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I Was Born a Slave. An Anthology of Classic Slave Narratives, Two volumes

Yuval Taylor (editor), Lawrence Hill Books, Chicago, 1999. xxxviii + 764/796 pp., bibliography, illustrations from the originals. \$21.00 each (paper), \$35.00 each (cloth).

Review by Marshall Joseph Becker, West Chester University

These two massive volumes include 20 powerful narratives documenting the lives of their 22 authors who spent part of their lives in slavery. Like the "captivity" narratives of colonists carried away by Native Americans, these stories became a popular literary form specifically because the perils of living in bondage. Here we read, at the turn of a page, as in the blink of a slave's eye, of death and other disasters. Taylor indicates that there exist some 6,000 of these "accounts" of which the vast majority are only brief records. However, "approximately 150 of them were separately published as books or pamphlets" (p. xv), ranging from only eight pages in length to two volumes. Thus, the 20 accounts in these two volumes represent only some 13 percent of all those longer "slave" narratives. The value of this collection, together with its useful notes, cannot be overstated.

The longer narratives all have similarities reflecting the markets for these tales. Yet within these accounts there is a wealth of information that merits the serious scholarly attention now being directed to them. They comprise a valuable data base from which to examine the extensive, and very expensive, archaeological effort that is being made to recover the fundamental record of daily lives of these people when they were in bondage. The archaeological record provides a type of documentation that is invaluable in reviewing these stories, but all the efforts made to date to recover the past do not provide a tiny fraction of insight that is offered by these accounts. For example, William Parker's account (p. 747) of the huge orphanage-like building for single people and unattached children on the Major William Brogdon estate in Maryland sets a standard for description by which archaeological reports should be measured. Each of these literary records also may be investigated from the viewpoint of anthropologists and folklorists, as well as ethnohistorians who can use parallel evidence to explore each of these tales as it exists in this record.

The foreword by Charles Johnson has a polemic tone almost obligatory when discussing slavery. Like the introduction, it touches on present politics and several other subjects that relate to these materials. Much is made of Andrew Johnson's 1866 veto of a bill that would have provided homesteads for the freed slaves. This "what if" scenario is interesting, but poorly thought out. Yet in these few pages Johnson summarizes some of the important concerns that make this massive two volume compilation worth adding to your shelves.

In his long introduction Taylor provides an excellent framework within which these narratives may be placed. Taylor describes the development of the genre, the shift toward the literary form that produced the majority of these substantive accounts, and the changes that resulted in the form after the Civil War. Taylor points out that there is a repetition common to these narratives, often filling as much as a quarter of each work. The reasons for this development, and much that is useful to understanding these important texts, here is effectively summarized within the context of the history of slavery.

Taylor includes comments regarding many of the other narratives, plus a brief note on each of the 20 authors and/or their works that he has selected. Following this format, and incorporating other data from the text, I have abstracted the names, publication dates, and significance of each particular work so that readers of this review can see why this collection merits their attention.

1. James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, 1772. This autobiographical account is considered to be the first published example of the "slave narrative."

2. Olaudah Equiano (Gustavus Vassa), 1789. One of the longer accounts, including ethnographic data and insights into the actual workings of the slave trade in Africa.

3. William Grimes, 1824/25. This narrative of suffering and bleak endurance was, when published, the longest autobiography written by an African American. More significantly, this text shifted the direction of the genre away from a tradition of some 50 years. Initially, slave narratives, provided a description of their author's "lives as adventures or spiritual journeys" (p. xv). The Grimes document focuses on a description of slavery and all of its more horrid aspects, setting forth a new type of narrative with goals far different than those written earlier.

4. Nat Turner, 1831. The "confessions" of this well-known leader of a slave revolt is very brief, but reveals numerous important elements. Embedded in this often cited text is suggestion that Turner was leading a classic "revitalization movement" among the slaves who were held in this part of America.

5. Charles Ball, 1836. This is considered the longest and most detailed antebellum slave narrative that we have, providing one of the most extensive views of plantation life as seen from "the slave's point of view" (p. xxxiii). The complex narrative is a cross between Melville and the modern adventure novel.

6. Moses Roper, 1838. Despite Olaudah Equiano's British connection, Taylor believes Roper to be the "first fugitive slave to widely publicize his experiences to

British audiences." The sadistic behaviors of his master, Mr. Gooch, came to stereotype the attitudes and acts of all slaveholders.

7. Frederick Douglass, 1845. This narrative is the first of the three autobiographies by this well-known fugitive slave. His "unparalleled rhetorical skills" are admirably displayed here, leading this text to become "the most widely studied slave narrative" (p. xxxiii).

