SLAVERY AND FREEDOM

Expanded Edition

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As one close student of Reconstruction has observed, whites North and South felt the ex-slave needed protection in his first experience in freedom. The difference was that the Northerner thought the freedman needed protection from his late master, and the Southerner thought he needed protection from *himself*.[3] Granted that planter political behavior must now be assessed as unenlightened, and probably selfish, the ex-master was no cynic. His record, as it appears in private letters and diaries, reveals him to have been a man undergoing severe trauma. Not only were his finances in chaos. So was his superego.

The southern planter's failure to take into account the extent to which radical measures and aspirations had won a popular following in the North partly resulted from preoccupation with his own internal conflict. The extent to which he had become victim of his own proslavery argument before the war may be open to question.[4] In general, however, the planter endorsed the antebellum polemicist's view of the slaveholder as benevolent paternalist, the Biblical patriarch at the center of a stable and orderly agrarian world. Now at last, after years of isolating this image of himself from outside attack, the planter was suddenly obliged to re-think that role, to re-think slavery, to re-think race relations. Nothing less than his own significance in the only world he knew was at stake. As a member of a self-conscious elite that had had more than three decades to bolster its psychological defenses, the great planter felt himself to be discredited; his values were not only defeated in war, but under the indictment of the civilized world. Distaste for slaves, he thought, had led to English and French refusal to intervene in behalf of the South during the Civil War. Indeed, his government had been willing at the end of the war to consider some form of emancipation as a desperate gambit to win foreign support.[5] It would also appear that the planter had to pick up the check within the South, as well as whatever moral bills the North and Europe had to present. He was even discredited, at least for the time being, in the eyes of the many poorer whites who had once considered his leadership infallible. They now held him responsible for bringing on the war.

The planter not only had to accept judgments passed at home

and abroad. He had some reason to suppose that God had condemned him too. In a society where the religious defense of the peculiar institution had assumed such importance, it is not surprising that in intimate revelations most planters who thought deeply about the meaning of the war expressed belief that the conflict had been God's means of ending slavery. In fact wherever the will of God is mentioned in connection with defeat, it is in that sense. "For myself," wrote a lawyer-planter of North Carolina, "I have become thoroughly convinced that the great design of Providence in this war is to exterminate our system of Slavery[,] as it is not the slavery of the Bible; and that this war will continue until that end is obtained. If we be wise, we may respect his wishes and save our country; otherwise he will use our enemies to effect his purpose."[6] Usually these wartime self-examinations assumed that slavery as it had existed in Biblical times had not been morally evil. But the South had erred, many men confessed, in using external antislavery threats as an excuse to gloss over evils peculiar to southern slavery. When clergymen spoke of these matters to their congregations during the war they urged reforms in the slave codes, reforms making it impossible, for instance, to break up slave families, and to make it possible for masters to teach slaves to read without breaking the law. How otherwise, they asked, could slavery be made the school for civilization and the vehicle of uplift its supporters claimed that it was?[7]

With these considerations behind them, most planters accepted northern victory as God's judgment. When William Henry Ravenel was coping with the widespread labor disorganization under the occupation of northern white and black troops, he cried out that "I cannot avoid the conviction that a righteous God had designed this punishment for our sins." He noted that most of the black troops who struck fear into the planter's heart had come from coastal South Carolina, where the master was so often absent, abandoning duties as patriarch, leaving slaves without spiritual instruction. "This is not the form of 'Slavery,'" Ravenel wrote, "that we can justify. . . . It may be that God has seen fit to deprive us of our stewardship."[8]

That God and the nineteenth century had spoken against him was painful to consider. But of more immediate concern was the

ex-slaves with dire consequences if they continued to work for their old master, regardless of how generous his terms were.[24] But the presence of the black army was also symbolic of former bondsmen's new freedom, and was hotly resented and blamed not only for trouble on plantations, but for what the freedman as a soldier stood for. The black soldier had indeed rejected the past, both manor and master, in the most conclusive way—by abandoning one and fighting the other.

