

Our benevolent masters...

By Michael Bowe

It is fair to say that both Blacks and whites, in general, are of the opinion that slavery was brutal, inhumane, and savage. However, many American historians who are white and highly respected share the view that slavery was, for the most part, a patriarchal institution that was benevolent and kind within limits. Eugene D. Genovese, Charles Joyner and Ulrich B. Phillips are just a few examples of renowned and acclaimed historians who support this view of slavery.

Genovese, the founding father of the notion that slavery was paternalistic, argues that slaves were dependent on their owners for protection and the necessities of life. While masters depended upon their slaves passivity and willing productivity to preserve their conscience. "Paternalism defined the involuntary labour of the slaves as a legitimate return to their masters for protection and direction."

Genovese insists that slavery, indeed, was a savage system of oppression; however, the master's attempts to dehumanize slaves into things failed as a result of his conscience and slave resistance. Instead, he argues that slaves were incorporated into their owners' families as 'children.'

Charles Joyner, who is a supporter of Genovese's views, asserts that slaves enjoyed many liberties. In his book *Down by the Riverside* Joyner writes: "Increasingly the slaves asserted claims to off times and holidays, in which their masters reluctantly acquiesced." Joyner also argues: "Slaves on the Waccamaw rice plantation who could perform two tasks in a single day were entitled to a full day off the following day."

Just what did slaves do with all this time off? Well, Joyner claims they "prayed and frolicked, hunted (with their own guns) and fished, cooked and cleaned, courted and married... loved and hoped and dreamed."

Africans who were brought as slaves to the New World did not accept their condition meekly. They employed a variety of methods to express their resentment of the institution of slavery, and of the white masters who enslaved them. They employed quiet, subtle, almost negative methods of protest which today might be termed civil disobedience; for example they pretended to be ill, and so avoided work. On the other hand, they sometimes went to the positive, violent extreme of armed rebellion. Historical studies have established fully the fact that Black anti-slavery attitudes and actions were a strong and persistent feature of the West Indian past."

Lucille Mathurin
Rebel Woman



graphic • Dennis Ranstone, African Caribbean Publications

In general, Joyner tries to prove that slaves in the Waccamaw region endured relatively good conditions and treatment from their owners and were allowed room for cultural and self-development.

Joyner quotes as evidence for his claims, a letter written by a rice planter which says "there is no class of people... in this country, or Europe, of the same grade where there is so much happiness, where the wants of nature are so abundantly supplied, where the requirements of labour are as little..."

Ulrich B. Phillips and other pro-slavery historians argue that slavery was a benevolent system. Phillips, who is a fierce defender of slavery, wrote that slavery gave Africans "Christianity and civilization." Moreover, Phillips states that the life of enslaved Africans was fruitful.

Kenneth M. Stamp has examined the views of the above historians and disclaimed them as nonsense, referring to them as mythical and romanticized. In his book *The Peculiar Institution*, Stamp argues that slavery was a ruthless system of exploitation of slave labour for profit.

He presents the records of slave catchers and the brutal Middle Passage where thousands of Africans perished in the landing of 5,000,000 Africans into the United States. He reveals the merciless making of slaves out of Africans, the poor or nonexistent health care, the brutal overseers and "masters," the acts of torture and the slave rebellions.

Stamp refutes claims that the "primitive" physical and mental makeup of Africans justified their enslavement; that slavery was necessary to prepare a "primitive people" to enter the complex civilized and modern society of America; that by the mid-nineteenth century slavery was at the point of extinction since it was becoming uneconomical; that slaves by and large were well-treated, content, did not mind being slaves and were loyal to their "masters;" that for the most part paternalism governed owner-slave relations.

Stanley M. Elkins' view of slavery is even more uncompromising. In strict historical fashion, Elkins insist that American slavery was the most brutal the world has ever known. His historical account depicts the total dehumanization of Africans.

Why the fuss over whether or not slavery was paternalistic, kind and benevolent or a brutal system of economic exploitation and dehumanization? According to historians who argue the former perspective, if it can be proven that people of African descent were indeed allowed the opportunity for cultural and personal development then it logically follows that they are partly to be blamed (if not entirely) for their conditions after slavery.

