The Long Trek to Freedom


*Though the Heavens May Fall: The Landmark Trial That Led to the End of Human Slavery*
by Steven M. Wise
Merloyd Lawrence/Da Capo, 282 pp., $25.00

*Slave Country: American Expansion and the Origins of the Deep South*
by Adam Rothman
Harvard University Press, 296 pp., $35.00

*The First Emancipator: The Forgotten Story of Robert Carter, the Founding Father Who Freed His Slaves*
by Andrew Levy
Random House, 310 pp., $25.95

*Bound for Canaan: The Underground Railroad and the War for the Soul of America*
by Fergus M. Bordewich
Amistad, 540 pp., $27.95

1.

Before the middle of the eighteenth century, slavery was generally accepted in Europe and its colonies as a divinely ordained punishment for original sin or simply as a natural part of the eternal order of things. Yet by then Europeans had stopped enslaving one another for centuries; slavery was a condition mainly imposed on blacks brought from Africa to the New World in order to produce tropical staples for European consumption. England and France in particular had an enormous stake in the slave trade and the plantation system, which were primary sources of prosperity and commercial development for both countries. But very few black slaves were to be found in either England or France, and it was an open question whether slavery could still be enforced in either country.1 Restricting slavery to particular races and regions opened it to criticism because it deviated from norms in European countries; but, paradoxically, it also meant that those who had little direct contact with slavery could easily put it out of their minds.

The ideas of the Enlightenment were bound to raise fundamental questions whether slavery and the slave trade were compatible with the new ideals of liberty, equality, and rationality. In his 1748 *Spirit of the Laws* Montesquieu considered various justifications for slavery, including the alleged subhumanity of blacks, and showed how unreasonable they were. But the Enlightenment was a two-edged weapon when applied to the kind of servitude that existed in the eighteenth century. While Enlightenment thinkers developed a conception of universal human rights, they also studied and classified the physical variations among human beings and thus laid the foundations for a concept of biological race that could be used to establish new hierarchies. It became possible to justify slavery on grounds of alleged scientific fact rather than divine fiat, owing to the new sciences of
comparative anatomy and physical anthropology. Several prominent Enlightenment thinkers who at times had qualms about slavery, such as Voltaire, Hume, and Jefferson, were convinced that blacks were much inferior to whites in their rational capacities—a belief that allowed apologists for the institution, such as the Jamaican planter Edward Long, to develop a modern and “scientific” defense of black servitude. Enlightenment theories, depending on how they were interpreted and applied, could condemn slavery as a denial of the rights of humanity or defend it as consistent with science and rationality.

As the books under review by Steven M. Wise, Andrew Levy, and Fergus M. Bordewich make clear, the strongest and most effective opposition to slavery did not come from Enlightenment rationalists but from religious zealots who were inspired by the evangelical or pietistic revivals and the “awakenings” that began in the eighteenth century and continued into the nineteenth. These men of faith discovered that slavery was not just ideologically questionable but contrary to the will of God—a sin that could no longer be tolerated by believing Christians.

Evangelical concern for the souls of enslaved Africans became evident before any visible hostility to the institution itself. The most active and successful missionaries to the slaves of the New World were the Moravians, members of a pietistic sect of Czech and German origin, who were successful in improving the condition of some slaves precisely because they made it clear that they were not opposed to black slavery in principle. They were able to persuade slave owners that they would not harm their interests and in doing so were able to gain influence in places like the Danish West Indies and North Carolina, partly because they conceded that the Bible sanctioned the servitude of Africans even after they had been baptized. But they argued that the divinely ordained status of blacks as “hewers of wood and carriers of water” did not preclude a degree of spiritual equality with whites that required kindly treatment from masters and sometimes even led to the full integration of religious worship.2

The pioneers of religious opposition to slavery were the Quakers. From their base in Pennsylvania, mid-to-late-eighteenth-century Quakers set in motion the American antislavery movement, first within their own community, and then more broadly in the Anglo-American world. Since they were pacifists, the Quakers had no weapons other than peaceful persuasion, but this was enough to make slaveholding incompatible with membership in the Society of Friends. The foremost Quaker exponent of abolishing slavery was Anthony Benezet, whose influence extended from Pennsylvania across the Atlantic. Benezet was a major inspiration for the first important British abolitionist, Granville Sharpe, the main character of Steven M. Wise’s book Though the Heavens May Fall, which is a thorough and convincing account of the case that led to the official banning of slavery in England in 1772.

