Human Bondage and Abolition

Slavery's expansion across the globe often escapes notice because it operates as an underground criminal enterprise, rather than as a legal institution. In this volume, Elizabeth Swanson and James Brewer Stewart bring together scholars from across disciplines to address and expose the roots of modern-day slavery from a historical perspective as a means of supporting activist efforts to fight it in the present. They trace modern slavery to its many sources, examining how it is sustained and how today's abolitionists might benefit by understanding their predecessors' successes and failures. Using scholarship also intended as activism, the volume's authors analyze how the history of African American enslavement might illuminate or obscure the understanding of slavery today and show how the legacies of earlier forms of slavery have shaped human bondage and social relations in the twenty-first century.

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Human Bondage and Abolition

New Histories of Past and Present Slaveries

Edited by

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,
New Delhi – 110025, India

79 Anson Road, #06-04/06, Singapore 079906

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107186620
DOI: 10.1017/9781316890790

First published 2018

Printed in the United States of America by Sheridan Books, Inc.

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Goldberg, Elizabeth Swanson, 1966– editor. | Stewart, James Brewer, editor.
Title: Human bondage and abolition : new histories of past and present slaveries / edited by Elizabeth Swanson, Babson College, James Brewer Stewart, Macalester College.
Description: Cambridge, United Kingdom; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2018. | Series: Slaveries since emancipation | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2018013743 | ISBN 9781107186620 (hardback)
Subjects: LCSH: Slavery – History. | Slavery – History – 21st century.
Classification: LCC HT867.H86 2018 | DDC 306.3/6209–dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2018013743

ISBN 978-1-107-18662-0 Hardback
ISBN 978-1-316-63736-4 Paperback

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Preface: Solidarity of the Ages

David Blight

> Contrary to popular belief, the past was not more eventful than the present. If it seems so it is because when you look backward things that happened years apart are telescoped together, and because very few of your memories come to you genuinely virgin.
>
> *George Orwell, "My Country, Right or Left," 1940*

To find, to know, to narrate, and to explain the past is an ever-daunting task. In sheer metaphysical terms, it may even be impossible. But we historians, and our readers, love this task; we believe in it, cannot resist its charms, insist on climbing its unreachable peaks, descend into its darkest valleys, hack our way through its jungles, and, every once in a while, a few of us find one of its shining lost cities. We do so for countless reasons, not least of which we hope are our insatiable curiosity and need for human stories, as well as our quest to comprehend the depths of human nature. As Herodotus seemed to know in the opening sentence of his *Histories*, some at least in our unique species are driven to tell a tale and interpret it. Like Herodotus, we are compelled to research and write the past perhaps above all because we live in a sovereign present, our own time which ever shapes us as it demands our understanding.[1]

This remarkable book of essays, taking a place like no other work of its kind in this new field of modern slavery studies, calls us to, in the

[1] Herodotus, *The History*, trans. David Grene (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 33. Those opening lines are "I, Herodotus of Halicarnassus, am here setting forth my history, that time may not draw the color from what man has brought into being, nor those great and wonderful deeds, manifested by both Greeks and Barbarians, fail of their report, and, together with all this, the reason why they fought one another."

editors' apt phrase, an "ethical empathy … then and now." With clear-eyed openness and the courage for debate about a "chameleon-like" phenomenon, as one author nicely puts it, this collection demands that we use and know the history of forms of enslavement since the great national and imperial emancipations of the nineteenth century in order to develop research agendas and write the history of slavery and human trafficking in our own time. Past and present meet here in these pieces, some based in deep research and others offered as challenging argument essays, with intensity, explicitness, and comparative fervor. History can and must be *used* to inform the present; the public and its political leaders do it every day. Historians should offer them a lead, as a "lantern," wrote the historian Allan Nevins idealistically in 1938, "carried by the side of man moving forward with every step taken."[2] How desperately the world needed such lanterns in the late 1930s; and how desperately we need them now!