Those who argue the latter perspective attempt to prove that enslaved women and men were dehumanized and given no room for self-actualization. As a result, their conditions after slavery and up until the present were caused solely by their oppressors.

Modern historical literature has begun to ascribe a new harsh and uncompromising reality to slavery as a result of a new movement of Black intellectuals. Nevertheless, a school of white historians continues to portray slavery as paternalistic, kind and benevolent.

1859

Abraham Shadd becomes a member of the Raleigh, Ont. town council the first black Canadian to be elected to public office.

1861

Outbreak of the American Civil War. About two thirds of the black population in Upper and Lower Canada returns to the United States to fight for the freedom of other blacks. By the end of the century, the black population in Canada has decreased to 17,500.

1900

Tilly Mays is a founding member of the Coloured Women's Club, a benevolent club formed when soldiers return home from the Boer War.

The women of the club work for with the poor, sick and injured in hospitals and soup kitchens. The club is the first women's club in Canada.

1904

Birth of Charles Drew, a black doctor born in the United States and educated at McGill University, who later discovers a process to store blood plasma.

1911

A public outcry against increased black migration to the Canadian West results in the passage of Canada's first official restrictive immigration laws.

1919

Railway companies hire many black men from the United States and the Caribbean as porters.

A community of blacks develops in Montreal because the city is the headquarters of Canadian Pacific Railways and the regional eastern centre of CN Railways.

1922-23

In the United States, Jamaican Marcus Garvey begins a world movement that advocates throughout the Americas the development of black pride and the appreciation of African heritage.

In Canada, the movement leads to the formation of chapters of the world-wide Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), which is today called the Universal African Improvement Association (UAlA). These organizations flourish with the movement of blacks from rural areas to cities like Halifax, Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver.

1955-65

The third wave of migration from the Caribbean begins. Because job requirements are oriented towards domestic labour, the majority of these migrants are women.

Many highly qualified women enter Canada during this time, seeing it as the only available legal route to achieve social mobility overseas. A large proportion of these black women were able to take advantage of opportunities for further education.

During this period, a total of 2,690 women came from the Caribbean to Canada under the Household Service Workers scheme. In order to increase their chances for acceptance, some don't declare that they left children in their home countries since the fact would be viewed negatively by immigration authorities.

1964

The Separate School Act is amended, leading to the removal

James W. St. G. Walker
22. *The Freedom Seekers*
Dr. Dan Hill

23. *Africville: The Life and Death of a Canadian Black Community*

Donald H. Clairmont and
Dennis William Magill

24. *Silenced: Talks with Working Class Caribbean Women about Their Lives and Struggles as Domestic Workers in Canada*

Makeda Silveira
25. *Black Protest: History, Document and Analyses - 1619 to the Present*

edited with introduction and commentary by
Joanne Grant

26. *Apartheid: South African Naziism*
Sipo E. Mzimela

27. *Resistance Literature*
Barbara Harlow

28. *Towards an Aesthetic of Opposition: Essays in Literature, Criticism and Cultural Imperialism*
Arun Mukherjee

29. *The Africans: A Triple Heritage*
Ali A. Mazrui

30. *Racism and Psychiatry*
Alexander Thomas M.D.
and Samuel Sillen, Ph.D.

31. *Blues People (Jazz History)* LeRoi Jones

32. *Black Nationalism and the Revolution in Music (Jazz History)* Frank Kofsky

33. *The Struggle is My Life*
Nelson Mandela

34. *Capitalism and Slavery*
Dr. Eric Williams

35. *From Columbus to Castro*
Dr. Eric Williams

36. *Slavery and Social Death*
Orlando Patterson

37. *Angela Davis Autobiography*

38. *Women, Race and Class*
Angela Davis

39. *Women, Culture and Politics*
Angela Davis

40. *Talking Back*
Bell Hooks

41. *Black Is The Color Of My TV Tube*
Gil Noble

42. *Black Women Writers: A Critical Evaluation*
Edited by Mari Evans

43. *Black Robes White Justice*
Bruce Wright

44. *V. S. Naipaul: A Materialist Analysis*
Selwyn Cudjoe