Sharpe was not a Quaker himself; in fact he was a highly orthodox member of the Church of England who had strong prejudices against Catholics and Protestant dissenters alike. Wise goes so far as to call him “a religious bigot.” But his tireless and ultimately successful effort to end slavery in England was dictated by a conviction that slavery was contrary to scripture. Whereas other biblical literalists found a sanction in holy writ for black servitude, Sharpe found the contrary. His main weapon against it was the English common law. Although not a lawyer himself, he was the prime mover in a series of court
actions that led ultimately in 1772 to the decision by Lord Mansfield, chief justice of the
King’s Bench, that slavery could not exist in the “free air of England.”

No one knows how many black slaves there were in England at the time. Estimates of the
total run from as low as 3,000 to as high as 40,000; approximately 15,000 seems a
reasonable guess. Most of these slaves had been imported from the West Indies or North
America by their masters, who expected to be obeyed and served as they had been in the
colonies. But unlike Virginia or Jamaica, England did not have slave markets or public
authorities clearly empowered to apprehend fugitives and return them to their owners.
Consequently, many slaves simply deserted their masters and went to live independently
in “free black” enclaves, the largest of which, by far, was in London. Sharpe came into
the picture most often when masters sought to capture their vagrant human property and
ship slaves back to the colonies for their own use or for sale to someone else. He and his
associates used writs of habeas corpus to prevent such actions by slave owners and then
went on to prosecute some masters for physically assaulting their slaves while seizing
them and trying to hustle them on board ships bound for Jamaica or Virginia.

In the first case of this kind that came before Lord Mansfield, the lawyers engaged by
Sharpe succeeded in getting a judgment that freed their client but only on the grounds
that his status as a slave had not been established. In the subsequent case of 1772,
however, there was no doubt that James Somerset, who had been plucked off a ship
bound for the West Indies, was legally a slave under colonial law. Here Mansfield faced
squarely the issue of whether slavery and English residence were compatible. Dismissing
precedents based on villeinage, a medieval form of lifetime servitude that had never been
outlawed but which no longer existed in practice, Mansfield found no basis for human
property under British common law. “The power of a master over his slave has been
different in different counties,” he concluded.

The state of slavery is of such a nature that it is incapable of being introduced on any
reasons, moral or political, but only positive law…. It is so odious that nothing can be
suffered to support it but positive law.

In other words, if the British wanted slavery, Parliament would have to legislate it. Such a
denial of the legitimacy of English slavery pointed to the subsequent campaign against
the slave trade and ultimately against slavery itself in the British colonies.

In 1772, with the American Revolution only a few years away, slavery was legal in all of
the American colonies. The struggle for American independence on the grounds specified
in the Declaration of Independence cast doubt on the future of slavery. How could a
nation that proclaimed that “all men are created equal” enslave some of them? There was
a strong presumption during and immediately after the Revolution that slavery was an
unjust and harmful institution and that its days were numbered.

It was not only the injustice of slavery that counted against it, but the fact that slavery
was seen as having introduced an inherently alien and potentially dangerous black
population into what many hoped would become a white man’s country (once the
Indians were disposed of, that is). Particularly after the uprising in Haiti in the 1790s, the
fear of a widespread slave rebellion served as a major impetus to thinking about how to
eradicate slavery. Thomas Jefferson objected to it because of its harmful effect on both races and favored emancipation in principle; but he could not imagine slaves being emancipated without the deportation or “colonization” of the freed black population. Lord Mansfield’s decision did not turn England itself into a multihued or multiracial nation, as emancipation without colonization would do to the United States.

