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Paper:

Anderson, D. (2016). Slave Narratives Review Article. *Reviews in History*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.14296/RiH/2014/1934>

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Reviews in History

Published on *Reviews in History* (<http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>)

Slave Narratives Review Article

Review Number:

1934

Publish date:

Thursday, 12 May, 2016

Editor:

Spencer Crew
Lonnie Bunch
Clement Price

ISBN:

978-1-4408-0086-3

Date of Publication:

2014

Price:

£188.19

Pages:

1124pp.

Publisher:

Greenwood

Publisher url:

<http://www.abc-clio.com/ABC-CLIOCorporate/product.aspx?pc=A3760C>

Place of Publication:

Santa Barbara, CA

Editor:

Lynette Ater Tanner

ISBN:

978-0895876263

Date of Publication:

2014

Price:

£6.38

Pages:

229pp.

Publisher:

John F. Blair Publisher

Publisher url:

http://blairpub.com/mediakits/tanner_lynette.php

Place of Publication:

Winston-Salem, NC

Reviewer:

David Anderson

“Christmas, we allus had plenny good sumpin’ t’eat, an’ we all got together an’ had lots er fun,” stated Rias Body, an ex-slave from Alabama, to a Federal Writers’ Project interviewer. Of particular enjoyment was the seasonal ritual of running up to the “big ’ouse early Christmas mawnin’ an’ holler out, ‘Mawnin’, Christmas Gif!’” when the plantation master and mistress “give us plenny Sandy Claus” with the distribution of presents and other festive tokens (Crew, et al, p. 74). “I know for Christmas de ole messus allus give us a biscuit and a apple”, remembered 85-year-old Silas Spotfore of Louisiana. “We tho’t dat wuz something” (Tanner, p. 15). Slave children received stuffed toys or candies, fruits, and nuts. Typically, most slave families received clothing provisions, extra rations, and other small articles at Christmas time. “Marse Elbert”, said Carrie Hudson of her master, arranged “to have hog killin’ close enough to Christmas so dere would be plenty fresh meat” on his Georgia plantation, “and dere was heaps of good chickens, tukkeys, cake, candies, and just evvything good”, she remembered (Crew, et al, pp. 90-1). Alcohol was also allowed as a Christmas treat. “Massa David allus give us eggnog and planty good whiskey at Christmas”, recalled Gus Bradshaw of Texas. “We had all day to eat and drink and sing and dance” (Crew, et al, p. 75). It was also customary for plantation owners to permit their slaves to attend dances, tea parties, and other forms of entertainment, or “frolics” as they were often called, on neighbouring plantations.

At first glance, it is perhaps unsurprising that former slaves looked back with affection on the plantation Christmas, given the festival typically equated with time off, gifts, additional provisions, extra food rations and drink, as well as relaxed restrictions on movement between plantations. On the other hand, the day-to-day realities of antebellum slave life were scarcely as munificent as the nostalgic turn would have us believe. Some ex-slaves insisted that the Christmas season differed little from other plantation holidays while others were threatened that Christmas would not come at all if they misbehaved. Invariably, Christmas possessed something of a bitter-sweet quality for many slaves. The first day of January usually marked a return to toil for those slaves who had been hired out for the year. “We knowed Christmas was over and gone when New Year’s Day come, because we got back to work that day after frolicking all Christmas week”, remarked James Bolton, a former slave who lived and worked on a Georgia plantation (Crew, et al, p. 75).

Nostalgia among elderly ex-slaves for the paternalism of the Old South, as C. Vann Woodward has remarked, was not for slavery per se but for those aspects of its existence that remained attractive to old, lonely, often poverty-stricken blacks living through the nadir of the Great Depression. Moreover, many Writers’ Project interviewees were young children or adolescents under slavery and probably did not remember its arduous toil while deference shown to (predominantly) white interviewers in an era of Jim Crow segregation, white supremacy, and lynch law may also explain reluctance among former slaves to dwell upon unpleasant memories of bondage, favoring instead to repress or stifle its unhappy recall.⁽¹⁾

