American Slavery: A Very Short Introduction

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Heather Andrea Williams’ American Slavery: A Very Short Introduction is the latest work in a series designed to make subjects accessible for all readers, examining the nature of slavery in North America, looking at its development, consolidation, and eventual decline. The study succeeds in highlighting both the broad nuances of the institution as well as examining individual case studies to focus on specific issues. Given the brevity of the study, however, it is inevitable that the discussion on some topics suffers from not being examined in detail.

Williams’ adopts a broadly chronological and thematic approach, using the first two chapters to study the Atlantic slave trade and the development of slavery in North America. From then the attention turns to the institution in the antebellum South, exploring the working life and community of slaves, and efforts of both masters and slaves to gain a sense of authority. The final chapter explores the destruction of slavery, looking at the introduction of laws banning the institution in individual states, and the development of anti-slavery and abolitionist movements developed, before highlighting the events that led to the outbreak of the American Civil War and the complete destruction of slavery in the United States.

Examining the development of the Atlantic slave trade, Williams traces its origins back to the 1441 expedition of Portuguese explorer Antão Gonçalves, who captured ten Africans off the coast of Mauritania and brought them back as a gift for Prince Henry. Through an agreement reached with one of the captives, who promised to provide more Africans in return for his ransom, a series of expeditions developed aimed at
capturing Africans to use as a source of labour, leading to the creation of the African slave trade. Coinciding with this development were the early efforts of to colonise North and South America. In this endeavour African slaves became increasingly important as a source of labour. But as the slave trade developed, so too did justifications for its existence, including religious and racial rationales. While Africans felt little kinship towards neighbouring tribes and were willing to engage in conflicts in order to enslave members of other villages to sell to slave traders, Europeans increasingly regarded all Africans as racially inferior heathens, to whom enslavement could provide a civilising impact.

The establishment of slave labour in European colonies in South America and the Caribbean is contrasted with the early English settlements. Despite initial setbacks, once the English colonies stabilised and began to cultivate crops of tobacco, the labour was predominantly provided through white indentured servants. The absence of systems of lifetime or hereditary slavery meant that when the first Africans arrived in 1619, from a Dutch warship blown off course, their status was relatively ambiguous. Although ideas of the savagery and brutality of Africans were present in the mind-set of English settlers, the 20 purchased occupied a state of ‘unfreeness’ equivalent to that of white indentured servants, and were treated in a similar manner. A number of Africans who entered the colonies in the 17th century did gain their freedom; Williams highlights the case of Anthony Johnson, an African who served his master for 20 years before gaining his freedom and eventually receiving 250 acres of land, which enabled him to become a successful planter.

As the 17th century progressed, however, English colonies began to develop laws that established hereditary slavery. The increasing dependence on unpaid labour, the wish to delineate between Africans and African Americans, and efforts from planters to stop the socialisation between African slaves and white indentured servants led to the passage of legislation which increasingly placed restrictions on blacks, both slave and free. In addition to colony-wide legislation, individual cases also highlighted the move towards black discrimination. In 1640 John Punch, a black indentured servant, escaped from his master along with two white male indentured servants. Upon their capture, the two white servants were ordered to serve their master for an additional year; Punch, however, was ordered to serve his master for life. Williams argues that the introduction of legislation highlights the growth of racism alongside slavery. Here, however, the debate as to whether racism developed as a result of legislation creating a system of hereditary slavery, or whether ideas about racial inferiority had contributed to the passage of these laws could have been explored in greater detail. Discussions over the increased legislation to differentiate between slavery and freedom in the aftermath of Bacon’s rebellion, which developed partly as a result of class tensions between indentured servants and planter elites in colonial Virginia, could have examined whether planters sought to create a racial hierarchy in order to prevent increasing class tension.