A lack of such population pressures in the northern states and a limited economic stake in slave labor there led to the gradual emancipation of slaves in those states beginning in the 1780s and 1790s. But south of what became the Mason-Dixon Line antislavery sentiment flickered and then died around the turn of the century. Adam Rothman’s *Slave Country: American Expansion and the Origins of the Deep South* is the fullest account we have of how slaveholding in the southern states became not only acceptable but also a source of pride and celebration.

The critical factor, as Rothman’s subtitle indicates, was the acquisition of vast new territories suitable for plantation agriculture, especially for the growing of short-staple cotton, a commodity much in demand for the industrial revolution in Great Britain and the northeastern United States. A flourishing Cotton Kingdom arose in the nineteenth century as the US government obtained the territories that became the states of Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana from France and Spain and crushed the Indian resistance in the new Southwest.

Fears that an excess of black people in the seaboard states would lead to a slave rebellion were among the factors that led Congress to abolish the slave trade by 1807. But the question remained where the additional slaves needed in the new territories would come from. The need was met by natural increase in the numbers of slaves and by internal migration. Unlike their counterparts elsewhere in the New World, North American slaves more than reproduced themselves, and the surplus of slaves beyond the labor needs of the states where they were born could be sent westward to man the new cotton plantations, whose prosperity depended on good soil, two hundred frost-free days, and the cotton gin—all of which were available after 1800.

Jefferson and others initially recommended “diffusion” of the seaboard slave population to the new territories in order to prepare the way for gradual emancipation; such movement, it was thought, would ease white racial fears of being overwhelmed or threatened by a growing black population. But eventually the argument for diffusion became a rationale for perpetuating slavery on grounds that spreading out the slave population led to more humane treatment than would have been possible if they were confined to the original slave states. The belief that American slavery was justified as a system of paternalism thus originated as the dominant social ideology of the Deep South.

2.

Robert Carter III, the subject of an impressive new biography by Andrew Levy, was an authentically paternalistic master of the late eighteenth century who kept all his slaves in Virginia and eventually freed them instead of “diffusing” them to the West. Inheriting hundreds of slaves from forebears who were among the greatest planters of Virginia, Carter refused to sell any of them; he gave them considerable independence of action on
the many plantations that he owned and avoided the harsh physical punishments that were routinely imposed by other masters. In 1791, he made the extraordinary decision to free all 452 of his slaves while he was still alive.

Through a complicated “Deed of Gift” he began the process by freeing fifteen a year. A Virginia law of 1784 authorizing such private and voluntary manumissions provided an opportunity (which would be foreclosed early in the next century) for Carter and other would-be emancipators of their own slaves. But Carter was unique in the number that he freed and in the fact that he was the only one of Virginia’s large slaveholding planters who divested himself completely of human property while he was still alive. (George Mason provided for the manumission of his slaves after his death, and George Washington did so after his wife’s death; Thomas Jefferson, notoriously, freed only his slave mistress Sally Hemmings and their children.)

Carter’s inspiration for his action was primarily religious. He was not a particularly well-educated man for a member of his class; as a child he had been allowed to run free and read whatever he wanted without the supervision and intellectual discipline that a tutor would normally have provided. The Enlightenment thought that influenced Jefferson and Madison had relatively little effect on him, although at times he considered himself a deist. His religious peregrinations began in 1777 when he contracted smallpox and had a high fever that lasted several days. In the midst of it, Levy tells us, he had a vision, or what he later described as a “most gracious Illumination.” The details of what he saw and felt remain sketchy, but they left him with the impression that he had experienced God directly and had been called to His service. Soon he left the Anglican Church and did the unthinkable for a member of the Virginia planter elite: he became a Baptist, thus joining a church of the plain folk and increasingly of the slaves.

For a time Carter became the major patron of the Baptists in Virginia; in addition to providing financial support for its congregations he traveled about attending as many Baptist meetings as he could. But when the Baptists sought respectability by toning down and eventually repudiating the opposition to slavery that they had announced in 1777, Carter drifted away from them and became an independent religious “seeker.” The closest he came to a new religious allegiance was when he fell under the spell of the Swedish mystic and vision-ary Emanuel Swedenborg, who envisioned a “New Jerusalem” free of slavery and other human iniquities. While he came under Swedenborgian influence, Carter made a Deed of Gift offering eventual freedom to all his slaves.

