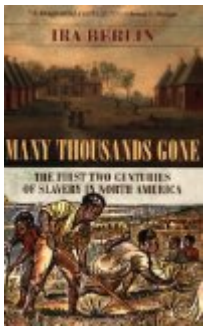
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Ira Berlin. *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998. x + 497 pp. $16.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-674-00211-1.



Reviewed by Sally E. Hadden

Published on H-South (May, 2001)

The 1960s and 1970s were an amazing era in slavery studies. Building upon the work of Frank Tannenbaum, Kenneth Stampp, and others, a new generation of scholars stepped forward and crafted new, intriguing works that have since formed the core readings for many a seminar on American slavery. The central works of this canon are Winthrop Jordan's *White Over Black* (1968), Philip Curtin's *The Atlantic Slave Trade* (1969), John Blassingame's *The Slave Community* (1972 and 1979), Peter Wood's *Black Majority* (1974), Eugene Genovese's *Roll, Jordan, Roll* (1974), Edmund Morgan's *American Slavery, American Freedom* (1975), and Herbert Gutman's *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom* (1976). In the past twenty-five years historians of slavery have largely written books and articles that fit within the debates framed by or paradigms used by these historians when describing American slavery.

Whether you connected slavery to European racism, greed, Anglo-American paternalism or patriarchy, focused on the centrality of slave labor, religion, family or community, considered the importance of the slave trade and African contributions to African(-American) life in America, or compared one slave society with another, one or more of these books would serve as a touchstone and point of departure for your work. And for quite some time we've needed a new perspective that would clarify our thinking on the subject of colonial slavery while taking in the richness of the scholarship written on early American slavery for the past two decades. But putting together a synthesis of a burgeoning field while offering up a new interpretive perspective is a tall order. In his most recent book, Ira Berlin has delivered the synoptic, yet forward-moving, study of colonial slavery that scholars have needed for the past thirty years.

Berlin's structure is one that, at first glance, seems designed more to confuse than edify. He divides his book into three sections, based upon a three-generation framework: charter generations (the first arrivals and their children), plantation generations (growers of the great staple crops), and revolutionary generations (those alive in the late eighteenth century). This tripartite temporal division is then crossed by four geographically

distinct regions: the Chesapeake, North, Lowcountry, and Lower Mississippi Valley. Yet each of the twelve segments of this book is interconnected with and dependent upon the others, and in reading it, you hear no jarring discordant note when shifting, for example, from the North, to the Mississippi, and then to the North again (ch. 7, 8, and 9). Indeed, an initial concern that the book will be a twelve-layer cake rather than an integrated whole is unfounded. This is a tribute to Berlin's fluid writing style, which sweeps up the reader in a strong narrative and moves steadily toward its conclusion, weaving together the strands from each chapter in a masterly fashion.

It is Berlin's gift that he can craft so elegant a work from the disparate stories with which he began. Shifting his story from general to specific and then back again -- from the creoles of the Atlantic rim with their polyglot abilities to the world of Anthony Johnson, sold into slavery in the 1620s at Jamestown -- Berlin employs small vignettes to illustrate the larger picture he constructs. The book uses statistics and some numbers to give fine detail, but the few tables are saved for an appendix at the end (covering the slave and free populations of North America and the black population of major cities prior to 1810). The flow of Berlin's story is never interrupted by a graph or chart, and thus the book will appear more accessible to the lay reader. Small wonder that the book received the OAH Rudwick Prize or the Southern's Owsley Award. The graceful writing style made this book one of five finalists for the National Book Critics Circle Award in nonfiction; in past years winners of this award have been journalists and memoirists more often than historians, since the judges search not just for accuracy but for smooth presentation and the well chosen word that will enchant non-specialist readers.

Almost as soon as Berlin introduces the generations concept, he aligns it with another, more subtle, interpretive tool -- one that I believe historians of colonial slavery will still be employing fifty years hence. Borrowing from studies of slavery in antiquity, Berlin appropriates the dual concept of societies with slaves and slave societies. While slavery in a society with slaves might appear superficially milder, because the line between slave and free might seem more easily crossed, slaveholders in such a society could still use extreme brutality towards their slaves because they were not central to their businesses. Other types of labor remained available and were used, such as indentured servants or the laboring poor, in the society with slaves.

In a slave society, however, slaves were the center of economic production, and "the master-slave relationship provided the model for all social relations;" slaveowners sat atop the economic and social pyramid and jealously controlled most other aspects of the slave society they ran (p.8). Historians have limned the picture by which American communities with slaves became slave societies, which generally coincided with the discovery of some product that could readily be sold for high profits: sugar, rice, tobacco, or, much later, cotton. This would trigger the massive influx of slaves, such that African peoples became the dominant form of labor, while at the same time other types of labor would decline -- and through it all, slaveholders would tighten the laws of slavery such that any escape to freedom (legally or illegally) would become much less likely. Meanwhile, slaveholders could gain a stranglehold upon the local political process and use their economic and political muscle to create racial ideologies justifying their slaves' status. The seizure of power by slaveholders would mark the critical event that could transform the society with slaves into a slave society (p.9-10).

Where Berlin builds upon the society with slaves/slave society dichotomy and makes it his own is when he convincingly suggests that in America, this process was not one directional: all areas with slavery need not progress ineffably from a society with slaves to a slave society. A

slave society could become a society with slaves once again, and indeed, a few places went through this conversion more than once. For instance, the Lower Mississippi Valley might commence as a slave society, then transform into a society with slaves in the second quarter of the eighteenth century, and end as a slave society once more by the end of the colonial period (ch.4, 8, and 12).

Each geographic region's evolution in terms of slavery was driven by the nature of production, and was affected by the democratic revolutions of the late eighteenth century, most notably America's independence but also the Caribbean freedom revolt of San Domingue/Haiti. The idea of slavery varying between these two states (society with slavery/slave society) permits greater flexibility in how we describe colonial slavery, yet also provides a secure structure for including what, until now, had been geographic regions with slavery that seemed to defy typical descriptions.

If the standard linear progressive model of slavery made normative the shift from small-scale to large-scale slave populations working in profitable staple crops, then slavery in the North -- which ultimately never grew into large populations and gradually disappeared in the wake of the Revolution -- must always be cast as an exception. But Berlin's model forces us to consider slavery in the North and in the Lower Mississippi Valley (another poor fit with the old linear model) not as exceptions, but as alternative examples of development in which slavery followed nonlinear, or even circular, progressions. Instead of using South Carolina and Virginia as the baselines for comparison against which all other slave societies (or societies with slaves) must be measured, Berlin offers us a useful theory that explains the evolution, or in some cases, devolution (ch.4), of slavery for all parts of North America.

One acid test for the vitality and clarity of a book is to take a it into the classroom and try teaching it to others. I did that last year with *Many Thousands Gone*, teaching it in a class on slavery to graduate students. By the semester's end, they were acquainted with parts of the vast literature of slavery, and in the course of reading for their own research papers, they had tackled many more works on the subject individually. When polled, without dissent, their favorite reading of the semester was Berlin's book. The words they used in their evaluations defy the conventional wisdom that you can't assign long readings and still have students like them: "clear," "asserts a theory and then proves it," "detailed without getting swamped in detail," "a good read," and probably best of all, "a book I will give my Dad for Christmas." Perhaps no higher commendation than that may be found in any book review this year, and Ira Berlin's *Many Thousands Gone* well deserves it.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-south

Citation: Sally E. Hadden. Review of Berlin, Ira. *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America.* H-South, H-Net Reviews. May, 2001.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=5107