Each of the reference works under review is another contribution to the burgeoning primary literature on slavery and slave life reflecting the reminiscences of former slaves and their memories of bondage, the Civil War, emancipation, and Reconstruction. *Slave Culture* adopts a thematic approach to present a wide range of first-hand testimonies of life under slavery while *Chained to the Land* uses a smaller sample of narratives to provide insight into slave community and culture in Louisiana. Both target a general audience. Building upon the earlier works of Ronald Killion and Charles Waller, eds. *Slavery Time When I Was Chillun Down on Marster’s Plantation*; Charles L. Perdue, Jr., Thomas E. Barden, and Robert K. Phillips, eds., *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia’s Ex-Slaves*; and Spencer Crew and Cynthia Goodman, eds., *Unchained Memories: Readings from the Slave Narratives* ⁽²⁾, the editors have carefully sourced often inaccessible collections of ex-slave narratives and thoughtfully mined their content to allow the slaves to speak for themselves.

From 1935 through 1938, thousands of ex-slaves were interviewed by staff members of the Federal Writers’ Project (FWP), a division of the Works Project Administration (WPA), a New Deal relief program established by the administration of President Franklin D. Roosevelt to provide jobs for the unemployed during the Great Depression. Under the directorship of Henry G. Alsberg, a former editorialist and theatre

producer, the relief agency found work for thousands of male and female writers, editors, teachers, and librarians who produced oral and written histories, children's books, and other works. The American Guide, for example, a series of sectional books and pamphlets comprising essays on the historical, cultural, and economic assets of every state, with descriptions of prominent cities, counties, towns, and highways, was one of the FWP's most noteworthy achievements. Housed at the Library of Congress, the Slave Narrative Collection, another ambitious undertaking by the FWP, boasts 2,300 interviews and several hundred black-and-white photographs of former slaves that were collected across seventeen states during the 1930s. These autobiographical accounts of slave life from men and women born into slavery allow unparalleled access to daily life in the slave quarters as remembered by those who knew it best, first-person accounts that continue to excite the interest of historians, sociologists, folklorists, and general readers and researchers alike.

Building upon the earlier works by FWP editor and folklorist B. A. Botkin, ed., *Lay My Burden Down: A Folk History of Slavery*; and historian Norman R. Yetman, ed., *Life Under the 'Peculiar Institution': Selections from the Slave Narrative Collection* (3), in 1972 George P. Rawick compiled and edited and Greenwood Press published *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, a series of forty-one volumes, including Rawick's own introductory volume, *From Sundown to Sunup: The Making of the Black Community*, a study of slavery from the perspective of the slave based on the FWP interviews in Washington, D.C. and other life histories of the 'peculiar institution' collected at Fisk University during the 1920s.

Many scholars writing on antebellum southern slavery during and since the 1970s have used the slave narratives extensively, most notably Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*; Leslie Howard Owens, *This Species of Property: Slave Life and Culture in the Old South*; Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925*; Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*; Paul D. Escott, *Slavery Remembered: A Record of Twentieth-Century Slave Narratives*; Leon Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery*; Roger D. Abrahams, *Singing the Master: The Emergence of African-American Culture in the Plantation South*; Wilma King, *Stolen Childhood: Slave Youth in Nineteenth-Century America*; Marie Jenkins Schwartz, *Born in Bondage: Growing Up Enslaved in the Antebellum South*; and Anthony E. Kaye, *Joining Places: Slave Neighborhoods in the Old South*.(4)

Advancing the study of antebellum slave society and culture from the vantage point of the enslaved, these 'and other, related' works have shown that male and female slaves had creative agency, challenging hoary myths of the Lost Cause that portrayed slavery as a benign institution and slaves as content and compliant. One thinks here, too, of John W. Blassingame's edited collection *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies* (5), a sizeable work that brings together a diverse compendium of slave sources left by the slaves themselves, and his introductory essay therein (6), that explores the problems and possibilities in using these historical materials to illuminate plantation era slavery. Blassingame, however, remained cautious of the WPA collection, fearing 'uncritical use' of the narratives 'will lead almost inevitably to a simplistic and distorted view of the plantation as a paternalistic institution where the chief feature of life was mutual love and respect between masters and slaves'?(7)

