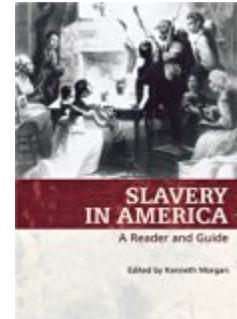


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Kenneth Morgan, ed. *Slavery in America: A Reader and Guide*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005. xiv + 456 pp. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8203-2792-1; \$69.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8203-2791-4.

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Once Upon a Time in America

While racial slavery as an institution officially ended with the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment, the subject continues to attract large numbers of historians. Especially since the Civil Rights Movement, slavery studies have assumed an increasingly important place in American historiography. Moreover, the increasing sophistication of Southern history, with an emphasis on racial themes, has only accented the significance of racial slavery. Yet this explosion of historical writing only makes it more difficult to put the various subject areas connected to the history of slavery together in one volume. Kenneth Morgan then is to be complimented for attempting to bring together a range of documents, essays, and a short synopsis, all into one work accessible to undergraduate students. All of us who teach undergraduate history courses, whether surveys or upper division courses, will be in Morgan's debt for producing a work that should stimulate classroom discussion. While the length of the work may prohibit using the entire volume in survey classes, instructors should still be able to select those sections that would best fit their courses.

Morgan's approach reminds me in many ways of Robert Conrad's *Children of God's Fire: A Documentary History of Black Slavery in Brazil* (1994), a brilliant compilation of historical documents that provided a thematic discussion of slavery and emancipation in Brazil. Morgan's book involves twelve different chapters that examine various elements of the history of slavery in the United States. Chapters discuss colonial and revolutionary America, the business of slavery, slave resistance, the

antislavery movement, and the Civil War. Morgan begins each chapter with a concise summary of important historiography on the subject at hand, selects a representative essay, and then concludes with three historical documents representative of the subject. While such a process often limits the scope of the subject being examined, it is difficult to see how he could have done otherwise and still produced a manageable work. Yet this approach also means that Morgan's story of slavery is dependent on the choices he made. It is a cruel reflection of the subject being examined that he has but one shot to explain the material, and when the choices are poor, the subject matter is not explored in the depth one might wish. As is often the case in compilations of essays and documents, the quality does vary at times. American slavery was a wide ranging experience over two and a half centuries, and space considerations limit what anyone can do in one volume. Morgan does try to be inclusive in his use of materials from various periods, but the Old South probably deserves more attention.

What does come through in Morgan's selections of essays and documents is how truly exploitive and destructive slavery was. We are able to see it as a system in which peoples lives were enmeshed with an economic system that exploited their labor, denied them autonomy, and treated them as less than human. In response, African Americans sought to carve out lives with dignity, and in some cases to seize advantage of the opportunities to resist and carve out new lives. Yet those efforts took place within an historical context in which most African

Americans were trapped and had no other choice but to endure. Morgan also gives us a sense of the way in which some white Southerners, such as George Washington, felt conflicted about the institution while they continued to profit from their slave ownership. Equally interesting was Johann Martin Bolzius's response to a questionnaire in which he recounts how easy it was to purchase land, and the immense profits that could be obtained from African-American labor. Even for historians of race relations, re-reading these familiar documents serve as powerful reminders of the dehumanizing aspects that slavery exerted on American society.

In some chapters, the reader could have benefited from a few choices beyond those Morgan ultimately made. For example, the chapter on slave life and work contained a wealth of material that describes how slaves felt but relatively little on the grueling labor that slaves performed. It seems strange that in a volume on African-American slavery, the production of cotton, sugar, and tobacco are relatively neglected. Most of what is presented regarding the African-American work experience was comprised of travelers' observations. Other subjects that could have been examined in greater depth include planter political culture, relations between plantation owners, overseers, and the impact of the Civil

War on the plantation system. The chapter on the Civil War was disappointing. It consists of an essay by Don Fehrenbacher on Abraham Lincoln's leadership as president and includes documents that demonstrate emancipation's impact, but do not explain the way in which freedom transformed ex-slaves' lives. It would have been useful to explain the significance of slavery in a broader sense by providing a comparison of American slavery with the nature of the institution in the Caribbean and Brazil, by discussing the legacy of racial slavery, and more effectively discussing emancipation. Yet all history is about choices, and space considerations no doubt played a role in limiting what Morgan was able to discuss in his volume.

These minor criticisms are not meant in any way to detract from the reach and significance of this volume. Kenneth Morgan has done a remarkable job synthesizing a tremendous amount of historical research. He has also managed to put into the hands of students and scholars a concise volume that tells us a great deal about the institution of slavery. This is clearly an important work that students and teachers will do well to consult as a very useful resource. Hopefully, the book's appearance suggests an increasing sophistication in the documentary collections that convey the history of American slavery.

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