Levy has done exhaustive research but we find in his book no full explanation in Carter’s own words of what he thought he was doing. He did not write books or tracts or give sermons setting out his religious views and their implications for the slavery question. In fact he was remarkably inarticulate for a man who had such strong opinions and took such dramatic actions. For the most part Levy has to imagine his spiritual life from the evidence of his behavior and a few brief references in his correspondence, which seems to have been mostly concerned with matters of business. I failed to find a single eloquent or even quotable statement of Carter’s fundamental beliefs. Precisely why he became “the first emancipator” remains mysterious and ambiguous.
Carter was an idiosyncratic Virginia aristocrat, whose behavior was most unusual. I have to question Levy’s view that he was a Founding Father whose emancipatory act can be taken as judgment on the other Founders and whose behavior suggests what they could and should have done to rid the country of slavery. Carter had a very marginal part in the American Revolution. He was generally lukewarm about the Patriot cause and remained on the sidelines. Never elected to a major public office, he did nothing in particular to help establish the government that came into existence in 1789. The failure of the great Virginia Founding Fathers, Jefferson, Washington, Madison, and Mason, to prevent the rise of a proslavery South is difficult to attribute to any quality that Carter had that they lacked. They might have done better, but if we acknowledge the political, economic, and ideological obstacles to abolition that Rothman shows were developing, we see that they could also have done worse. At least they provided some ideas that, if consistently acted upon, could inspire later opponents of slavery.

Nevertheless, Levy helps us to understand why the revival of antislavery sentiment in the nineteenth century was based less on the secular egalitarianism of Jefferson than on something like the religious perfectionism of Robert Carter. The centrality of faith and piety to the nineteenth-century abolitionist movement is made clear in Fergus Bordewich’s absorbing history of the Underground Railroad, a difficult story to tell because the Railroad was never a centrally organized or well-coordinated undertaking. How it related to the larger abolitionist movement has never been made entirely clear. But beginning in around 1800 and extending up to the time of the Civil War, a variety of groups and individuals helped fugitives to escape from the South to Canada or protective enclaves in the upper North. That they made up a movement that could be likened (somewhat misleadingly) to a railroad system was an idea that did not develop until the 1840s, when the railroad itself became a prominent part of the American scene. But Bordewich has made a valiant and generally successful effort to piece together the scattered evidence into a coherent story.

Once again the pioneers were Quakers. Although strictly nonviolent, Quaker activists were willing to disobey unjust laws, such as the Fugitive Slave Acts passed by the United States Congress. Because of the Quaker presence and its proximity to slaveholding Maryland, Pennsylvania became a principal way station on the path to Canada. But Quaker communities in Ohio and Indiana were also havens for slaves making their way to Canada via the Great Lakes. Other evangelical Protestants, such as Methodists, Presbyterians, and Congregationalists, became increasingly involved with Railroad activities in response to the development of a more radical and activist antislavery movement in the North in the 1830s. As Bordewich makes clear, their primary motivation was almost always religious. Although many white abolitionists had doubts about the full equality of blacks, they “were exhilarated by the conviction that they were doing what faith demanded of them. They were, after all, assuring their own salvation in a deeply pious era when Judgment Day was as real as the annual spring planting and autumn harvest.”

In its earliest years, between 1800 and the 1840s, the Underground Railroad was primarily conducted by humanitarian whites who provided temporary havens for black fugitives and then guided them to the next station on the line to Canada and freedom. For a long time, historians interpreted the entire history of the Underground Railroad as a
story of benevolent whites helping essentially passive blacks. Beginning in the 1960s and 1970s revisionist historians who stressed the initiatives of African-Americans themselves described the Railroad as if it were almost exclusively a black endeavor. Bordewich strikes a good balance between the earlier overemphasis on white benevolence and the more recent tendency to ignore it almost completely. White initiative was crucial in the early stages, but as a militant black antislavery movement developed in the North, partly because of agitation by former fugitives such as Frederick Douglass, African-Americans increasingly became leaders of the movement. Particularly impressive were the blacks who worked as conductors on the Railroad, such as the legendary Harriet Tubman, whose forays into the South to recruit fugitives and guide them to freedom were only possible because she could pass as a slave herself in order to get close to her potential passengers. But whites remained seriously involved in a genuinely interracial movement, which in some ways anticipated the civil rights movement of the late 1950s and early 1960s.