Here again the Sea Island country offers a microcosm of a tension common all over the South—and again because of the special circumstances. Wherever the master class retained the land, the freedman whose attachment to home, family, and friends was strong had to accept the old owner too, and to reach an accommodation with him. In the Sea Island country, tables were turned. Here the master was often in the position of courting the favor of his one-time slave. Massa returned to the islands penniless, and was frequently a suppliant for whatever crude comforts the land itself could offer in such trying times—shelter, or firewood, for instance, sweet potatoes, or blackberries in season. Sometimes the impoverished master was not above asking for and accepting small cash loans from his erstwhile slaves.[25] In this region the freedman was in a position to offer favors, to affirm purely personal bonds of the old relationship without endorsing its economic and exploitative aspects. His relative freedom from coercion makes his response more meaningful. The master, for his part, had few advantages in his drive to return to his position of primary influence in the former slave's new life.

In fact, the one-time owner had a formidable rival in that arena. During the war numbers of northern men and women of antislavery conviction had come into the South Carolina islands to teach blacks and to supervise their first efforts at farming for wages. These missionaries had had by 1865 several years of contact with Sea Islanders. By a not-so-surprising but nevertheless ironic twist of fate, they had often, if somewhat unconsciously, slipped into the planter's old paternal role. It looked very much, to use a psychological expression made famous in the historiography of slavery by Stanley Elkins, as if the freedmen's most significant "significant other" was not old master at all, but the

"Everlasting Yankee," who appeared in many guises, as the schoolteacher, the plantation superintendent, or the Freedmen's Bureau agent. His was now the power to provide aid, security, advice.[26]

Under the circumstances the planter's situation as the symbolic father whose children have rejected him was particularly painful. One is therefore hardly surprised to discover that the earliest and most consistent complaints registered by the master were of the one-time slave's *ingratitude*. When Thomas Chaplin returned to St. Helena Island, he found his property had been divided and sold to his slaves. But what he singled out for special comment was the disloyalty of his faithful retainer, Robert: "I left everything in his hands and he never saved a single thing for me and has always kept out of my way since peace. He might have saved something if ever so little." He thought fondly of a favorite rocking-chair that he had some reason to suppose the estimable Robert had appropriated to his own uses. Reflecting further upon how upside down the world had become, Chaplin remembered a terrible time in his youth, when he had been forced by the sheriff to sell ten slaves to clear his debts. Chaplin took belated comfort. He should not have "felt bad about it," he wrote, for "in truth the Negroes did not care as much about us as we did for them." With the benefit of hindsight, he ought, he declared bitterly, "to have put them all in my pocket."[27]

The Thomas Chaplins had not anticipated such rejections. When one respected coastal planter returned to his old home, his former slaves went out to welcome him, with the familiar "Huddy," and took him in. According to the northern teacher who wrote about the incident later, the master then made the mistake of telling the freedmen that he expected to get his property back soon, and he wanted to know how many would work for him for wages. Nobody was willing. "Even if you pay as well, sir," said the foreman, "we had rather work for the Yankees who have been our friends."[28] Stephen Elliott's slaves also took him in "with overflowing affection," and according to Elliott, they treated him "as before," serving "beautiful breakfasts and splendid dinners." But there were limits. "We own this land now," they informed their old master. "Put it out of your head that it will ever be yours again."[29]

South. The basis of power remained much as it had been before the war. The closest freedmen came to armed resistance was over this very point. But the entire epoch demonstrated little violence and much patient black politics.

Abolitionists who had thought a great deal about revolts in the West Indies often expected the black population to light a fire behind the Confederate army, a fire so hot that the war would have to be called off by the South. They spoke about this hope more often in private than in public, to be sure, for they understood that many northern supporters of the war were not so angry with southern whites as to wish upon them, as the phrase went, "all the horrors of a servile war." Instead of fulfilling this somewhat dubious hope of their friends, southern freedmen murdered exceedingly little. Rather, they escalated their traditional nonviolent forms of resistance: malingering, petty and not so petty sabotage, above all flight. In general, slaves behaved in accordance with a proper understanding of which army offered freedom. They assisted Union soldiers, spied upon Confederate movements, depleted the southern labor force by running to enemy lines, and finally, served in the Union army on every front.