Following the examination of how hereditary slavery developed in North America, attention turns to the work carried out by slaves. Here Williams stresses the diversity of labour performed by those in bondage, commenting that this work drove the economic growth of the United States from the 18th century until the Civil War. While the vast majority of slaves were involved in agricultural labour, with the most common crops cultivated being tobacco, rice, and cotton, some served as domestic and industrial labourers. Williams also highlights the work of skilled slaves, who were sometimes able to hire themselves out and make money for themselves as well as their masters.

The variety of jobs performed and conditions faced render it impossible to create a generalised view of slave working life. However, Williams highlights two issues shared by a majority of slaves, the first being the issue of manual labour. As racial theories surrounding black inferiority solidified, the idea of Africans and African Americans performing intellectual work was widely ridiculed within white American society. Those who did engage in intellectual pursuits, such as the poet Phillis Wheatley, were widely discredited, with Thomas Jefferson commenting in his publication *Notes on the State of Virginia* that while those of African descent did experience emotion, they lacked the means to translate them into a poetic form. The second issue is the idea of pride. Williams argues that many slaves took great pride in their work which ‘sustained their egos and their need to have meaningful lives’ (p. 50). There is a problem with this argument, however. While some may have had a sense of pride in their work, using this as a tool to ameliorate the brutal conditions they encountered, it is difficult to argue that a large number of those in bondage experienced such
a positive attitude, particularly amongst field slaves. The monotonous nature of the labour, and efforts made
to sabotage tools and work at a deliberately slow pace, highlight that a large number of slaves saw their work
as something that had to be endured, rather than something they could take pride in. Similarly, while
Williams argues that slaves were aware of the impact their work was having on the economic growth of the
United States, the geographic isolation of numerous plantation in the South and illiteracy of the vast majority
of bondspeople makes this argument difficult to uphold, as slaves on these plantations would have had little
idea regarding the impact of their work.

While elite whites constructed and came to believe in the idea of black racial inferiority to condone a system
of hereditary slavery, they did not assume that this perceived inferiority would lead African Americans to
voluntarily submit to white authority. Efforts to ensure that slaves remained deferential were met with efforts
to resist the authority of the slaveholder from those in bondage. For slaveholders, a perceived major threat to
their authority was the possibility of slaves learning to read, which would not only give them access to the
Bible and dispute the idea that slavery was ordained by God, but also enable them to read anti-slavery and
abolitionist literature published in the Northern states. From the slave’s point of view, literacy was a highly
valued skill; one which could help them undermine the authority of the slaveholder through forging passes
and papers, reading abolitionist literature, and challenging Biblical defences of slavery.

Williams also highlights the role religion played in the struggle for control between master and slave.
Elements from the Bible, such as the Curse of Ham, and passages that focused on the obedience of servants
to their masters were used by slaveholders to justify black enslavement. Conversely, slaves used passages
from the Bible to generate a sense of optimism that their suffering would eventually end, the most common
being Moses leading the children of Israel out of slavery in Egypt. However, the idea that slaves used
Christianity to challenge oppression is debateable. Associating an African-American form of Christianity
with more violent methods of slave resistance, such as rebellion, creates the possibility of imbuing slave
religion with a revolutionary ideology it did not necessarily possess. Slave religion comprised predominantly
of a theology of hope and liberation, rather than one of subversion.

Following the discussion of the struggle for control between master and slave, Williams then turns to efforts
used by slaves to survive the brutalities of their daily life. The creation of a slave community provided those
in bondage the opportunity to raise families, hold meetings to deal with shared anxieties, or assemble for
religious services or celebrations that enabled the enslaved to temporarily forget about their shared suffering.
Yet this slave community was by no means a stable institution. Slaves, like any other group of individuals
‘experienced jealousy, betrayal, dislike, and conflicting or competing beliefs’ (p. 76) and so could
undermine each other by betraying information regarding acts of subversion to the master. Slave marriages
could easily be broken up by the slaveholder through sale, and while celebrations and religious services may
have provided a temporary sense of relief, they did not detract from their permanent state of subjugation.

