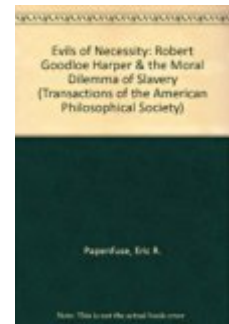




Eric Robert Papenfuse. *The Evils of Necessity: Robert Goodloe Harper and the Moral Dilemma of Slavery*. Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1997. x + 160 pp. \$18.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-87169-871-1.

Reviewed by James C. Foley (University of Mississippi)
Published on H-SHEAR (August, 1998)



Robert Goodloe Harper: Self-Deceived Man of the Early Republic?

Eric Robert Papenfuse has written an intriguing book about a man, Robert Goodloe Harper, who is well known to historians of the early American republic. One might ask what there is new to say about Mr. Harper. Eric Papenfuse replies that Harper's moral dilemma over slavery and its necessary place in southern society provides an exciting new vantage point from which to study this man.

What Papenfuse reveals in this book is both continuity and change within the character of Harper. Robert Harper believed passionately in the value of education yet remained firmly committed to slavery as one of the underpinnings of southern society. Thus, his hopes for the improvement of the black race collided with the need for the social control and safety offered by slavery. In essence, what Papenfuse offers is a narrative that explores this moral dilemma that Harper faced. This approach places Papenfuse squarely within that group of historians, such as Thomas Slaughter and John Demos, who explore the interior lives of their biographical subjects within the narrative framework.

In Chapter One, "Education and the 'True Religion,'" Papenfuse discusses the important role that education played in the life and character development of young Robert Harper. Harper did not begin formal schooling until age ten; he dropped out of school, joined a local cavalry unit and fought against the British in 1780-1781. Following a period of idleness and dissipation, he resumed his studies, this time at Princeton University. It was at

Princeton where Harper's "pedagogical belief in personal independence antithetical to his family's understanding of the social order" took shape (p. 4). He derived this belief from the Reverend John Witherspoon's lectures. Harper concluded that "all races of mankind possessed an innate moral sense, which required cultivation. Only reason could bring such enlightenment. It was therefore essential, for one's spiritual salvation, to reject a passionate world of unthinking obedience and to pursue an educated life of rational self-interest" (pp. 4-5). Despite his rejection of his parents's religion, Harper asserted that religion, morality, and virtue existed and played important roles in man's life. Man was not deprived according to Harper; rather, rationalism and religion became intertwined. Failure to follow their precepts would lead to a life of sin. For Harper, education thus became a substitute for grace. Learning would redeem humanity, and for Harper this applied with special force to the black race. Papenfuse reveals this idea to be a thread that runs throughout Harper's life.

After graduation from Princeton, Harper headed to South Carolina to make his way as a lawyer. He brought with him to his new home another belief, namely the rejection of the idea that blacks were inferior to whites. Harper believed that blacks "were inherently equal to whites" (p. 8). Blacks merely lacked the education offered to whites and this deprivation therefore created status distinctions in society. Despite this belief in black equality with whites, when Harper created a hierarchy for society he placed slaves and free blacks at the bottom.

Why? Their degradation and lack of prospects for self-improvement relegated them to the bottom of society. Their race also doomed them to inferior status. Whites would never accept them as equals in an unenlightened society. Harper then reckoned with slavery, the presence of which presented him with his first moral dilemma. He resolved this dilemma in a revolutionary manner. He concluded that slavery was sin and not the other way around. Blacks would only benefit from bondage if they received education; however, the lack of opportunity for such improvement rendered slavery in South Carolina a “temporal embodiment of evil” (p. 10). Harper never acted on his beliefs. He rationalized the continuation of slavery because he saw slavery as a necessity. Slavery permitted whites to make money and an attack upon slavery threatened financial ruin for South Carolina.

Harper decided to give up his efforts as a backcountry lawyer and turned his attention instead to politics, which dominated his life in the 1790’s. His first effort occurred during the reapportionment struggle in South Carolina in which backcountry whites sought greater parity for their region in the state legislature. Harper’s oratory on behalf of the backcountry linked slavery and freedom. His rhetoric permitted his constituents to see their “political slavery” as comparable to the chattel slavery endured by blacks. Such oratory appealed to backcountry whites but frightened lowcountry slaveholders, who responded by attacking Harper’s emancipationist ideas as fatal to South Carolina’s economic health. Harper denied this charge and defended slavery as necessary. Without it, he asserted, South Carolina would be inundated with a multitude of uneducated blacks who would threaten the peace and stability of society. Papenfuse notes that Harper once again could not rationalize the moral evil that was slavery.

