H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Edward Countryman, ed. *How Did American Slavery Begin?* Boston: St. Martin's Press, 1999. x + 150 pp. (paper), ISBN 978-0-312-18261-8; $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-312-21820-1.

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Teaching historians are constantly searching for new and innovative works to use in the classroom. Understanding this need, Edward Countryman of Southern Methodist University has edited a series of readers that examine various issues in American history. In this volume, a collection of individual essays attempts to answer a question that students have long been asking and professors have long been attempting to explain. How did slavery begin in America?

Countryman begins his work with a historiographic essay on the subject. It is written in succinct prose and will be of great value to the attentive student. He also includes a short note that explains to the reader what the historian does and how the student should approach the subject in order to gain a firm grasp of the facts. All in all, Countryman introduces this topic well. He then presents five articles from eminent American historians of the institution of slavery

The first essay, a contribution from Ira Berlin, examines the evolution of slavery in America. Berlin finds that what he terms "charter generations" arrived not as cowering slaves but as men and women with a known history and therefore dignity–unlike future generations that would endure what some historians have termed "social death." He also explains that these first American slaves entered a society-with-slavery, not a slave-society, which made early slavery much different than the system later generations would know.

Margaret Washington's chapter on the Gullahs examines the effect that African geography had on American slavery. Her work identifies the traits of the various African peoples and the preferences of the slave brokers for slaves from specific groups. She finds that colonists always held some view of which tribes produced the most desirable slaves, and this preferred tribal affiliation changed depending on the work and the era. The docile Gold Coast slave was the preferred worker for a while before the Senegambians were elevated to an equal status. The Ashanti were more likely to seek revenge on their oppressor, which put them among the least sought-after tribes.

In the third chapter, A. Leon Higginbotham, Jr. examines perhaps the most important issue of the book, one which most undergraduates have never contemplated. Higginbotham looks at four different court cases and finds a specific pattern of dehumanization. He finds that the perpetuation of "social death" was an intention of the early planters because an advanced society must always depend on laws to subject others. Slaves who enjoyed even the most insignificant of rights, could manipulate those rights and eventually shed the chains of bondage. Higginbotham clearly illustrates the progression toward the American belief in white superiority/black inferiority in the early legal system.

Winthrop D. Jordan's essay examining mulattos in the British Colonies forms chapter four. Mulattos were caught in a racial netherworld where they were neither wholly accepted into the slave row nor into the white family. Due to the myth of white superiority, they did view themselves in a somewhat elevated way. Even a small amount of white blood was felt to bestow some advanced status. In early America, however, even though much white blood might flow through one's veins, that person was still black and, by virtue of that fact, relegated to inferiority. Jordan finds that this inflexibility was the reason for English America's clearly defined position on miscegenation, whereas, in the Caribbean, mulatto s were more acceptable because of a culture that believed in degrees of race.

To close the argument of this short book, Countryman calls on Edmund Morgan. Morgan looks at the paradox of American freedom and American slavery in this, a reprint of his 1972 Organization of American Historians Presidential Address. He finds white freedom to be inexorably linked to black slavery and the condition of the slave not a product of social accidence but a fundamental part of American liberty. As was the case with Thomas Jefferson, the enslavement of his servants provided him

with his all important liberty and uncontested freedom.

The only possible problem with this small book is the complexity in some of the individual articles. While honors students should have no difficulty reading it, the instructor may have to guide a regular class through some of the more difficult passages. This is a good book, and if used properly, it will contribute significantly to the knowledge of the undergraduate student. The individual articles have clearly defined theses, and Countryman writes brief introductions and presents questions to help the students focus their attention more effectively.

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