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Review

### Escape Artist

By Darryl Pinckney

*Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown*

edited and with an introduction by Richard Newman, and with a foreword by Henry Louis Gates Jr.

Oxford University Press, 73 pp., \$21.95

In the mid-nineteenth century a house slave or a slave in town was more likely to learn to read and write than was a slave in the fields, just as a house slave or a slave in town also had more chances for escape. Literacy, like light skin when it came to devising disguises, aided in escapes. Slaves who could read could not only keep track of the wanted posters and newspaper advertisements concerning fugitives, in some cases they could also write their own passes and any authorities they met along the road would be slow to suspect a slave of being the author of his or her own freedom. One valiant woman, before escaping disguised as a sailor, hid in her grandmother's cramped attic storeroom for seven years, but in the meantime convinced her masters that she had already fled by getting a letter of hers smuggled out by ship to New York, after which it was mailed back to Virginia.

Most of the self-liberated went on foot, at night. Not all escaped by sea or Underground Railroad to the North or to Canada, following the intrepid Harriet Tubman or the North Star of the sorrow songs, the spirituals. Uncounted numbers slipped away to Mexico. But Henry "Box" Brown is probably the only enslaved person who ever mailed himself to freedom:

The idea suddenly flashed across my mind of shutting myself *up in a box* and getting myself conveyed as dry goods to a free state.

In 1849, Brown, with help from a local storekeeper and a doctor, concealed himself inside a baize-lined wooden container that was three feet one inch long, two feet six inches high, and two feet wide (Brown was 5'8"). The box was then placed on a train for the twenty-seven-hour journey from Richmond, Virginia, to Philadelphia, where it was taken to the city's Anti-Slavery Committee and opened. Brown emerged, drank a glass of water, and sang the Fortieth Psalm, a free man and a celebrity.

Just as many instances of resistance on the plantations have not come down to us, so, too, most tales of escape will never be known, because most of the enslaved black people who "stole" themselves did not write their stories or tell their stories to others who then wrote them down. But the Library of Congress does have about seven thousand narratives of very different lengths, and Richard Newman estimates that between *A Narrative of the Unknown*

*Sufferings and Surprising Deliverance of Briton Hammon, a Negro Man (1760)* and Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery (1901)*, some two hundred slaves and former slaves published their stories. "The fugitives we know are remembered primarily through their published narratives," Newman tells us in his excellent introduction to his edition of *Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown*.

Brown was one of those fugitives who couldn't read or write. Consequently, the first version of his autobiography, published the same year as his escape, is "highly flawed," according to Newman. Charles Stearns, a zealous white abolitionist—an uncle was one of the founders of Brook Farm—wrote Brown's story on his behalf, but his style was unfortunate and the result is a "turgid" polemic that bears little relation to Brown's personality. "Box Brown was not free from saying what other people wanted him to say," but when he fled to England after the passing of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which made him fearful of capture in the North, he was able to tell his story his way. A new edition of his autobiography was published in Manchester. It was popular in England in his time, and copies were on sale at his public appearances, but since then it has, until now, been one of the scarcest titles in the rare books trade, and even 1960s reprints are hard to find. Brown himself disappeared rather quickly back then, fading from the abolition circuit and the public record, unlike Frederick Douglass or William Wells Brown, who continued to write after they published their slave narratives. This new edition is a reprint of the Manchester version of Brown's life. "The real difference is that this version is told in Brown's own voice," Newman tells us.

"I was born about forty-five miles from the city of Richmond, in Louisa County, in the year 1815. I entered the world a slave..." Brown begins. Tyrants stood by his mother's couch, stretched their bloody arms, and branded him with the mark of bondage before he had done anything to deserve forfeiting his liberty while his soul was yet undefiled:

Yes, they robbed me of myself before I could know the nature of their wicked arts, and ever afterwards—until I forcibly wrenched myself from their hands—did they retain their stolen property.