In the 1790s, Harper’s faith in education and black improvement would receive a severe test as events in France and Santo Domingo unfolded. Of particular interest to southern slaveholders was the slave revolt on Santo Domingo. This revolt showed what might happen when slaves heard about liberty and sought to gain it for themselves by taking up arms against their masters. This theme runs throughout Papenfuse’s second chapter, “The Burning Fuse: Revolution and the Coming of the Apocalypse.”

Papenfuse deftly illustrates Harper’s gradual disenchantment with the French Revolution. Harper went from a leading Charleston Jacobin in 1793 to an ardent Federalist by 1798. Rejecting earlier interpretations, Pa-

penfuse asserts that Harper saw America caught between anarchy and slavery, each representing an extreme point in a range of possibilities for the young republic. Education is again the key for Harper because education provides knowledge and virtue to maintain equilibrium. Harper believed the chaos of the French Jacobin Terror would undermine the American social order, and that “Bondage, not liberation, would be the result as mankind plunged backward toward anarchy and violence” (p. 22). The presence of slaves forced Harper to abandon his positive view of the French Revolution. Slaves would benefit materially and emotionally from the social upheaval a revolution would create because such an upheaval would weaken the white power structure. Harper therefore feared that the revolt in Santo Domingo, inspired by events in France, was the foreshadowing of slave uprisings in America.

As chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, Harper pushed through defense bills designed to thwart an impending invasion from Santo Domingo. Papenfuse perceives a psychological dimension to Harper’s actions. He asserts that Harper engaged in self-deception: “Lacking moral grounds for tolerating slavery’s existence, he let himself believe that a black revolution was spreading to the United States; such fears reinforced the institution’s ‘necessity’ and assured him of the importance of national unity” (p. 31). Furthermore, Papenfuse asserts that this feared incipient rebellion provided a way for Harper to release his inner doubts about black education while also allowing him to support the Alien and Sedition Acts, legislation that clearly limited the free dissemination of knowledge and education. Papenfuse notes that Harper found certain kinds of speech, such as the Quaker antislavery petitions, objectionable because their powerful ideological arguments severely tested the uneasy equilibrium he maintained in his own mind.

Following the Jeffersonian electoral victory in 1801, Harper resigned from public office and moved to Maryland to pursue a lucrative career as an attorney in Baltimore. It was in Maryland where Harper made his return to politics. In 1810, he became president of the Washington Society of Maryland, “a group designed to support, extend and carry into effect the political principles and system of [George] Washington” (p. 38). It was part of a larger effort by Federalist leaders to create benevolent institutions around the nation. Papenfuse believes that for Harper this society served as a “platform from which he could address the issues that plagued his conscience” (p. 40). This society also permitted Harper to

renew his efforts to provide education for the less fortunate. This effort came through the Washington Free School, which served poor white children. Though the school only admitted white children, Papenfuse asserts that these children served as “psychological equivalents for those whom he was unable and unwilling to assist,” namely black children (pp. 45-46). Such a strategy prevented Harper from confronting the moral evil of slavery and its necessary place in southern society.

Slavery continued to preoccupy Harper after the War of 1812; however, his mind became attracted to more radical solutions that emerged in the next ten years. Papenfuse discusses these in his last chapter, “Colonization and Diffusion: The Only Solutions.” Harper saw the increasing black population, both slave and free, as perilous to the nation’s health and existence. He feared that an invading force could find ready troops in the nation’s black population. In 1817, Harper began to aid the cause of African colonization through his enthusiastic letter to Elias Caldwell, the Secretary of the newly formed American Colonization Society. Harper argued in favor of colonization, citing the unique racial aspect of American slavery that prohibited freed slaves from occupying anything other than a degraded position in American society. Free blacks particularly agitated Harper’s mind. He perceived that free blacks were cognizant of their freedom and degradation, they grew unhappy with their lot because they were rational beings, then descended into “wickedness and debauchery,” and ultimately threatened the safety of the slave system by providing a bad example for the slaves (p. 59). In a new environment, though, blacks could be free, prosperous, civilized, and Christian, all things currently impossible for them in America. Harper believed that colonization would find favor with southern planters, poor whites, and free blacks. When free blacks objected to the proposed plan, Harper became disillusioned and believed that blacks needed more education to appreciate his efforts.