Historians can seem preachy when we caution, or sometimes demand, that contemporary debates take time out to learn a little history first. We burn with indignation when we see blatant historical ignorance prevail in a presidential news conference or a tweet, in a pundits' discussion, or in the public square. Historians sometimes desperately feel the need, within our limited domains, to put our hands on the scale and tip it toward knowledge, thoughtfulness about cause and consequence, and, dare we admit it, truth. The works in this book do not claim high-minded or irreversible truths, but they do offer bracing, informed perspectives on how and why exploitive forms of labor grew in the late nineteenth century in illegal environments, and why sex trafficking and abolition movements against it emerged out of "moral panics" in the early twentieth century. Current, "new abolitionists" ought not be left alone in their conflicted worlds of moral outrage, NGO fund-raising, and strategic free-for-alls. They have an abundance of empathy and commitment, but they need a historically informed empathy, and a clear-headed commitment that stops to grasp, as the authors demonstrate here, that forms of slavery since ancient times have always grown out of "greed, autocracy, tyranny, war, disruption, and disaster."[3] There is nothing new under the sun, even as the details always change. 9/11 was not new; it happened in the Trojan War. The slaughter and displacement in Syria today is not new; it happened

[2] Allan Nevins, "A Proud Word for History," 1938, reprinted in Stephen Vaughn, ed., *The Vital Past: Writings on the Uses of History* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1985), 237.

[3] See Introduction by Stewart and Swanson, and Chapter 1 by David Richardson.

in the Hundred Years War. Massive supply chains exploiting forced labor are not new; only the commodities and the scale may be mostly new.

Historians, it turns out, do need to preach once in a while. We simply need to have our theology down solid – meaning our facts rooted in research – and then we can, carefully, be that lantern of intellectual and ethical guidance. We might even prod the unknowing to action. As the great social scientist James Scott writes in his latest work, "History at its best, in my view, is the most subversive discipline inasmuch as it can tell us how things that we are likely to take for granted came to be."[4] Scott's is a gentle but powerful call for useful histories that push us into our present, like it or not, armed with data, and maybe even a little wisdom.

Although so much of the best research about modern slavery – both about the supply chains in forced labor regimes that have ensnarled millions on all continents, or in the bewildering, gruesome, and seemingly countless precincts of sex trafficking (or "work") around the world – is stunning in its capacity to build awareness, most people prefer to ignore these realities. The "indifference," shown in some of these essays, that formed so much of the environment in which new forms of enslavement thrived in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries prevails today as well. In a world of terror, mass murder, refugee displacement, and war on civilians, one can only look at so much pain. In the educated classes we often prefer irony as the antidote for our awkward comfort, not horror. We perhaps prefer subjects to which we can apply satire, rather than revelation. The sheer cunning of evil can overwhelm our empathic and strategic imaginations.

If the present may terrify people, they simply may never seek to know the history of how they got here. But we have to find ways to light the lanterns and keep them marching. Few ever wrote about the connections of past and present with quite the insight and poignancy of Marc Bloch. One of the best, and certainly most heroic, books ever produced on the nature of historians' work is *The Historian's Craft*, written in great part while surviving and fighting in the French resistance in the Second World War. The great French historian of feudalism and other broad subjects, Bloch, a veteran of the First World War, fled from his professorship at the Sorbonne into hiding in Strasbourg after the fall of France to the Nazis in 1940. He began writing his masterful meditation on the historian's art in 1941. Chased further into hiding, he finished perhaps only about

[4] Lecture by James Scott, April 13, 2017, sponsored by Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery and Abolition, Yale University.

two-thirds of the book he had planned, until the Nazis captured, imprisoned, and tortured him, and finally shot him in an open field with twenty-six other French patriots in June, 1944. But in that text he left, Bloch could write under unbearable circumstances with such a sense of humor. "A good cataclysm," he said, "suits our business."[5]

