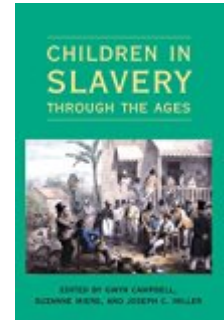


Gwyn Campbell, Suzanne Miers, Joseph C. Miller. *Children in Slavery through the Ages*. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2009. 248 S. \$24.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8214-1877-2.



Reviewed by C. Nana Derby

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This book aims at the exploration of the reasons for the purchase of slave children, and at overcoming the lack of scholarship on children's experiences in slavery throughout history. These goals are thoroughly addressed in two thematic sections: The Trades in Slave Children and The Treatment and Uses of Slave Children through the Ages. The authors sufficiently illuminate the otherwise blurred resources on children in slavery with this collection of very revealing essays on how child slaves were acquired and how the experiences impacted them. The sketchy sources of information notwithstanding, that this volume richly fills the gap in the scholarship on children's experiences in slavery throughout history cannot be overemphasized. Furthermore, the provision of data although quantitatively unclear in some of the articles, is sufficient to enable the conclusion that children's place among the victims of labor exploitation has always been significant, and that contemporary forms of slavery and the traditional forms of yesteryear are not entirely disconnected.

In acknowledging their sources were sketchy, the editors note "Children did not keep diaries or other records of their lives and treatment while in slavery" (p. 1). Nonetheless, these in-depth articles effectively inform the reader so quantitatively and qualitatively the impact surpasses the intended goals. As noted already, scholars of contemporary slavery would find this volume overly resourceful given the deducibility of the link between traditional slavery and contemporary forms. Aside the legality of the nature of slavery and exploitation chronicled in these essays, many similarities are observed. In both the contemporary forms of slavery and the historical ones, the impact of gender role expectations is documented. In Lisbon, "Black women and children found themselves confined to menial domestic tasks of the most unpleasant and degrading kind" (p. 21). In his essay on Child Slaves in the early North Atlantic Trade, Antonio de Almeida Mendes properly illustrates the magnitude of women and children's recruitment when he states that they constituted more than 70% of the slaves who were imported to Portugal from Africa between 1499 and 1522. While the ratio might have changed in

subsequent eras, the exploitation of women and children for domestic servitude and sexual purposes in Europe and North Africa around the 15th and 16th centuries was as significant as it is today (pp. 22 – 23).

This observed role of gender is typified in Kristina Richardson's chapter on Singing Slave Girls (Qiyān) of the 'Abbasid Court in the Ninth and Tenth Centuries. Drawing upon Orlando Patterson's elaboration of Hegelian model of the master-slave dialectic, Richardson locates her discussion of the processes of the female slave's dehumanization in theory to demonstrate how, through sexual exploitation, "the slave validates the master's existence..." and "... dies unto herself and is reborn, so to speak, as an extension of the master that because she exists only to fulfill the master's will.

Readers would not dispute the view that efforts to scientifically investigate the exploitation of children's labor are usually thwarted by, among others, the complexity of the concepts of slavery itself, childhood and children. Definitions of traditional or the historical forms of slavery may not be as complex as the contemporary, because "A slave is generally taken to constitute a chattel, deprived of civic rights, and whose status is inherited by his or her children" (2). Any observed difficulties in the conceptualization of traditional slavery could, therefore, derive from the diversity of bondage, slave relations and the processes of enslavement, and from spatial and temporal dynamics as the editors concisely note. The relevance of space and time is also observed, the editors recognize, with the concepts of childhood and children through social constructions, cultural fluidity and regional boundaries. One cannot help but concur with these observations. "... For instance, the age of consent to marriage for girls in some countries is as low as twelve. The legal age at which children of either sex enter the work force, are conscripted for military service, are allowed to marry, vote, or drive varies from country

to country. The legal school leaving age could be an indicator of legal adulthood, but in many countries education is not compulsory, and in some countries few if any girls attend school. Many children do not have birth certificates and their age is not officially known ". (p. 3)

Furthermore, the reasons for recruitment and commoditization of the slaves as presented in these essays seem to inform the prevalence of the phenomenon in contemporary societies. *Children in Slavery through the Ages* further illustrates the significance of politics and religion. In Portugal, military and religious conflicts redefined the dominance of the various ethnic communities, inflamed social tensions, and turned entire groups of members within the communities into "foreigners." Some owners kept slaves for purposes of profits, as was the case in Southern United States. The influence of poverty in slavery across time is also documented. In writing on slaves who were obtained from southern Sudan and bound for the markets of northern Sudan, Egypt and the Ottoman Empire in the period between 1820 and 1835, La Rue shows many of the victims were sold by their parents or relatives to better their fate or to save their lives in times of famine or free the rest of the family, or were captured in wars and raids.

In some cultures such as the Ottoman Empire and among the Eunuchs of Imperial China, the slave children were usually well treated and upward social mobility was possible for them. In Europe, slave children were able to assimilate into the cultures of their masters through adoption, acceptance into religious confraternities, and accorded opportunities of formal education.

These opportunities for cultural assimilation notwithstanding, these writers demonstrate a need to avoid minimizing the horrors, violence and the dehumanizing impact of slavery. The experiences of children orphaned through forced separations from their parents around the nineteenth century (Schermerhorn), the high inci-

dence of infant mortality among the enslaved populations of the British Caribbean (Morgan), through the palace eunuchs of China and the *devsirme* of the Ottoman state suggest enslaved children have always been dealt inhumanely. “Even the relatively good treatment of children on the transatlantic voyage compared to the suffering of their parents.... It merely shows that persons involved in all branches of this cruelest of trades could be humane if it suited their purposes”. (p. 13)

This review suggests *Children in Slavery through the Ages* is resourceful. It is the first of its kind, focusing specifically not only on the sources of recruitment and the uses to which the child slaves were put, but thoroughly informs the reader of how their experiences impacted them. It is a must read for scholars of history, labor exploitation, and all forms of bondage and enslavement.

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