His father and mother were slaves, but Brown lets us know that they have since purchased their freedom, a measure of liberty, "as the law affords to those who have made recompense to the tyrant for the right of property he holds in his fellow-man." Brown remembers his mother's tears, her trembling voice, as she took him on her knee, pointed to the forest, and told him that as yonder leaves were stripped from the trees, so are the children of slaves swept from their parents by cruel tyrants. The power of slavery to separate children from parents, brothers from sisters, husbands from wives is a theme Brown returns to. Of all the torments of bondage, the destruction of families for profit is the grievance most frequently mentioned by slaves, Brown says. Aware of his readers, he exhorts the "Mothers of the North" to consider how they would feel.

The literature gives examples of black women in slavery who tried to protect themselves—and their children—from heartbreak by seeming indifferent to them. Some mothers on plantations hardly saw their children after they gave birth to them. However, Brown's mother was determined to act on her maternal feelings no matter how limited the time she would have with her son. She instructed him in principles of morality—don't steal, don't lie, behave in a becoming fashion toward everyone. Yet he "had no means of acquiring proper conception of religion in a state of slavery" and still wonders that he did not imbibe a lasting

hatred of Christianity, because the followers of Jesus Christ had the dispositions of demons rather than those of men. Brown believed until he was eight years old that his master was God and that his master's son was Jesus Christ. Brown and other slave children thought thunder was the voice of God. Because their master hurried them indoors before thunderstorms and then took pleasure afterward in the fine shower the flowers had had, Brown assumed it was he who had thundered and caused the rain to fall.

He concedes that his master was exceedingly kind, "for even a slaveholder may be kind," but he did nothing to correct Brown's childish belief and enjoyed the reverence. All the young slaves called the master's son "saviour." Then one night he heard his parents talking of a woman who had been baptized. Such rituals for slaves were commonly held at night, after their work was done. His mother then told him about the God who ruled in heaven. He was astonished to learn that his masters were not the Father and Son he'd heard spoken of. Brown recalls that he had a sister who wanted to be converted and so had her hair cut off, it being a belief among the local slaves that the soul could not be converted otherwise. Their mother reprimanded his sister, saying that God didn't judge one's worth from any outward show of having renounced sin.

Brown concludes the sketch of his childhood by saying that his principal employment was "waiting upon my master and mistress," but he looked

forward with dismay to the time when I, like my fellow slaves, should be driven by the taskmaster's cruel lash, to separate myself from my parents and all my present associates, to toil without reward and to suffer cruelties, as yet unknown. The slave has always the harrowing idea before him— however kindly he may be treated for the time being—that the auctioneer may soon set him up for public sale and knock him down as the property of the person who, whether man or demon, would pay his master the greatest number of dollars for his body.

**W**hen he got a little older, he had the job of carrying grain to a mill on another plantation in the next county, where he met the plantation's slaves. This was one of the few chances Brown had to learn something of the world outside his own plantation. He met "a number of forlorn looking beings" who "gazed earnestly" at Brown and his brother. They were slaves dressed in shirts made from coffee sacks. They told Brown that they had never seen colored people in shoes, vests, and hats. A relative of the plantation owner told them that slaves had no business wearing hats and shoes and that they'd never be of any value because they had never been whipped. After Brown and his brother shared among these fifty or so slaves what meat and bread they had, they were told that these slaves never got meat and weren't permitted to go to church. They told Brown that they were allowed to have wives, but their master would not let them marry anyone from another plantation. These slaves were all related to one another.

One of the strongest motives which operate upon the slave-holders in inducing them to maintain their iron grasp upon the unfortunate slaves, is because it gives them such unlimited control over the person of their female slaves. The greater part of slave-holders are licentious men, and the most respectable and kind masters keep some of these slaves as mistresses. It is for their pecuniary interest to do so, as their progeny is equal to so many dollars and cents in their pockets....