Drawing on multiple excerpts from original typescripts in the Slave Narrative Collection, *Slave Culture*, a three volume set, presents thematically arranged accounts from slavery's eye-witnesses, offering readers 'a view of the institution of slavery from the inside out' (p. xv). The collection begins with a tightly written if general introductory essay on the history of the slave narratives, detailing the formation of the FWP, how formerly enslaved persons were interviewed (including what questions they were asked), and the merits of oral history as a legitimate source to understand the slave experience. A facsimile copy of Angie Garrett's 1937 interview with a FWP worker in Alabama ('Time had not softened her memories,' we are told) is reproduced in the introduction to give the reader some sense of the editing and redaction processes undertaken by the interviewer before the final typed copy was sent to the Library of Congress for processing (p. xxiv). Usually transcribed in dialect, interview files typically included the names of both interviewer and interviewee, brief notes made by the narrator, the location and date of the interview, and, when available, a photograph (several of these, sourced from the Library of Congress, are scattered throughout the volumes,

making for a fascinating photo essay of former slaves).

Following a short chronology of slavery in the United States, the reader is then introduced to the editors' selections that are clustered around the following themes: 'The enslaved community culture?', 'Childhood for the enslaved?', 'The enslaved family?', 'Enslaved women?', 'Work and slavery?', 'Physical abuse and intimidation?', and 'Runaways and the quest for freedom?'. Each category is, in turn, introduced by a small essay that provides some broad-brush scene setting for what follows. Even a cursory glance at the excerpts reveals a broad diversity of opinion, rendering valid generalization of antebellum slave life and cultural adaptation a difficult – if not impossible – task. From these reminiscences, drawn from 70-year-old memories, one can find a personal record of how slaves lived, felt, and conducted their daily lives on small farms and large plantations, as they answered specific questions on family life, living conditions, food and clothing, field and domestic work, punishments, rebelliousness, runaway slaves, religion, weddings and funerals, and holidays and other special occasions. 'What do I think of slavery?' stated Charity Moore of South Carolina to a FWP interviewer, reflecting the range of slave responses to questions about life under slavery. 'I think slavery is jest a murdering of de people. I think Freedom been a great gift. I lak my Maussa and I guess he was as good to his slave as he could be, but I ruther [rather] bee free?' (p. 993). Helpfully, a name and subject index facilitate the search for specific slaves by state or topics of interest. A historiographical essay, 'The long road to the cabin door: historians on American slavery?', concludes the set.

In *Chained to the Land*, Lynette Ater Tanner, owner of an award-winning cotton plantation and museum in the Mississippi Delta, has gathered together 42 interviews with former Louisiana slaves, sharecroppers, and tenant farmers that were conducted during the 1930s under the supervision of Lyle Saxon, Louisiana's WPA director and celebrated journalist and author of historical New Orleans. These narrations, however, were never sent to the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress with the rest of the interviews from other states. Rather, most of Tanner's selections were kept in private hands at Melrose Plantation in Natchitoches and thus have not had the attention that they deserve. Part of publisher John F. Blair's 'Real Voices, Real History' series which has made the more cumbersome sets of slave narratives more accessible and reader friendly, Tanner's short volume, which is supplemented by a sprightly essay on the history of Louisiana, brings together these hitherto unpublished first-hand accounts, making them available in printed form to the wider reading public. The respondents hail from across the state, from in and around New Orleans and Baton Rouge to several central and northern parishes and Tanner has remained faithful to the spelling, sentence structure, and dialect style of the original transcriptions. Interestingly, some of the interviews, such as those of Mary Reynolds, Charley Williams, and Peter Barber are lengthy narrative accounts, recounted by FWP staff, with occasional insertions by the interviewers included (one official, for example, added a note to his interview file that cast doubt on his subject's age and memory, noting too the belligerence of family members to his presence [p. 39]).