The movement remained nonviolent until the 1850s. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 was the crucial factor leading to an acceptance of violent action to capture those who had escaped from slavery. The new law gave the federal government much greater enforcement powers and threatened the freedom of fugitives who had thought they were safe in northern antislavery enclaves. It also increased the chances that blacks who had been born free or legally emancipated would be kidnapped, fraudulently enslaved, and sent south. As federal marshals sought fugitives in black communities, they were sometimes met with lethal resistance. A number of rescues or attempted rescues took place in the early 1850s, some resulting in loss of life on both sides.

Bordewich describes some of these incidents, but it is odd that he does not mention the efforts to rescue Anthony Burns in Boston in 1854, an extremely dramatic and violent affair in which a white abolitionist killed a guard. A large number of federal troops were dispatched to capture Burns; they marched him to a boat in Boston Harbor through an enormous, jeering crowd. No further attempts were made to arrest fugitives in Boston.

Bordewich’s omission of the Burns affair is symptomatic of a general problem of the book—its relative neglect of New England as a source of antislavery thought and action. He may be overcorrecting a previous tendency in antislavery historiography to overemphasize New England’s contribution to the movement. The actual traffic on the Underground Railroad may have been somewhat lighter than in upstate New York or northern Ohio, but it was substantial. As Bordewich acknowledges at one point, Vermont was a prime haven for fugitives. It may have been the safest state of residence for a fugitive who did not wish to go to Canada.

The turn to violent action against slavery culminated in the actions of John Brown. Since Brown was active in the Underground Railroad for several years and to some extent conceived his raid on Harper’s Ferry in 1859 as a large-scale effort to inspire mass desertions from southern plantations, his exploits are a legitimate part of the story Bordewich tells. In December 1858 and January 1859, as a kind of dress rehearsal for Harper’s Ferry, Brown forcibly liberated eleven slaves from Missouri plantations, killing one owner before leading them on a long trek to freedom in Canada. Brown has recently become an object of great historical interest.
There has long been controversy over whether or not he was excessively committed to violence. In Kansas in 1856 he presided over the murder of five proslavery settlers who neither owned slaves themselves nor were guilty of any known acts of violence against the antislavery settlers with whom they were competing for control of the territory. Recent discussions of Brown have raised the question whether he was a prototype of the modern “terrorist” driven to extreme actions by religious zealotry and by a belief that there was direct divine sanction for his deeds. In his recent biography of Brown, David S. Reynolds tries to distinguish Brown’s kind of terrorism from that of modern suicide bombers and plane hijackers. Reynolds argues that Brown’s methods can be justified by the need to challenge the enormous and exceptional evil of slavery, by the lack of other means of dealing with it, and by the better society that was envisioned as a result of taking violent action against it.²

In his more general discussion, Bordewich compares the religiously inspired abolitionists involved in the more militant actions of the Underground Railroad with contemporary anti-abortion activists, who attack clinics and commit other illegal acts in response to a “higher law.” He concedes that “uneasy questions” remain “about what happens when revealed religion collides with a secular society that shares neither its politics nor its reading of the Scriptures.” But he concludes that the faith of the “deeply pious activists of the underground … was also balanced by a generous idealism, and by an uncompromising devotion to the rights of others” that he suggests would be difficult to find among the more militant members of the contemporary anti-abortion movement. The implied argument here is that slavery was an obvious and flagrant denial of personal liberty, while the woman’s “right to choose” might be considered an assertion of that liberty. Bordewich does not resolve the question of the legitimacy of violence and civil disobedience but by raising it he brings to his account the moral seriousness it deserves.

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3. For a full account of this campaign see Adam Hochschild's recent narrative history, *Bury the Chains: Prophets and Rebels in the Fight to Free an Empire's Slaves* (Houghton Mifflin, 2005).