The Missouri Crisis of 1819-1821 gave Harper the chance to argue in favor of the diffusion of the slave population westward. Diffusion, he argued, permitted masters to act more kindly toward their slaves, raise the morals of slaves, and give them “true religion,” thus preparing them for their eventual life after slavery. It is interesting to note that Harper was one of the few southern political leaders who acknowledged the right of Congress to regulate slavery, yet Harper found it “inexpedient” for Congress to do so in this case because slavery would not prosper in Missouri’s inhospitable climate and distance from eastern markets. Furthermore, Harper

saw the South as a “dying power,” losing the race in economic growth to the industrializing North; therefore, Missouri was not worth the sectional conflict that its proposed admission created. It was merely a matter of time until slavery ended in the South. Harper counseled others to be as patient as himself and merely wait for the appointed demise of slavery, even though this demise might not occur for many years. Papenfuse correctly notes the shocking lack of sensitivity displayed by Harper to the suffering that slaves endured on a daily basis. He attributes this insensitivity to Harper’s inability or unwillingness to confront the evils of bondage. In his afterword, Papenfuse asserts that had “Harper attempted to ameliorate the conditions of blacks for their sakes rather than his own, he might have found a means of resolving his moral dilemma. In the end, he was unable to overcome this tragic flaw” (p. 77).

Eric Papenfuse leaves the reader with plenty of food for thought. His biography situates Robert Goodloe Harper within the context of his own times and illustrates how he adapts, or fails to adapt, to changing intellectual currents and political events. Papenfuse reveals a man who is in many ways a symbol of his generation. As Winthrop Jordan notes in *White Over Black*, the belief in environmentalism, that blacks were degraded because they were slaves and not because they were black, began in the late eighteenth century before giving way in the early nineteenth century.[1] Harper in many ways fits this pattern. He rejected ideas that blacks were inferior to whites, believing instead that their lack of education rendered them inferior to whites. He also believed that white racial prejudice prevented blacks from being able to rise from their degraded status in American society. Despite such progressive beliefs, he continued to support the necessity of slavery. Harper’s passing in 1825 in many ways is emblematic of the passing of the Jeffersonian generation and the rise of the next generation that would aggressively defend slavery.

In evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of this book, this reviewer believes that there are more strengths than weaknesses. Papenfuse discusses the interaction of slavery and race in the mind and conscience of Robert Harper. This approach yields fascinating insights into Harper’s thinking and actions, thus allowing the reader to see how Harper’s thoughts became translated into action. Papenfuse writes well and his text is aided by several paintings and maps that appear at appropriate places in the book. His footnotes provide a useful guide to the secondary literature for interested readers. Finally, he provides four appendices that allow readers

to examine key speeches and letters written by Harper which are frequently cited in the text. These appendices permit readers to study the evidence presented by Papenfuse and draw their own conclusions.

That being said, this reviewer does have some criticisms. Papenfuse sometimes stretches his conclusions to a point beyond which his evidence does not support his claims. One such example is the statement uttered by Harper: "Millions for defense, but not a cent for tribute!" Papenfuse asserts that Harper uttered this sentence not toward the French but toward another foe, black troops ready to leave Santo Domingo and invade the South. Harper's words appear to fit more closely with the reaction to the XYZ Affair and the French demand for a bribe rather than for defense preparations. On this point, Joseph W. Cox appears closer to the mark than Papenfuse.[2] Another related criticism is Papenfuse's use of self-deception to explain some of Harper's actions, such as his support of the Washington Free School or the threatened invasion from Santo Domingo. This reviewer has qualms about the use of psychohistory. It is interesting to read, but can one be sure about the conclusions offered? Is what Papenfuse asserting really what Harper was thinking? Papenfuse's use of this device appears only to diminish the range of action that Harper could take and makes Harper appear as less than a rational historical actor in possession of free will. The reader

will have to decide for himself or herself whether this approach to the past works. For this reviewer, the evidence to support self-deception appears wanting.[3] These criticisms are not meant to take away from what is otherwise a fresh, imaginative study of Robert Goodloe Harper.

Notes

[1]. Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1968), 287-294, 349-356, 533-538.

[2]. Joseph W. Cox, *Champion of Southern Federalism: Robert Goodloe Harper of South Carolina* (Port Washington: Kennikat Press, 1972), 122-124.

[3]. Thomas Bender, ed., *The Antislavery Debate: Capitalism and Abolitionism as a Problem in Historical Interpretation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992) offers good analyses of self-deception, in particular Thomas Haskell's and John Ashworth's critique of its usage by David Brion Davis in *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770-1823* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975). See Bender, pp. 13, 118-122, 166-167, 182, 217, 237, 250, 274, and 288-289.

Copyright (c) 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-shear/>

Citation: James C. Foley. Review of Papenfuse, Eric Robert, *The Evils of Necessity: Robert Goodloe Harper and the Moral Dilemma of Slavery*. H-SHEAR, H-Net Reviews. August, 1998.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2259>

Copyright © 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.