



PROJECT MUSE®

*Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New
World* (review)

Charles R. Foy

Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies, Volume 77,
Number 1, Winter 2010, pp. 84-87 (Review)

Published by Penn State University Press
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/pnh.0.0005>



➔ *For additional information about this article*
<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/369615>

commentary of those Haudenosaunee along the Grand River. If she had done so, Mt. Pleasant may have realized the notable connection between events occurring on the Haldimand Tract with regard to the religious schism between “Christian” and “Pagan” factions and those Haudenosaunee south of the forty-ninth parallel.

It is fitting that the translator of the Zeisberger diaries, Julie Tomberlin Weber, was given the final word in this interesting collection of essays. In her concluding remarks, Tomberlin Weber comments at length on the complexities of translation, suggesting that we, as readers and researchers, should keep in mind that transparency in translation “is unobtainable and that no translation can ever live up to an original text” (196). Coupled with James Merrell’s recent examination of the recordings of Teedyuscung’s 1756 council speeches, her remarks should keep those of us interested in the history of cross-cultural exchange humble and mindful of our sources.

WILLIAM CAMPBELL

California State University, Chico

David Brion Davis. *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006. Pp. xvi, 440, maps, illustrations, notes, index. Cloth \$30.00; Paper, \$18.95.)

In the past three decades slavery has come to occupy a central place in history. Scores of monographs discussing various aspects of slavery are written each year, and *Slavery and Abolition’s* Annual Bibliographical Supplement now exceeds one hundred and fifty pages. This increased interest in slavery has also been reflected in the realm of public history, as museums throughout the world have presented exhibits highlighting slavery’s importance. Slavery has even become the center of interest in such popular movies as *Amazing Grace*, *Amistad*, and *Glory*. As David Brion Davis realized in the mid-1990s when he began a seminar on slavery for high school teachers, despite the greater acceptance of the importance of slavery in our history, neither the public nor college students are well informed on the subject. To remedy this circumstance, Davis set out to provide a synthetic narrative of the history of slavery in the Americas that could connect with the general public and serve as a textbook. *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* succeeds on both counts.

Davis commences his wide-ranging overview of slavery in the Western world through a discussion of the *Amistad* case. By using this famous slave ship insurrection, Davis quickly establishes one of *Inhuman Bondage's* central tenets—"the multinational character of the Atlantic Slave System." Involving natives of Sierra Leone transported to Cuba by Portuguese slave traders, the *Amistad* rebellion and related legal cases enable Davis to illustrate the place of slavery in the American political and judicial system and address the nature of the international slave trade, racial slavery and abolitionism.

Starting his narrative in Babylon, Davis connects slavery in the Americas to more ancient systems and other regions. Through a comparison of the relatively privileged Babylonian slaves with those in Tupinamba of Brazil prior to European settlement, David modifies Orlando Patterson's definition of slavery. While Patterson emphasizes the extreme 'personal domination' of enslaved peoples, Davis argues that enslavement results from what he terms "animalization," in which enslaved people were treated like animals being domesticated. This process of focusing on the animal traits all humans "share and fear" allowed slave masters to deny "the redeeming rational and spiritual qualities" of the enslaved that would otherwise have bound the two together (30–32). The power of Davis's conception of slavery is evident in the hundreds of slave sale advertisements in which "Negroes" are listed for sale among a long list of farm animals, and often referred to without distinction from such animals.

In the book's early chapters Davis describes the development in the Americas of a labor system in which slavery would incorporate anti-black racism and become race-based. He traces the roots of this racism from both Islamic and Judeo-Christian traditions, demonstrating how the "Curse of Ham" story was used as a justification for the bondage of Africans and the equation of blackness with slavery. These ideas of anti-black racism received powerful support during the Enlightenment in the writings of David Hume, Immanuel Kant, and Thomas Jefferson, among many others. This race-based ideology would, Davis asserts, be "an intrinsic and indispensable part of New World settlement" (6).