Nevertheless, the four million slaves of the South did not behave in the way that servile populations are assumed to behave under the impact of revolution, in the crucible of war. It is a monument to the common sense of southern freedmen and their leaders that they did not in this way risk uniting whites engaged in deadly combat. Like American colonists in revolution against Britain, former slaves seemed more concerned to gain rights and privileges of citizenship than to alter terms of that citizenship in sweeping ways. This was made more clear in conventions held in numbers of communities after the war, conventions asking for the ballot and civil equality, and clinched later in constitutional conventions organized under Congressional Reconstruction. These revolutionaries were usually still in the Tennis Court Oath phase of the classic French Revolution, and not in the Reign of Terror and Virtue. In spite of acute racial and social tension during the entire period, there was no jacquerie, and much less specific animosity among freedmen toward former owners than there was reason to expect.

In writing about this period in later life, John R. Lynch, a prominent Afro-American leader in Mississippi, attempted to explain why many black Republicans abstained from voting for the Mississippi Constitution submitted by the radical convention of 1867. Lynch claimed that the clause disenfranchising Mississippi white citizens was disagreeable to blacks. He spoke of a bond of sympathy between the races, "a bond that the institution of slavery with all its horrors could not destroy, the Rebellion could not wipe out, Reconstruction could not efface, and subsequent events have not been able to change."[1]

This may well have been one of those generous sentiments that ripen and mellow with time. Yet a number of arresting examples of black leaders who behaved with extraordinary generosity toward conquered whites suggest that Lynch's sentiments may not have been altogether based on afterthought. Beverly Nash, a black representative to the radical convention in South Carolina, urged Afro-Americans to seek racial unity by petitioning Congress to remove white disenfranchisement. The talents of the best men were needed, Nash argued, regardless of color. Nash and his black associates W. J. Whipper and Francis L. Cardozo, also men of the highest qualifications, persuaded the convention to petition Congress to that effect. Few southern states went that far in the radical phase of Reconstruction, but there is strong evidence that in many states cooperation with former Confederates would have been possible had former Confederates been willing to accept black participation in politics as an accomplished fact. A few were willing, especially in Mississippi, where the old Whig leadership inclined to accept realities and join the Republican Party. But across the South there was a reluctance on the part of former leading citizens to cooperate across the race line.

For reasons why the white upper crust could not be colorblind, one does not have far to look. Inveterate racial hostility was undoubtedly a central factor for many, perhaps most. And yet poor whites, comprising the very class supposedly most prejudiced against blacks, cooperated with ex-slaves.

The problem for the dominant white classes seems to have been subtler. Throughout the private correspondence of the planting elite in the year following the war there is an undercurrent of

One way to grant the proper importance to black participation is simply to understand the major aspirations of these illiterate freedmen. The major aspiration of all aspirations was to own land, and that failing, to rent it. This was how a farmer understood getting a living, and the freedman had learned that much and much more as a slave. He understood the sources of master's economic and social power, and immediately asked for land. When he did not get it, he still proved reluctant to submit to wage labor for his old master, although that was often what the old master preferred when he had the cash. Both former master and former slave understood the extractive potential of, and the kind of supervision that would accompany, the wage system. It was therefore more from the wish of the slave to have a free hand at farming operations than from the old master's foreknowledge of its potential for extracting labor that the sharecropping system first arose. The freedmen may collectively have made a bad choice. But their choices were not very attractive, once the national government abandoned the idea of giving freedmen farms.

Next to desire for land, and second only in importance to it, was the aspiration toward an education. This was as spontaneous and as universal as the wish to own a farm. Black soldiers in every part of the South turned barracks into primary schools. Nobody was welcomed into the South more heartily by blacks in all parts than were northern schoolteachers. It is doubtful if a people ever, in such large numbers, went through such inconveniences to get a little learning. The school became for the freedman almost as symbolic as the church had been.

The historian who wants to see Reconstruction from the point of view of the freedman will therefore follow with special interest the efforts to win land and education through politics. Black leaders were rarely numerous enough in southern legislatures to dictate social changes of the sort many of their constituencies would have desired. Seen from the angle of freedmen, however, black leadership constituted the only chance for improvement in condition.