Block found the poise to write about how history intrudes, indeed roars, into the present. The writing and imagination of history cannot be spared "present controversy," Bloch wrote. "Once an emotional chord has been struck, the line between present and past is no longer strictly regulated by a mathematically measureable chronology." Bloch deeply understood the pain and pleasure of knowing and doing history, as well as the marvelous joy of transforming research into writing. And he certainly grasped how the past is so often that thing we cannot live without, but also sometimes we cannot live with as well. Its double-edged cuts may leave us wounded and stranded. "The solidarity of the ages," declared Bloch, "is so effective that lines of connection work both ways. Misunderstanding of the present is the inevitable consequence of ignorance of the past. But a man may wear himself out just as fruitlessly in seeking to understand the past, if he is totally ignorant of the present."[6] We are bound by our craft and our humanity to engage both past and present, whatever the pain or pleasure. Historians are often reticent in linking then and now, shy of instrumental parallels and analogies that often do not work. But we have no choice; the path to understanding goes through shaky parallels and dimly lit analogies. This book provides a great deal of illumination of these pathways.

The essays in this volume have much to suggest about how to think in time about analogies. Debt peonage in the late nineteenth century is today's forced labor systems in everything from tea to cocoa production; the convict lease system of a century ago is today's "guest workers" shipped from South Asia to Qatar and a dozen other less visible places; and the moral panic over "white slavery" in the 1920s is something akin to today's moral absolutism over prostitution and sex work. We have to think in these terms even when we find difference colliding with similarity.

Sometimes we need the assistance of art to help us particularize and grasp the cunning of evil and how to think about the past. A case in point is the novel by Nigerian-born writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Half*

[5] Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft*, intro. Joseph R. Strayer, trans. Peter Putnam (New York: Vintage, 1953), 75.
[6] Ibid., 37, 43.

of a Yellow Sun. Adichie's book is not explicitly written to engage the current dilemmas of modern forms of slavery, but it is richly historical, resonant of our recurring present in countless ways, and genuinely tragic as it instructs with resolutions through blood and loss. *Half a Yellow Sun* is a harrowing tale of the Biafran Civil War in the 1960s. All the brutalities and devastation, much of it invisible to or suppressed in modern historical memory now, are on display in this book. A teenager, Ugwu, comes of age as the civil war breaks out and takes over the land. He is torn from his family and conscripted into the army to fight for Igbo independence in the three-year bloodbath. Ugwu undergoes great suffering, wounds, despair, and both witnesses and participates in the rape of a young woman among his fellow soldiers. The look in her eyes haunts his boyish conscience and nightmares. Under gunpoint, Ugwu is kidnapped, taken to a former primary school turned into a training camp. His hair is shaved with a piece of broken glass, leaving his "scalp tender, littered with nicks." The terrified youth is punished by the "skinny soldiers – with no boots, no uniforms, no half a yellow sun on their sleeves" [symbol of the rebels] who – "kicked and slapped and mocked Ugwu during physical training." Ugwu nearly succumbed to this brutalization. "The obstacle training left his calves throbbing. The rope-climbing left his palms bleeding. The wraps of *garri* he stood in line to receive, the thin soup scraped from a metal basin once a day, left him hungry. And the casual cruelty of this new world in which he had no say grew a hard clot of fear inside of him."[7] A world in which he *had no say*. Such a circumstance, as Adichie portrays it, fits firmly into both the 1956 United Nations Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, as well as even more so into the 2016 Bellagio working group's updated definition. Ugwu was enslaved by war, an automatic machine gun-toting child soldier.

War itself becomes a monstrous character in Adichie's nimble writing, even as she humanizes other people in her story. War corrupts or ravages all good will in its path, it seems, and especially in this case the meaning of books, learning, and education. At least almost all. Ugwu, who has been educated and loves to read, searches for scraps of paper on which to write down his thoughts, in part as a means of sustaining his sanity, of keeping his mind alive whatever happens to his body. One day in the abandoned schoolhouse, Ugwu finds wedged behind a blackboard a copy of *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave.*

[7] Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun* (New York: Random House, 2006), 449–50.