In subsequent chapters Davis shows how European westward expansion relied upon an expanding supply of African slave labor. These two developments—European expansion into the Atlantic and the Atlantic slave trade—are for Davis the means by which Africans became essential players in world history. Davis precisely details how the consequence of an ever-increasing European

demand for slaves devastated African societies and caused African economies to become inextricably connected to the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. With European borne diseases and warfare killing many Native Americans, European planters in the New World became increasingly dependent upon African slave labor, ensuring that large numbers of Africans would be transported to the Americas as slaves.

When Davis brings his story to the shores of the Americas, he focuses on Britain's plantation colonies of southern North America and the West Indies, where slavery would become the foundation of these colonies' political and economic lives. Before Davis explores the establishment of economies predicated upon commodities such as sugar, rice and tobacco, he demonstrates both the variety of labor in the British colonies and the opportunities available to blacks in the seventeenth century Chesapeake. These opportunities were largely lost in the aftermath of Bacon's Rebellion, which helped propel slavery forward as the central labor system on American plantations and elevated the institution as a significant font of wealth for many European nations. With the creation of slave societies in the American colonies, detailed proslavery arguments were developed to justify the enslavement of African Americans. Davis details both those justifications and how slaves responded to the brutality of slave societies by developing their own distinct African American culture.

In the second half of the book, Davis shows the more hopeful side of the history of slavery—its abolition. Davis sees widespread opposition to slavery as developing from the revolutions of the late eighteenth century—American, French and Haitian. With their emphasis on equality not hierarchy, these revolutions gave ideological inspiration to antislavery writers and leaders. Although the American Revolution abolished slavery in the northern states and the French Revolution led to a national emancipation decree, it was the Haitian Revolution—the only instance of a successful slave rebellion—that served as the harbinger of slavery's collapse. Despite proslavery writers such as George Fitzhugh denying the relevance of the revolutions to the morality of slavery, abolitionists and religious revivalists framed the question of slavery in moral terms, leading many in the Anglo-American world, including political leaders such as Lincoln, to see the institution as sinful.

In his last chapters, Davis considers the politics of slavery and emancipation during the Civil War. He argues that the Civil War was revolutionary in that it resulted in acts that before the war would have been thought unimaginable: the arming of blacks, large numbers of slaves fleeing their owners, and

the emancipation of slaves. The progress fostered by this revolution would wither away with the end of Reconstruction.

As Davis acknowledges, *Inhuman Bondage* is “not a comprehensive or encyclopedic survey” (2). It does, however, provide a compelling narrative that will attract a wide variety of readers and offers a solid foundation for the any course on slavery.

CHARLES R. FOY
Eastern Illinois University

Thomas J. McGuire. *The Philadelphia Campaign: Brandywine and the Fall of Philadelphia, Volume One*. (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2006. Pp. 420, notes, glossary, bibliography, index. Cloth, \$34.95.)

It had been a very near thing in the winter of 1776. With enlistments coming to an end and a disastrous defense of New York and New Jersey pointing to an early end to the Continental Army, General George Washington managed a reprieve for his army with audacious albeit operationally marginal victories at Trenton in December 1776 and Princeton in January 1777. The war would go on with each side seeking to find a decision to the conflict whether it be by force of arms or stroke of pen. Thomas J. McGuire, in his masterful narrative history of the Philadelphia Campaign of 1777, paints an exceptionally detailed picture of the people and events of the campaign, missing little of importance along the way.

Sir William Howe sought in the summer of 1777 to decide the war either through the capture of Philadelphia or the destruction of the rebel army in its defense. Washington understood Howe’s intent for the disposition of the British army hinted at an overland campaign through New Jersey. Washington positioned his own army to threaten Howe’s flanks. Realizing that there was little he could do to rid himself of this threat, Howe pulled back to the safety of New York and in doing so, left Washington with a quandary. With British forces gathering in Canada poised to move south by way of Lake Champlain and the Hudson River, did Howe now intend to make the main effort the isolation and reduction of rebellious New England? Was Charleston, South Carolina the new target using the Royal Navy for transport? Or did a water approach to Philadelphia by way of the Delaware River or the Chesapeake Bay offer another way to the rebel capital?