The final chapter explores the ways in which slavery was removed from North America. Although it was not
until the Civil War and the ratification of the 13th Amendment in 1865 that slavery was entirely abolished,
efforts to restrict or end the institution occurred throughout the 18th and 19th centuries. Williams argues
that, prior to the Civil War, the most concerted efforts to reduce slavery or remove it completely took place
during the American Revolution. Concern over a proclamation made by Lord Dunmore, the royal governor
of Virginia, that slaves who fought for the British would be guaranteed their freedom prompted George
Washington to permit African Americans to enlist in the Continental Army. Most of the more than 5000
black men who served did eventually receive their freedom. The rhetoric of freedom and liberty in the
American Revolution also prompted some groups to argue that slavery was incompatible with these ideals.
By the beginning of the American Revolution, Quakers culminated their increasing protests against slavery
with an outright rejection of the institution. Pressure from Quakers subsequently led to the abolition of
slavery in the states of Pennsylvania and Massachusetts by the end of the 18th century. By the time the
Constitution was ratified, slavery had disappeared from five other states, and in 1808 Congress prohibited
the importation of slaves from Africa.

The eradication of slavery in the North did not remove ideas of racial prejudice, and African Americans in
the free states continued to experience white prejudice and discrimination. The establishment of the American Colonisation Society in 1816 to encourage the manumission of blacks in order for them to emigrate to Liberia highlights efforts made by whites to remove African Americans from the United States. Other whites, however, began to see slavery as a sin. The period of religious revivalism beginning at the turn of the 19th century known as the Second Great Awakening prompted some individuals to argue for the abolition of slavery. By the 1830s, activists were publishing newspapers and pamphlets, and giving speeches calling for emancipation. Although this movement was heavily ridiculed and criticised, both in the South and the North, calls to rid the country of slavery grew as the 19th century progressed.

Alongside the development of abolitionism, the growth of slavery began to dominate American politics. Efforts to maintain a balance between slave states and free states resulted in a number of compromises, however these efforts became increasingly fraught and the country increasingly divided. The election of Abraham Lincoln in November 1860, achieved with hardly any support from the slaveholding South, resulted in the secession of the Southern states, and the beginning of the Civil War. As with the American Revolution, African-American slaves used the chaos as an opportunity to escape from their masters, with many of those who fled joining free blacks from the North, after the passage of the Emancipation Proclamation, to serve in the Union army.

Williams’ work manages to cover the complexities of slavery in America despite the limited space available. Throughout the book key issues are highlighted and discussed through the use of individual case studies. However the limited space available has meant that some topics are overlooked. One such key issue is the development of the second middle passage. Williams notes that by the end of the 18th century cotton was the primary crop cultivated by slaves, but does not mention how important this product was to the American economy, or how the expansion of slavery into the Lower South altered the nature of the institution from one that both slaveholders and non-slaveholders believed would inevitably die out, to a system engrained in American society. The expansion of the cotton economy and of slavery also resulted in the growth of the internal slave trade, the Second Middle Passage, through which close to one million slaves passed during the 19th century. There is little discussion of this important development, in how this created a division between the Upper and Lower South, and the fear generated amongst slaves at the possibility of sale to states of the Lower South.

A further problem with the study is the lack of discussion over the historiography of slavery. A variety of the issues discussed, from the nature of relations between master and slave, the transition from indentured servitude to slavery in the 17th century, and the strength of the slave community and success of acts of slave resistance all remain contentious subjects widely discussed and debated by scholars. The absence of references to historiography may have been imposed by the Very Short Introduction series due to the intention of engaging a wider audience, and also due to the limited space available. However, this omission reduces the potential of the study. Other areas of discussion, particularly in the first chapter looking at the growth of the transatlantic slave trade could have been shortened in order to include discussion on areas of historiography.

Ultimately, Williams’ study provides a concise overview of many of the key issues and topics surrounding the nature of American slavery, but the omission of one or two developments, in addition to the lack of historiographic discussion, lowers the usefulness of the book to scholars and students in comparison to other works such as Peter Kolchin’s American Slavery.

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