8. Lewis Clarke, 1845/46; and J. Milton Clark, 1846. Like Frederick Douglass, Lewis Clarke had lectured for years on the American Anti-Slavery Society circuit (p. 602). A year after its first printing Lewis's account was published together with that of his brother. Certainly these accounts demonstrate why Taylor calls them "two of the most engaging slave storytellers" (p. xxxiii).

9. William Wells Brown, 1847. In addition to producing this version of his life, Brown's publications lead him to be considered as the first African-American novelist and playwright.

10. Josiah Henson, 1849. The various versions of this account "proved to be the most popular slave narrative of the nineteenth century," earning the author the title of "the original Uncle Tom" (p. xxxiii).

11. Henry Bibb, 1849. This is a "love story" (p. 2) combined with a frontier adventure tale that recounts Bibb's escape from slavery and later attempts to rescue his wife and child.

12. James W. C. Pennington, 1849. The most interesting aspect of this work is the narrative focus on "questions of property and ownership" from a "well-known abolitionist minister and one of the most educated and literate black men of his time (p. xxxiii).

13. Solomon Northup, 1853. The kidnapping in 1841 of this "free black man of New York" (p. xxxiv) and his 12 years in the deep South place this story in a position parallel to the Indian captivity stories, perhaps accounting for its great popularity.

14. John Brown, 1855. Taylor considers this to be "the most brutal of these narratives" (p. xxxiv), which is saying a lot. However, it differs from the Moses Roper account and may in its own way be more chilling.

15. John Thompson, 1856. An extremely interesting account that includes a whaling voyage during which the author made a visit to Africa.

16. William and Ellen Craft, 1860. This narrative of their life and their brilliant escape on the eve of the Civil War "successfully blurs distinctions between white and black, master and slave, man and woman" (p. xxxiv).

17. Harriet Jacobs [Linda Brent] 1861, edited by Lydia Maria Child. Jacobs is the first female to write her own story, providing us with a powerful and detailed account of servitude from a woman's point of view.

18. Jacob D. Green, 1864. The Brer Rabbit motif appears in several of the works included in these two volumes and is common in this narrative tradition. Yet Taylor identifies Green as "the only slave narrator to make full use of the trickster tradition" (p. xxxiv). Each of Green's three escapes is an interesting story.

19. James Mars, 1864. Since Mars was born in Connecticut, in 1790, and spent his entire life north of the Mason-Dixon line his narrative provides an important reminder of the extent of slavery prior to the nineteenth century and insight into how slavery operated in different parts of the country.

20. William Parker 1866 (first published in two parts in the February and March issues of *The Atlantic Monthly*). Parker's text, edited by "Edmund Kirke" (pen name of James R. Gilmore) includes many interesting details about slave life that should be reflected in the archaeological record. His armed resistance against slave hunters in 1851 is often identified as the first "battle" of the Civil War.

The ten stories selected for Volume One begin with the first known account in this tradition, published in 1772, and ends with Josiah Henson's account published in 1849. Volume Two begins with the Henry Bibb narrative, also published in 1849, and concludes with the extremely important William Parker account of the armed resistance to southern slave hunters by African Americans at Christiana in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania.

As Taylor points out in his introduction, the focus and intent of these narratives shifted considerably over the nearly 100 years of their production. While reasons for the post Civil War shift is made relatively clear, reasons for the change in emphasis that begins with the Grimes account (1824/25) warrants further discussion. An examination of the market for these narratives, the periods of their peak production and volumes of sales would tell us much about the literary niche that they occupied. These stories are filled with sex and violence, fear and trembling, and all the ingredients that go into the production of the bodice rippers so popular today. Their period of production largely predates the frontier novels and westerns

Interesting is how many of these authors were sons of veterans of the American Revolution, where some 20 percent of the enlisted troops may have been men of color. That the liberty they fought for was not available to all leads us to consider these situations within their own context. While more of these tales are deliberately selected records of horrible situations, we should remember that life for all Americans in that span of history was far from ideal. The lives of indentured servants were not much, if at all different from those depicted in these narratives. Johnson (p. x) even notes that the 20 Africans sold at Jamestown in 1619 were referred to as "indentured servants." But those countless victims of lethal if not simply unhappy indentures, like the many brutalized sons and daughters of average free people, could not paint their tales against a canvas of an evil institution.

Each of these volumes can be read independently. Both, however, have the same foreword and the same introduction, and both end with the same annotated list of recommended readings followed by nearly six pages of other works cited.