the Roman Catholic Church in Scotland.

The book examines the pre- and post-independence United States of America, and the attitudes of those churches from the Reformed and Presbyterian tradition towards enslaved people. The early public records within the Presbyterian Church in America reflect the dilemmas that churchmen faced, between condemnation of what one historian described as ‘The Peculiar Institution’,³ and the need to hold onto the support of their members, North and South, thus staving off the split in Presbyterianism which became more inevitable. Church pronouncements were so often hedged about by ambivalence and the watering down of absolutes, and Presbyterians in America, although not alone amongst the Protestant denominations, were conspicuous by their vacillation.

This dilemma was reflected by some of those associated with the early years of that celebrated Presbyterian foundation, Princeton. One of its first Presidents, a minister from Scotland and a signatory to the Declaration of Independence in 1776, never resolved this dilemma in his personal or public life. No more did some of his distinguished contemporaries or students.

One way in which the South sought to find a solution to the irony of slavery in a free society was the embrace of what became known as ‘paternalism’, a perceived divine trust of care and responsibility for those whose lives were ‘entrusted’ to them in the natural order of things. It was of course undergirded by the assumption that at worst enslaved men and women were of no better human value than animals, and that at best their humanity was naturally inferior, and that this inferiority was marked entirely by racial characteristics. Paternalism suffered a severe blow in the early and mid-nineteenth century when real or supposed slave rebellions led to fears that the only security for the holders of enslaved people was not kindness, but further harsh repression.

Yet there was always a nagging doubt within the minds of many thinking white people that this whole construction of slavery might be faulty, and even worse, that it could have incurred divine disapproval rather than support. There was another attempt by concerned whites,

3. Kenneth Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South* (New York: Random House, 1956).

undergirded quietly by those who saw it as a racist solution – that of encouraging black Americans, including, but not limited to, enslaved people, to return to their origins by returning to Africa and thus assist a solution to the problem.

African colonisation had in it a strong element of Christian evangelism towards what was seen as a dark and ‘heathen’ continent receptive and ripe for mission. The nineteenth-century drive for mission overseas was sometimes coupled with the racist conviction that this was a way of diminishing the increasing number of black people in America. It also divided the movement for the abolition of slavery, with many whites believing that it would be a way to weaken slavery and assist its eventual abolition. Some African American leaders for a time embraced this as a way of freeing themselves from America by making a completely new life in the Africa of their ancestors. This was a movement with some that lasted beyond slavery and well into the twentieth century.

The limitations of benevolent evangelism within the structure of slavery is examined through the lives of three major white church figures in Charleston, all influenced by the Reformed tradition of enthusiasm for the religious instruction of enslaved men and women. A vital part of exploring this question is to hear the voices of those who had experienced the life-denying condition of enslavement, and how they perceived and practised the Christian faith within this nightmare. Formerly enslaved elderly men and women in the 1930s were enabled through a public project funded by the US government in the Depression years to reflect on their experiences. Many spoke about attempts to introduce religious education on the plantations, about the ways in which the Bible was employed, and about religious worship controlled or permitted. Much of their testimony is not only unique, but until comparatively recently has remained buried in academic archives, while the reality of American slavery was glossed over by historians, with some distinguished exceptions.

The lives of distinguished women who liberated themselves from slavery are now becoming documented, rather than patronisingly romanticised, in contemporary studies. Their testimonies and their contributions to the anti-slavery movement, have often been subsumed in favour of male abolition leaders. At an early stage the American abolitionist cause was divided on whether to welcome the contribution of white women, and black female activists often had to struggle doubly for acceptance. Yet their faith and its outworking remains a powerful part of the wider picture.

Some black male ministers from the Presbyterian tradition, all of whom rated education as a key to liberation, provided leadership for the abolition movement, but not without controversy or conflict over such key questions as colonisation and evangelism, revolution or cooperation within the system, support for the constitution, or distancing from the Union side in the Civil War.

In the mid-nineteenth century many leading black abolitionists visited and informed British and Irish audiences on the reality of slavery. Some came to avoid recapture, others to rally support. Those who came to Scotland played a strong role in raising awareness amongst ordinary people even during the Civil War, where many ordinary people had sympathy and even supported practical help for the cause of the South, all too easily portrayed as the wronged 'underdog'.

I am more than conscious that as a white Scot who has never known the dehumanising pain of racism, still less the agonies of the 'unfree', I am ill qualified to judge, perhaps even to comment on, the experiences of those whose lives have been so blighted in this way. I can only reflect their words and the documents in which they own and celebrate their courageous struggle.

In my study I have a photograph taken of an elderly gentleman outside his small house in Greenville, Mississippi. I stayed with Mr Albert Peters for some days in 1964 when as a visiting student, I was involved briefly with the Civil Rights Campaign in Mississippi. Mr Peters had been born just four years after slavery was abolished, and he told me tales of his father's experiences. I asked him if he wasn't afraid of the all too frequent attacks or firebombs on houses that hosted student volunteers. 'Lawd no' he said laughing, 'I'm ninety five. I'm going to die soon and go to heaven. What can they do to me now?' Mr Peters was a man of great dignity (leavened by some lovely humour and hospitality) who had lived his life through almost a whole century in the face of the most horrific denial of human rights. He was never a 'victim', because he met all these obstacles with courage, faith and hope, in a battle that is far from won today. To his sacred memory this book is respectfully dedicated.