The smallness of the cadre of black leadership should not be surprising when one considers the rather infrequent opportunities offered by slavery for the emergence of talent. But there were

certain opportunities. Slaves who had made the most of them were available after the war to assume responsibilities of leadership. In addition, a considerable number of northern free blacks came South after the war to aid in Reconstruction.

From these materials came the leadership of the freedman during Reconstruction, a leadership that was never independent of white carpetbag influence, but a leadership that nevertheless gave voice to needs and attitudes of newly enfranchised people. It is standard to begin such discussions by analysis of the highest levels of attainment during the epoch. At no time can it be fairly stated that blacks controlled any southern state. With the brief exception of the Louisiana interim governorship of P. B. S. Pinchback, after Henry Clay Warmoth was removed from office, no black leader was Governor of a southern state during the epoch. In South Carolina two blacks became Lieutenant-Governors, however, as did one in Mississippi and three in Louisiana. Blacks became Speakers of the House in several states. In no southern state did black men control legislatures, though they came closest in South Carolina and played a prominent part in Louisiana.

On the national level there were two Senators, Blanche K. Bruce and Hiram Revels, both from Mississippi, both able men. Before the turn of the century there were twenty black Congressmen, eight from South Carolina, four from North Carolina, three from Alabama, and one each from Virginia, Louisiana, Georgia, Mississippi, Florida. Prominent for length of service were J. H. Rainey and Robert Smalls of South Carolina, and John R. Lynch of Mississippi.

Blacks were members in varying strength in each legislature, and were prominent in activities on behalf of civil rights and education. One of the most significant parts of the picture is the presence of blacks in state constitutional conventions that organized Reconstruction governments. In only one state were blacks in the majority. Such was the case in South Carolina, and they assisted in writing one of the most progressive state constitutions, one that served South Carolina well for several decades. It was eventually abandoned at the end of the century for the simple reason that under it there were too many difficulties in driving black men from the polls. In Louisiana black delegates to the Re-

construction Convention were equal in numbers to whites, and in several other states blacks constituted a healthy minority.

Most Afro-American leadership at upper levels of government was provided by northern blacks who came into the South during and after the Civil War. Without any pejorative implication, we may call them black carpetbaggers, though I want to add immediately that many were returning south. Some, like Blanche K. Bruce, had been born in the South as slaves. Bruce escaped during the war, taking his departure from St. Louis. He was a teacher, and an able one. Mississippi was lucky to have his political services during Reconstruction.

Many of these leaders were brilliant and well-educated men. No better-educated man operated during the period than Francis Cardozo, who served as Secretary of State and Treasurer of South Carolina, and before that as a very able supervisor of public education in Charleston. Cardozo had benefited from an education in Glasgow and London. It is ironic that this educator, who rose to office through his expert management of the Charleston city schools, should have had the same last name as T. W. Cardozo of Mississippi, who was charged and convicted of embezzling funds from Tougaloo. Alas, in this respect, as in so many others, black politicians proved neither superior nor inferior to white counterparts. Some Lieutenant-Governors were able, some were not, and from there to the lowest level of organized political activities the same might be said.

Important as it is to know about these leaders, however, it is even more interesting to reflect upon how they gained power. What institutions assisted them, authenticated them, so to speak, to the people? The extremely significant answer is that most black leaders had some connection with newly emerging educational systems of the South, or with churches.

Many teachers were among the elite leaders who came South during and just after the war. Nothing served better to enhance a man's image with the people he represented than association with schools and education. Education represented for most freedmen a means of economic and social advancement, and the people were ready to support men who came under such auspices. Many teachers and agents of the Freedman's Bureau had opportunities

to travel widely, and the support they received was consequently greater. As members of active organizations they also secured information they would need later about organizing, financing, and about wringing support from the federal government. Not the least advantage was the occasion to work with white Northerners who would comprise an active and important if relatively small part of the Republican Party in the South. Acquaintance with men whose influence in the federal government was strong was an important asset to black leaders, whether they came themselves from North or South. They were not very rich men for the most part, and often required some kind of appointive office before they could hope for a following at the polls.

