

The Trial: The Assassination of President Lincoln and the Trial of the Conspirators

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Review

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Heuman, Gad, Editor and Walvin, James, Editor. *The Slavery Reader*.
Routledge, \$29.95 ISBN 415213045

Extensive Anthology:

Essays from the historical literature of slavery

The emergence of the conceptual lens of the Atlantic World as a means of understanding New World slavery is one of the most significant recent scholarly developments in slavery studies. In this collection, Gad Heuman and James Walvin have brought together thirty-seven essays that cumulatively serve as a fine introduction to how we might read American slavery not merely as a brutally exploitative labor regime that enabled the creation of massive wealth and new nations in the western hemisphere but as a complex and cohesive system with global implications that enveloped the entire Atlantic rim for centuries and utterly transformed the societies and political economies of four continents, as well as the lives of millions of Africans and their descendants.

All of the pieces in this collection were published previously either as journal articles or book chapters, and most originally appeared within the last twenty years, though the editors have included a number of older essays they consider to be pioneering in their approach and research models. The selections range widely both chronologically and geographically, from the 15th to the 19th centuries and from west and central Africa to the Caribbean and mainland North and South America, but the editors have organized the collection topically, grouping the essays into nine parts. Three engage the Atlantic Slave Trade, the origin and development of slavery in the Americas, and the elaboration of race as a hierarchical socioeconomic and ideological framework that created and solidified the New World connection between blackness and slavery. But the sections at the heart of the volume delve deeply into the lives of the slaves themselves. Whether discussing their labor in almost every imaginable productive capacity, their familial and communal lives, their creation of diverse

slave cultures, their independent economic behavior and their material circumstances, or their constant resistance to their own enslavement, the editors and contributors to **The Slavery Reader** consistently remind us of the centrality of Africans and the African experience to historical considerations of the Atlantic World.

Yet for all its strengths, **The Slavery Reader** is not without its flaws. First, while it is hard to quibble with a selection that contains pieces authored by so many leading scholars of slavery—such as Philip Curtin, Ira Berlin, Winthrop Jordan, Philip Morgan, and Joseph Miller—one has to question how and why the editors ultimately chose what to include in this collection. Given the nearly mind-boggling volume and variety of scholarship on New World slavery, for example, why would the editors choose to include multiple essays from seven different authors? Moreover, why include eight essays that originally appeared in just one journal, *Slavery and Abolition*? A greater variety of scholarly voices and editorial origin might have made this collection even stronger.

Second, while the editors have written useful introductions to each part of **The Slavery Reader**, where they intelligently discuss the significant issues raised by the constituent essays, those introductions are often both redundant and repetitive. Take, for example, the introduction to part three, *Slaves at Work*. Not only do the editors include, in the space of three pages, two very similar comparisons of the gang and task systems of labor, but on page 155, they write that Africans were shipped into the Americas to work only to repeat on the next page that Africans were imported into the Americas to work. Similarly, in the introduction to part four, *Family, Gender and Community*, we learn at least three times in two pages that the demographics of the enslaved population of the Americas slanted heavily male in the early years of the slave trade (a fact repeated yet again in the introduction to part five), and we see on page 245 that Africans arrived on the slave ships alone, not in family groups, only to see on page 246 that Africans were bought and sold into and from the slave ships as individuals, not as family groups. This replication of both language and content frequently detract from otherwise perceptive analysis.

Finally, even though **The Slavery Reader** is already quite lengthy at 800 pages, the exclusion of essays focused on topics such as emancipation and the demise of American slavery and the Atlantic Slave Trade seems a significant omission, as does the relative dearth of material on how slavery dramatically reshaped European law, politics, and diplomacy, all of which are topics dealt

with only tangentially. More discussion of the latter subjects in particular would have strengthened the cases the editors rightly make for the cohesiveness of the Atlantic World as a unit of analysis and for the all-encompassing impact of New World slavery.

Joshua D. Rothman is an assistant professor of history at the University of Alabama. He is the author of Notorious in the Neighborhood: Sex and Families across the Color Line in Virginia, 1787-1861, and is currently working on a study of banditry, gambling, and slave insurrection scares in the Old Southwest.