Charles, a son of Brown's master, "became impressed with the evils of slavery" and emancipated some forty people, paying their expenses to a free state, but the old master, now ill, employed an overseer so cruel he made many of the slaves that were left run away. Brown says he thinks the master's neighbors had criticized him for treating his slaves so mildly. As the master lay dying, he called Brown and his mother to his bedside. "We ran with beating hearts and highly elated feelings, not doubting, in the least, but that he was about to confer on us the boon of freedom." They were to be disappointed. The master admonished Brown to be a good plowman or gardener, and to remain an honest boy. "I have given you to my son William, and you must obey him." Brown says the old gentleman had deceived them by his kind treatment and they were left to mourn not his death, but their bondage. "If there is any thing which tends to buoy up the spirit of the slave...it is the hope of future freedom." Brown says he knows of slaves who worked hard to get "the price of their own redemption," but after they had paid for themselves over and over again were still refused what they had paid for. Many masters hold out the false promise of letting slaves buy their freedom just to keep them working hard, Brown says.

The old master's property was divided among his four sons. Brown was then fifteen and the separation from his father and mother, brother and sister, was the most severe trial he had yet endured. "This kind of torture is a thousand fold more cruel and barbarous than the use of the lash which lacerates the back." Skin may heal, but horrible memories, Brown speculates, probably rush "thousands annually from off the stage of life." Slaves on a plantation are hard to divide because no master wants all children or all old people. The division is made according to money value. The slaveholders tell themselves "niggers have no feelings." Brown, the property of his master's son, who also chose one of Brown's sisters for his "keep Miss," was taken to Richmond and put to work in a tobacco factory.

**A**bout eighteen months after his move to Richmond, "an extraordinary occurrence took place which caused great excitement all over the town." His master would only tell him that some slaves had plotted to kill their owners, but Brown learned much later that it was "the famous Nat Turner's insurrection." Brown recalls that the whites were terrified and blacks were whipped, hanged, cut down by swords in the street, shot if found away from their quarters after dark, and "half-hung"—strung up by rope but not strangled, and pelted with rotten eggs instead. Slaves were afterward forbidden to gather unless it was for work; black preachers were silenced. Meanwhile, the relative comfort of Brown's position depended on the character of the various overseers at the tobacco factory who had charge of him. He remembers good white ones, a good black one, and then villain after villain. One tried but failed to sneak up on slaves because his wooden leg always gave him away. Another abused a sick black man known for his singing, and this gave Brown the opportunity to refute those whites who claimed that at least slaves were taken care of when they fell ill, unlike free men.

Similarly, Brown uses the example of an overseer's galling behavior as head of the Sunday school to offer his reflections on slavery and the church. The whites, wanting to keep a better eye on blacks, got together and promised the blacks of Brown's district that if they paid three thousand dollars for an "old meeting house," about a fourth of its value, they could have it for their use. Blacks set about to save to buy the chapel, which deprived them of what little extra money they had, money that could have helped them to escape. When the blacks wanted to take possession of the chapel they'd paid for, they were told that they owed additional sums. Brown doesn't believe they ever got their chapel. Then, with the money collected from blacks, the white people of the district built themselves a new church and made a church rule

that stipulated that any black who entered without permission was subject to thirty-nine lashes.

Brown and his wife, Nancy, were married before a Northern preacher (who had become pro-slavery after a little while in the South), but to do so they had to get the permission of their respective owners, each of whom promised Brown that he would never sell them off. A year later Nancy's owner sold her to a saddler in Richmond, whose wife was even crueller than he was. She believed Nancy's manners too refined for a slave and she hated to see her nursing Brown's child. The saddler fell ill and begged Brown to get his slaves to pray for his recovery. But, once well again, taunted by his wife, he denied that he had asked for such a thing, and whipped the slaves who said they had prayed for him. To punish Brown for praying for him, he sold off his family to another Richmond saddler, who had the temerity to ask Brown to make up the fifty-dollar shortfall in his wife's price of \$650. Brown knew that the man could get the money from elsewhere, but he hoped to put the new master under an obligation of some kind and agreed. However, the saddler now informed Brown that if he did not rent a house for his wife and children, furnish it, pay for their keep, and pay him fifty dollars a year as well he would sell Brown's family to the next buyer he could find. A free black, James C.A. Smith Jr., rented a house for Brown.

