Sweet Taste of Liberty: A True Story of Slavery and Restitution in America

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Author: W. Caleb McDaniel
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Scholarly historians as a group are often criticized for writing books that speak only to other academics and that are not accessible to a general audience. This criticism is unfair, as many professional historians who have made significant interventions in our understanding of history have also written books that bring history alive for the average reader. W. Caleb McDaniel and his recently published *Sweet Taste of Liberty: A True Story of Slavery and Restitution in America* are cases in point. McDaniel is a prize-winning historian whose previous work has placed the reform efforts of Garrisonian abolitionists within the context of transatlantic intellectual conversations about the nature of democracy. His first book, *The Problem of Democracy in the Age of Slavery* (Louisiana State University Press, 2013), was aimed at a scholarly audience and won awards from the Organization of American Historians and the Society for Historians of the Early American Republic. In *Sweet Taste of Liberty*, which itself was a finalist for the distinguished Lincoln Prize given by the Gilder Lehrman Institute for American History, McDaniel employs his skill as a researcher and talent as a writer to illuminate for a general audience the world of Henrietta Wood, an enslaved woman who sought restitution from her former captor.

Although McDaniel’s new book revolves around Wood, it is not so much a biography as a microhistory that is concerned primarily with setting the context for Wood’s quest for restitution. Due to limitations of source material, Wood’s thoughts, feelings, and actions are frustratingly elusive throughout the account. McDaniel, however, overcomes the source problem by using, as a starting place, the content of two interviews that Wood gave about her experiences in slavery and her attempts to seek justice. Around the story revealed in these interviews, he weaves together descriptions of the spaces within which Wood lived and the people with whom she interacted, and he contextualizes it all with explanations of how her story fits into our larger understandings of slavery and its aftermath in the 19th century United States. The result is a masterful book that not only draws the reader into an interesting narrative but also educates its audience about the world in which that narrative takes place.

Throughout the book, we journey with Wood to various locations across the border between slavery and freedom, each furnishing different experiences related to her status and the nature of slavery in the region. The reader learns about her kidnapping from Cincinnati where, after a lifetime of slavery, Wood had
received her freedom papers, only to be re-enslaved illegally. She is taken from Cincinnati into the slave state of Kentucky when members of the family to which she had been enslaved sell the rights to her as property in order to pay off debts. Zebulon Ward, a shady figure who is always out for a quick profit, bought those rights and arranged for Wood’s kidnapping. Upon her arrival in Kentucky in 1853, Wood gives her first interview about her plight and, with the help of an antislavery lawyer, she sues Ward, alleging that he had her illegally kidnapped. Sadly, she is unsuccessful in her freedom suit.

Ward eventually sells Wood ‘down the river’ to Mississippi, where she is absorbed into the brutal cotton economy. As the Civil War approaches, McDaniel gives us snapshots of Wood’s situation in Mississippi and then tracks her movement from the Natchez plantation on which she was enslaved to Texas, where her brutal enslaver Gerard Brandon removes himself and a large portion of his household to escape the threats brought by the Union Army in Mississippi. Following the war, they all return to Natchez, where Wood works under a restrictive labour contract for Brandon, doing work for which she was never paid. Eventually, she and her son Arthur leave Mississippi, and Wood returns to Cincinnati. It is there that she, with the aid of a sympathetic employer in the legal profession, initiates a second lawsuit against Zebulon Ward, seeking restitution for her kidnapping and years of illegal enslavement. Thus began a long, drawn-out process with many bumps along the way. In 1876, in the midst of this legal wrangling, Wood gave her second revealing interview about her life to a journalist; an interview that helps to guide the story McDaniel tells.

Wood’s journey, pieced together from her 1853 and 1876 interviews, both produced in the shadow of her two lawsuits against Ward, provides the structure of the book; but the reader also learns much from McDaniel’s narrative about the experiences of those with whom she interacted. Each of her enslavers are sketched out in detail. Sadly, these figures often seem more fully drawn than Wood. Because there is a richer set of source material—including letters, diaries, and business papers—from which to reconstruct their stories, the details of the lives of these powerful, literate men are easier for McDaniel to exhume and relate. Their perspectives and actions are instructive, however, as they reveal much about Wood’s situation. Her status as chattel in the eyes of her enslavers, as well as the utter indifference they held towards her basic welfare, comes through loud and clear in McDaniel’s account.

Especially present throughout the book is Zebulon Ward, the object of both of Wood’s lawsuits and the reason for her prolonged period of enslavement. Peppered throughout the account of Wood’s experiences, McDaniel gives us chapters on Ward and his activities throughout the Civil War Era. In those chapters we learn how he amassed great wealth as a penitentiary keeper in Kentucky and then as a lessee of penitentiaries in Tennessee and, later, Arkansas. These positions allowed Ward to make a fortune built on the exploitation of convict laborers who worked under brutal conditions. He died in 1894, leaving an estate worth around $600,000.