Having been a minister at some time was also an important asset in a potential black leader. This is hardly surprising when one considers that the church had been almost the only avenue available to would-be leaders under the slave regime. Cramped and narrow as that avenue had been, it had been there. All students of slavery acknowledged its importance. The slave preacher was the man with the most status on the plantation, was associated with the most important social and emotional outlet of his fellow slaves, and he was heard. It was not without reason that whites suspected preachers when trouble developed, and tended to curtail their activities in times of public fear of insurrection. Therefore the development of a class of native-born leadership came as a very natural thing. Northern ministers who came South during the war contributed to the number of leaders associated with the churches, and sometimes these men did not analyze the problems of the newly enfranchised along precisely the same lines as those who had grown up on the land.

What is unfortunate is that we as yet know so little about local political leaders who took up the essential but undramatic role of organizing at the community level. One supposes they must in fact have arisen from slavery and secured their position as leaders more by means of natural talent than training of any kind. Many were undoubtedly illiterate. Their jobs were infinitely more dangerous than that of major political leaders. One wonders whether these men came from the class called "privileged" bondsmen, or from the field slaves, or from the free men of color. Research at

career at the end of many business ventures and as many failures, unsuccessful speculations, lawsuits, and bankruptcies, even misappropriation of funds. Brown dealt with his family as a stern Calvinist, fearful that his neglect in punishment of even the smallest faults would advance the work of the devil. Only rarely did his tenderness find expression, but Oates shows that it was there.

In John Brown's career in the Kansas territory, as leader of a small guerilla band of Free State men, Oates finds the occasion to explain the messianic streak that compelled Brown to become first a criminal and then a saint. To Oates's credit, he describes John Brown's crime as unflinchingly as he describes his hardships, endured under what Brown took to be the chastisement of God.

Lawrence, the main town of the Free State government in the territory, had been attacked and burned by proslavery forces bent on driving the Free State men out of Kansas. Brown undertook to become God's instrument of vengeance. On a moonless night in May, 1856, he took four of his sons, a son-in-law, and two other followers and separated himself from the main body of armed settlers. This band descended upon the sleeping community of Pottawatomie Creek, where Brown called forth from their homes five men and had his band hack them to death with swords he had sharpened especially for the purpose. After washing the murder weapons in the waters of the creek, Brown went into hiding with his men, and began the career of outlawry in the cause of freedom that certain newspapers at the time, and many historians since, have found heroic.

Oates shows plainly that these murders, which Brown's defenders have preferred to call "reprisals," instead of helping the cause of freedom in Kansas, began the worst phase of the undeclared war on the frontier. What Brown had to contribute after Pottawatomie as a guerilla captain was insignificant, for he could take orders from no one, nor could he cooperate with other leaders to any common purpose.

The astonishing thing about Brown's contemporaries and historians since, who have built and protected the legendary Brown, is the indifference they have shown to Brown's victims. Who has asked the names and ages of the slain men, or whether they were guilty of anything, or if they were in fact a threat to other settlers in the region? Louis Ruchames, for example, describes them simply with the opprobrious word "proslavery."

There were no slaveholders among Brown's victims, two of the men were hardly men at all, being twenty-two and twenty respectively, and there would have been a fourteen-year-old boy among the dead if his mother had not interceded for his life. The one thing the adults had in common was an association with a court that was shortly to hear a case in which Brown would be a defendant. So great is the investment of presumably "liberal" scholars in the legendary Brown that they often stoop to intellectual blackmail of other scholars who explore the pre–Harper's Ferry Brown carefully. Ruchames, for instance, in his Introduction to the Brown letters singles out James Malin's older work,[9] where for the first time Brown's Kansas career was fully described, and refers to the author as one

> . . . who seems unable to forgive the North for having used force against Southern secession, or the Abolitionists for having taught that the abolition of slavery would be a step forward for American society, or the Negro for having believed that his welfare would be furthered by a forceful elimination of slavery.

Whatever Mr. Malin's failures in scholarship or objectivity may have been, Mr. Ruchames does not answer any of the charges Malin brought against Brown. Nor will his charges against Malin be convincing so long as Ruchames identifies Brown with that group of antislavery men and women who were "devoted to the highest ideals of equality and democracy, influenced by the best in the Judaeo-Christian tradition and all that was good and noble in the thoughts and actions of the Founding Fathers."