Nevertheless, in August of 1848, Nancy's master demanded more money of Brown, which he did not have. He went to his labors "in deep anguish" because he was afraid the master's financial need meant he might sell one of their children. He soon heard worse news: his wife and children had been taken to the "auction mart" and sold to a Methodist minister from North Carolina. When he tried to bring some "things and money" to the jail where they were being held, he was warned that he would be seized and sold off separately himself. Brown implored his own master, William, to intervene, but he coolly replied that he would not meddle in the business of gentlemen and that Brown could easily get another wife. Brown then discovered that the white man who had sold his family had also stolen all the furnishings from his house.

His agony complete, Brown received a message that if he wished to see his wife of twelve years and bid his children a last farewell, he could stand on the street where they were to pass with 350 others and more on their way to North Carolina, all of them purchased by the same minister:

These beings were marched with ropes about their necks, and staples on their arms, and, although in that respect the scene was no very novel one to me, yet the peculiarity of my own circumstances made it assume the appearance of unusual horror. This train of beings was accompanied by a number of waggons loaded with little children of many different families, which as they appeared rent the air with their shrieks and cries and vain endeavours to resist the separation which was thus forced upon them, and the cords with which they were thus bound; but what should I now see in the very foremost wagon but a little child looking towards me and pitifully calling, father! father!... Thus passed my child from my presence....

Brown waited for the gang in chains that included his wife. They walked about four miles hand in hand, unable to speak. "When at last we were obliged to part, the look of mutual love which we exchanged was all the token which we could give each other that we should yet meet in heaven."

**F**ive months later, bitter, meditating on escape, Brown confided in a storekeeper he'd often done business with, who was surprised that Brown thought him trustworthy. Brown told him he had \$166 and the man agreed to help him escape for \$86. Brown says he hit upon his idea about the box through prayer. He then consulted Dr. Samuel Smith, a white man whose antislavery sentiments he was sure of. They decided to act immediately. The storekeeper, who doubted that Brown could live in a box for so long, wrote to a friend in Philadelphia. A carpenter was found to make the box. Brown poured oil of vitriol on an injured finger to give him a reason to be absent from work. In the early morning of March 29, 1849, Brown, the storekeeper, and Dr. Smith met to pack the box. Brown had three gimlet holes through which to breathe and "a bladder" of water. The lid was nailed shut.

At the Express Office, Brown was turned upside down, heels up. At the depot, he was thrown into the baggage car, but happened to land on his right side. The next stop in his "battle for liberty" found him taken from the train and put on a steamer, again with his head down. "I felt my eyes swelling as if they would burst from their sockets; and the veins on my temples were dreadfully distended with pressure of blood upon my head." Brown remained in this position until two men, wanting to sit down, grabbed his box for that purpose. In Washington, the box marked "this side up with care" was better treated on its way from steamer to depot. But Brown heard someone say that if anything broke, the railway company would pay for it, and the box was handled so roughly that he, its contents, got knocked out. He woke up to hear someone say that there was no room for the box, but someone else reminded them that it had come express and had to go on. Brown traveled the remainder of the three hundred and fifty miles on his right side. In Philadelphia, Brown's box waited at the depot until a wagon came for it that evening to take him to the arranged address. Brown kept quiet, until someone rapped on the box: "Is all right within?" "I waited patiently for the Lord," Brown sang.