The attention McDaniel gives to Ward highlights the injustice of the result of Wood’s second lawsuit. Although she won a settlement in the end, which was a sort of victory in that it was acknowledged that Ward had kidnapped a free woman, Ward was ordered to pay only $2,000 in restitution to Wood—far less than the $20,000 that she sought for her years of suffering and deprived wages. Despite the acknowledgement of wrong-doing, Ward was never stripped of the great wealth that he was able to grow on the backs of oppressed labourers, and most of those he exploited were never compensated for the economic well-being and quality of life that they had been denied. Henrietta Wood was an exception, in that she received any recompense at all, but even that compensation was woefully inadequate.

In his introduction and epilogue, McDaniel connects Wood’s story to current discussions about reparations for slavery. He stumbled upon Wood’s story in the midst of contemporary debates on this issue, and that is what drew him towards excavating the details of this remarkable woman’s life and her unrelenting effort to make Ward pay for the injustice brought down upon her. McDaniel does not belabour this connection in his narrative, leaving it for the most part to the reader to glean his or her own understanding of the lessons that we can learn from Henrietta Wood’s tale. He does, however, call attention to two important points. First, her story shows the inadequacy of lawsuits seeking restitution to rectify the past damages of slavery. Even as
Ward made his $2,000 payment to Wood, he never admitted any transgression against her, but instead joked that she was ‘the last negro to be paid for’ in the United States (p. 232). Without a full acknowledgement of the evils of slavery and the long-lasting inequalities it produced, awards from lawsuits mean little. Second, Wood’s story speaks to current arguments that the time for reparations has past—that such a policy would have been easier to execute in the wake of emancipation when it was clearer what individual damages were. Wood’s story, however, shows that there was nothing easy about her attempts to seek restitution and that there was little justice delivered in the ultimate result of her attempt.

McDaniel’s book, then, does not attempt to provide answers to the question of reparations, but his presentation of Wood’s story does add complexity to our understanding of the historical context of current debates on the topic. It also demonstrates that the history of this question goes back further than many realize. The reparations question is often viewed as a debate that arose in the 20th century, but Wood’s efforts show that the idea of restitution for slavery is not a wholly modern issue. McDaniel’s account of Wood also makes clear that even the small amount of restitution she received allowed Wood to invest in her and her son’s future when they settled in Chicago following the suit, giving her a tool for uplift that most freedpeople did not have. The reader can only imagine what a fairer settlement would have done for Wood or what a more widespread policy of reparations could have done in the United States in paving a way for a more equitable future for all Americans, had it been considered as an option following emancipation.

McDaniel’s story of Henrietta Wood is, thus, an important contribution to our understanding of reparations, but the value in McDaniel’s work extends beyond that question. His work presents not just Henrietta Wood’s story to the reader but also an understanding of her world. In this presentation a general audience can appreciate the trials and tribulations faced by American slaves and the inadequacies of the way the legacy of slavery has been addressed in the United States. And, although the work is aimed at a general audience, it has much value to scholars in the historical profession. Wood’s story is one that had not been integrated into the history books, and it is one of which historians should be aware.

One of the most unique aspects of the book’s significance, though, is the transparent way that McDaniel has presented his sources and his research process to the reader, and to the public at large. Throughout the narrative, McDaniel explicitly discusses the sources he uses, noting both their value and their inadequacies. An essay on sources that appears in the appendix of the book addresses some of the decisions he made about whether or not to use certain materials, and McDaniel’s conclusion conveys to the reader his own excitement at unveiling a key source at an archives, including him or her in that sense of discovery. Even more remarkable is McDaniel’s decision to make his research publicly available on the internet. Many social media users followed his research journey before the book was completed, as he tweeted out news of his archival findings, asked questions of others, and encouraged students and scholars to use the sources he provided for their own projects. McDaniel provides a link to those sources in the book.

The way in which McDaniel overtly presents his research process, both within the book itself and in the online materials, adds value in that it helps readers to understand the historian’s profession and how historians reconstruct stories and make decisions about source material. I believe it would be an especially valuable book to assign in the classroom, as it not only provides fodder for meaty discussions of the issues presented in the book but also would be educational to students who are conducting their own research projects. Caleb McDaniel’s account of ‘a black woman who survived enslavement twice—and then made a powerful white man pay’ is, thus, a powerful one that should have appeal not only to the general audience at which it is aimed but to professional historians, teachers, and their students (p. 7). McDaniel has done a service to these audiences, both in the act of bringing the story of Henrietta Wood to life, and in so clearly revealing the methodology he used to do so.

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