During the course of the interviews, many former slaves were anxious not to offend the sensibilities of their white interviewers, insisting that they had been largely happy and well provided for under slavery, a story that some WPA officials were keen to promulgate. When 86-year-old Mary Harris was interviewed in New Orleans, a WPA worker recorded that they agreed that slavery was 'a most unfortunate thing,' noting that 'all masters were not cruel' and many former slaves 'still tell of their love for 'ole Miss' and 'old Marse,' for the 'loyalty and love existing between them could never have been created in rancous [rancorous] hearts' (p. 174). Conversely, some of Louisiana's former slaves (alongside others) spoke openly of cruel slaveholders and overseers, remarking on whippings, beatings, and other callous punishments. 'My dam ol' Missus was mean as hell', remembered Henrietta Butler. 'You see dis finger here? 'dare is where she bit it de day us was set free?' (p. 141).

In addition to recollections of life under slavery in Louisiana's sugar cane economy, one can glean useful material from these interviews about the coming of the Civil War, the conduct of Union and Confederate soldiers, emancipation, the political intrigue of Reconstruction, the nefarious activities of the Ku Klux Klan, as well as much about the realities of freedom, citizenship, and respectability for African Americans during the late 19th century. 'Freeing themselves physically and then financially from the cotton and cane, these resilient former slaves were often still emotionally 'chained to the land'', explains Tanner (p. xii). 'We jest

sats down some times and talks about how we use to cut dat cane in them fields??, affirmed Annie Flowers, age unknown, of her interview in the McDonoghville community of New Orleans, contrasting past reassurances with current destitutions. ??I knows it was happier times than now,?? she conceded. Unschooled and living on the poverty line, ??Work was all I knew to do??, she told her interviewer. ??And I?es still trying to work?? (pp. 164?5).

Whether affected by failing memory in old age, the sway and influence of white interviewers, crystallization of Jim Crow statutes and customs, or the grinding poverty of the 1930s, the 20th-century oral interviews conducted by the FWP with former slaves remain, when read carefully and critically, one of the richest primary resources for exploring antebellum southern slavery and the people it affected. Complimenting existing syntheses and selections of the Slave Narrative Collection, *Slave Culture* and *Chained to the Land* will prove to be useful research tools and references for historians and students of slavery.

Notes

1. C. Vann Woodward, ?History from slave sources?, *American Historical Review*, 79 (April 1974), 470?81.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. *Slavery Time When I Was Chillun Down on Marster?s Plantation*, ed. Ronald Killion and Charles Waller (Savannah, GA, 1973); *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia?s Ex-Slaves*, ed. Charles L. Perdue, Jr., Thomas E. Barden, and Robert K. Phillips (Charlottesville, VA, 1976); *Unchained Memories: Readings from the Slave Narratives*, ed. Spencer Crew and Cynthia Goodman (Boston, MA, 2002).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. *Lay My Burden Down: A Folk History of Slavery*, ed. B. A. Botkin (Chicago, IL, 1945); *Life Under the ?Peculiar Institution?: Selections from the Slave Narrative Collection*, ed. Norman R. Yetman (New York, NY, 1970).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll, The World the Slaves Made* (New York, NY, 1974); Leslie Howard Owens, *This Species of Property, Slave Life and Culture in the Old South* (New York, NY, 1976); Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (New York, NY, 1977); Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness, Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York, NY, 1978); Paul D. Escott, *Slavery Remembered, A Record of Twentieth-Century Slave Narratives* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1979); Leon Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long, The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York, NY, 1979); Roger D. Abrahams, *Singing the Master, The Emergence of African-American Culture in the Plantation South* (New York, NY, 1992); Wilma King, *Stolen Childhood, Slave Youth in Nineteenth-Century America* (Bloomington, IN, 1995); Marie Jenkins Schwartz, *Born in Bondage, Growing Up Enslaved in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge, MA, 2000); and Anthony E. Kaye, *Joining Places, Slave Neighborhoods in the Old South* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2007).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies*, ed. John W. Blassingame (Baton Rouge, LA, 1977).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. A revision of John W. Blassingame, ?Using the testimony of ex-slaves: approaches and problems?, *Journal of Southern History*, 41 (November 1975), 473?92.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. *Ibid*, p. 490.[Back to \(7\)](#)

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