**T**he slave narratives were recognized in the nineteenth century as a new contribution to world literature, Richard Newman reminds us, but once Ulrich B. Phillips, the influential historian of slavery and defender of the South, declared them unreliable documents, they were more or less forgotten until the modern civil rights era. They were antislavery tracts, Newman points out, as well as a way of raising money, either to help former slaves or to buy the freedom of family members still in bondage. Newman tells us that Brown liked the life of singing on stage and telling his story. In a preface to the Manchester edition, Brown warns his audience looking for adventures and scenes of blood in his story that although he escaped the lash for the most part in slavery, nevertheless his mind groaned under torments the language is inadequate to express.

He didn't have the language, but Douglass, in his searing *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (1845), and William Wells Brown, in his *Narrative of William W. Brown, A Fugitive, Written by Himself* (1847), describing how as a child he had to listen to his mother being flogged, did. And for a long time *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) by Harriet Jacobs, the woman who nearly lost the use of her legs in that attic, and who witnessed from that hiding place the terror after the Nat Turner rebellion, was thought to be a novel by the white writer and abolitionist Lydia Maria Child, and not just because it was first published under a pseudonym. Her story is almost incredible. Harriet Beecher Stowe tried to rip off Jacobs's story, as Ishmael Reed claims Stowe ripped off Josiah Henson's narrative for *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.<sup>23</sup>

If one assumes that Brown's voice really is coming through the text, it is noticeable how ultimately cheerful his tone is, though he has spoken of heart-wrenching things. Brown's experience of slavery was mild compared to the atrocity stories of many of the enslaved. Douglass eventually turned against him as someone insufficiently committed to the abolitionist cause and too interested in his own performances of gratitude at his deliverance. As Henry Louis Gates Jr. suggests, black people were recreating their public image through their autobiographies and nobility of intent was a political asset Douglass was protective of.

Newman's edition has notes that are not only useful and interesting, but as moving as Brown's story itself. For instance, from Newman we learn that Dr. Smith was convicted in 1849 for helping to box up two more slaves, who failed in their escape attempt. He survived the stab wounds of a hired assassin and converted his jailer, but he was not released from prison until 1856. By contrast, James C.A. Smith, who admitted to having helped slaves escape since 1826, was released after his trial, "perhaps because a lawyer who charged \$900 argued his case." Newman is also interesting on Brown's later career. Brown adapted a Stephen Foster song, "Old Uncle Ned," for his shows, turning a sentimental ballad into a protest song. Foster's song:

*Hang up de fiddle and de bow;  
No more hard work for poor Old Ned—  
He is gone whar de good Niggas go.*

In Brown's version, the black man is absent for another reason:

*Brown laid down the shovel and the hoe.  
Down in the box he did go;  
No more slave work for Henry Box Brown,  
In the box by Express he did go.*

His success as a performer "encouraged his abilities as an entrepreneur." He got the artist Josiah Wolcott to design and paint *The Mirror of Slavery*, a panorama consisting of many thousands of square feet of canvas, a spectacular exhibition of fifty scenes depicting the history of blacks in the US, which toured New England.

When Brown and his new business partner, James C.A. Smith, fled to England in 1850, they managed to bring over *The Mirror of Slavery*. They traveled the lecture circuit, with Brown selling lithographs of himself. But Brown and Smith somehow fell out in 1851, and Smith wrote to pious antislavery friends about Brown's drinking, smoking, gambling, and swearing. "What happened to Brown is as yet unknown," Newman concludes. Rumor said he married an Englishwoman and disappeared into Wales. Years later, Frederick Douglass, who had declined in the 1845 version of his autobiography to divulge how he escaped in order to protect those who had helped him, took Brown to task for giving away his secret, thus maybe depriving others of his avenue of escape.

## Notes

Henry Louis Gates Jr. and William L. Andrews wrote the notes for the Library of America volumes that contain the autobiographies of Douglass, Brown, and Jacobs. But *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*, by Harriet A. Jacobs, edited by Jean Fagan Yellin

(Harvard University Press, 1987), and *From Fugitive Slave to Free Man: The Autobiographies of William Wells Brown*, edited by William L. Andrews (Penguin, 1993), remain useful editions.

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