Presumably Ruchames feels that Brown was justified at Pottawatomie Creek by the "historical context." In support of that view he cites expressions made some twenty years after the event by Brown's neighbors, who by that time had a considerable moral investment in the legend. Oates, however, makes it clear enough that, although many acts of violence had been perpetrated upon the Free States settlers, and certainly many threats had been uttered, nothing that preceded Pottawatomie justified Brown's cold-blooded act, and that the event marked the beginning of the

most vicious period of an undeclared guerilla war. John Brown's own neighbors were unanimous and unequivocal in their condemnation of the massacre at the time it took place.

One by one Oates strips away the excuses Brown's contemporaries and later historians have used to shield Brown's memory from the responsibility for his act, even to an exposure of that most unbecoming trait in martyrs, mendacity. To those who *knew* his guilt, Brown declared, "God is my judge," and to those who did not, he simply denied it. Sometimes this denial was accomplished with stunning craftiness. Mr. Ruchames's volume includes a letter that Brown wrote to his wife shortly after the killings. He reported that he had left the main body of armed Free Staters with his "little company" and

> . . . encountered quite a number of pro-slavery men, and took quite a number of prisoners. Our prisoners we let go; but we kept some four or five horses. We were immediately after this accused of murdering five men at Pottawatomie, and great efforts have since been made to capture us.

He asked his wife to send a copy of this letter to Gerrit Smith, the rich philanthropist of Petersboro, New York, who was Brown's chief financial supporter, because he knew "of no other way to get these facts . . . before the world. . . ." Such an elliptical and technical view of the truth, advanced with glittering sincerity, goes far to explain the influence of Brown upon the eastern antislavery intellectuals who subsequently joined the conspiracy that led to Harper's Ferry, and supplied the money for the insurrection Brown planned. C. Vann Woodward pointed out nearly twenty years ago that John Brown understood these sophisticates very well and that he "could have told them much that they did not know about the psychology of fellow travelers."[10] But their gullibility is still hard to explain.

Unlike Ruchames, Oates sees clearly in the crime at Pottawatomie certain unheroic elements that sit poorly with the saint of Harper's Ferry and the Charlestown jail. In the shadow of the gallows Brown engineered his legend as he wanted it to endure, and made the fullest use of the platform afforded by his trial. His words in those last weeks were patient, brave, forgiving, and

entirely convincing. But he did not stick to the truth. He denied having planned an insurrection, and insisted that he had merely planned to provide a haven for refugees in the mountains. Frederick Douglass knew better, for that had been the substance of their dispute at Chambersburg. Apparently it was never subsequently in Douglass's interest to expose the "inaccuracies and falsehoods"—to use Oates's phrase—of Brown's testimony at his trial.

Making a sensible connection between the John Brown of Kansas and the John Brown of Harper's Ferry has been the great challenge for Brown's biographers. James Malin and the other anti-Brown writers do so by interpreting Brown as a wicked person of completely ruthless expediency who welcomed the opportunity to carry on a life of brigandage; others have taken at face value the nineteen affidavits of insanity in Brown's immediate family offered at the time of his trial. Oates accepts neither pattern of explanation. He is not convinced by the affidavits, and he points to Brown's brilliant exploitation of his position at his trial to obtain the maximum benefit for the antislavery cause as a sign of complete sanity.

Both Ruchames and Oates point out that calling a man insane for hating slavery enough to make a war on it is misguided, to say the least. In such times those who hate slavery less may also be called a little mad. It is only fair to point out, however, that it is not his hatred of slavery that has caused historians to call Brown mad; it is also right to say that there is nothing in either book that will resolve the question of John Brown's mental health. One's mode of behavior delineates madness, not one's convictions. At this point, of course, no clinical proof or conclusive answer is possible, because aside from Brown's acts, about which one may believe what one will, the main evidence rests with the affidavits, which were gathered for the purpose of saving Brown's life.

Both Ruchames and Oates avoid the explanation of insanity, but beyond that point the similarity in interpretation ends abruptly. Ruchames manages some forty pages of introduction without mentioning the religious aspects of Brown's nonconforming abolitionism, or the man's curious identification with the bloody heroes of the Old Testament who served Jehovah with the sword.