The boy sits on the floor and reads the book for two days; he then continues reading it over and over as his unit moves to other locations. *The Narrative* becomes Ugwu's sacred possession and psychological sustenance. He declares himself "so sad and angry for the writer," whose experiences in slavery become a metaphor for his existence in the enslavement of soldiering. He discovers that he and Douglass wrote for many of the same reasons. One day Ugwu explodes in rage as he sees a fellow soldier rolling a cigarette in torn out pages of the *Narrative*. Ugwu's despair becomes almost unbearable after watching and then joining in during the rape of a barmaid. He witnesses people whipped brutally, feels the inner weakness of hopelessness. He manages to carry on by continuing to collect scraps of paper on which he writes of his own experiences with Douglass's classic slave narrative as his model.[8] Adichie demonstrates in wonderful imagery the now universal reach and appeal of Douglass's powerful tale of survival and reinvention through literacy. It is a great distance and no distance at all between these pasts and presents, between Frederick Bailey's "dark night of slavery" on Maryland's eastern shore and a Nigerian teenager's ravaged spirit in the Biafran War of the 1960s. Douglass still speaks across all time and all borders.

Ugwu memorized some sentences in Douglass's *Narrative*. As he tried to attack the soldier rolling a cigarette in a page of the book, others grabbed him, and "dragged him away, said it was just a book after all, told him to drink some more gin." When combat operations "overwhelmed him, froze him," he would return to his copy of Douglass and read "pages of his book over and over." Wounded and convalescing, sitting under a flame tree, a journalist named Richard keeps trying to interview Ugwu about his experiences, wondering about the boy's visible efforts to write and hide his manuscript, such as it is, scribbled on old newspapers and anything resembling paper. Richard finds the discovery of the Douglass *Narrative* a very useful "anecdote." Ugwu cannot sleep because of his wounds and because of the "dead hate in the eyes of that girl" that awakens him. Ugwu survives and returns home at the end of the war to his destroyed town. He seems to have lost most of his health and his precious copy of the American slave narrative. He sees a huge pile of blackened books that have been burned. Ugwu laments: "I wish I had that Frederick Douglass book." After the interviewer sees and reads

[8] Ibid., 451–2. There are many editions of Douglass. See *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself*, 3rd ed., ed. David W. Blight (Boston, MA: Bedford Books, 2017).

some of the "sheets of paper" Ugwu has been writing on, left on a table, he remarks that they are "fantastic." "Yes sah," replies the young writer, "I will call it 'Narrative of the Life of a Country.' "[9]

In today's brooding world of multiple forms of contemporary enslavement and exploitation, which end in no exits for so many victims, survivors have nevertheless found ways to tell their stories. In all this loss there are renewals. In all the endings there are beginnings; survivals, if never utopias. It has ever been thus despite all the darkness of human conduct. We have to keep solidarity with the ages. There are pasts that will help us prepare if not prescribe for the present. There is a book behind that abandoned blackboard.

[9] Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, 456–8, 495–6, 530.

Acknowledgments

This volume is dedicated to

> all those lost to slavery and slaving, then and now;
> all those who have survived slavery, past and present; and
> all those who have dedicated their lives to ending slave systems wherever they manifest.

For Dottie and for Mike and Marcelle.

We gratefully acknowledge the team at Cambridge University Press, especially Deborah Gershenowitz, who has so assiduously shepherded this volume from idea to fruition. We are also deeply indebted to Series Editors Randall Miller and Zoe Trodd, whose careful and thoughtful readings have done much to strengthen our work. Additionally, the community of scholars comprising the international NGO Historians Against Slavery, whose work on slavery and abolition straddles past and present, has provided foundation and support for this volume, and more significantly, to the endeavor to mine usable pasts for academic and activist purposes in the present. We thank especially HASers Jason Allen, Michael Todd Landis, Talitha LeFlouria, Matthew Mason, Stacey Robertson, Stephen Rozman, and Robert Wright. Finally, we offer our sincere gratitude to the many individuals whose ideas, critical readings, and activism have invigorated this work, especially Kevin Bales, Nikki Berg Burgin, Douglas Blackmon, Shakti Jaisingh, Siddarth Kara, Greg Mullins, Laura Murphy, Alexandra Schultheis Moore, John Pepper, Louise Shelley, and Zoe Trodd.