

Questioning Slavery

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Reviewer: David Richardson

James Walvin needs no introduction to students of slavery since, over the last thirty years, he has been one of the most prolific writers on the history of American slavery among the academic fraternity on both sides of the Atlantic. The great majority of Walvin's writings on slavery have focussed on the institutions and cultures of slave societies in English-speaking America. His latest book is no exception to this pattern. It is also fair to say that, since he co-authored with Michael Craton in the late 1960s a study of Jamaica's Worthy Park plantation, Walvin's writings have tended to take a more panoramic view as he has surveyed the growth and evolution of slave systems. Seeking to 'to pick a path through the scholarly thickets' (p.vii), his current book again tends to follow the more recent pattern of his writings. Walvin makes no pretense to quantitative skills. Indeed, at times, he is positively suspicious of quantification since he believes that in some cases debates over data can lead historian to become detached from the 'social realities' of the historical events or situations that they are seeking to analyse. Thus in one of his more openly critical passages in *Questioning Slavery*, he reflects on the way that historians have discussed the fertility rate of enslaved women and suggests that is so often historical debate has taken the form of a discussion about data, which is utterly remote from the women concerned' and then goes on to remind us that 'a new generation of (mainly) female historians' is now seeking 'to redirect our attention back to the slaves' (p.103). The lives of the slaves, especially their resilience in the face of a brutal institution, and the depths to which white owners and their overseers could on occasion sink in their treatment of them, have been and remain consistent themes in Walvin's work. As such, his writings on slavery offer an important counterweight to those, myself included, who have tended to invoke economic theory and to marshal large amounts of quantitative evidence in pursuing the study of the 'peculiar institution' and the traffic in Africans that sustained it.

As co-editor for over a decade of the journal *Slavery and Abolition*, Walvin has witnessed at close quarters much of the recent research on slavery in the Americas. One of his skills lies in revealing to a non-specialist audience the directions of current trends in research in the field of slavery. With the modern emphasis on detailed research monographs and articles in academic journals, works of synthesis have tended to enjoy a lower status within academia. They do, however, provide a very valuable service in introducing students, undergraduate or graduate, to what may be major areas of historical research. *Questioning Slavery* is intended primarily as an introductory text, offering its readers not a comprehensive history of slavery but a review of the directions in which slavery studies have been and are heading, and with the emphasis, in

characteristic Walvin fashion, on the human dimensions of the subject, especially the social costs of slavery and the slave traffic as well as the efforts of slaves to create their own identities. As Walvin admits, trying to make sense of 'a generation's scholarship' involves selectivity and 'a degree of artificial ordering' of materials (p.viii). His purpose is to confront some of the main questions or problems that have attracted the attention of scholars and to do so in a critical fashion. Seen in these terms, the book may be judged to be a qualified success.

Appropriately, Walvin begins *Questioning Slavery* by charting the expansion of slave-based plantation production from the Mediterranean and Atlantic islands to, successively, Brazil, the West Indies and mainland North America and by asking the basic question why slavery became so widespread in the Americas and so fundamental to the development of the Atlantic world between 1500 and 1850. He then goes on briefly to explore the expansion of the transatlantic slave trade and its impact on Africa before turning at greater length to those aspects of slave societies in the Americas with which his own work has become most closely identified, namely, the structure and operation of plantation regimes, the public and private lives of the slaves, and the rise of abolitionist movements in Europe in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Although he looks briefly at slavery in Brazil, which had the longest exposure to imports of enslaved labour from Africa and has been the subject of some recent outstanding studies, Walvin keeps his focus firmly directed to the English-speaking islands and mainland North America. In this respect, his book stands in contrast to some other, much longer, recent syntheses of the literature on transatlantic slavery, notably that of Robin Blackburn (*The Making of New World Slavery: From the Baroque to the Modern 1492-1800*, Verso, 1997) which places slavery in English-speaking America in the context of the slave systems of other European colonial powers.

Walvin's answer to the basic question of why slavery migrated from the Mediterranean and the Atlantic islands to the Americas leans heavily on economic forces. In particular, he emphasises high land to labour ratios in the colonies conquered by the European powers and the relative costs of coerced and free labour. These are not new arguments, but it is useful to non-specialists have them presented in such an accessible way as Walvin does. It is important to note, however, that, while patterns of resource endowments and labour supplies may help to explain the rise of American slavery, they do not explain why those enslaved came overwhelmingly from Africa. Walvin insists that the resort to 'servile African labour' largely reflected the 'changing costs and availability of black and white labour' (p.16) and he goes on to underline the point by claiming that 'economic convenience, not cultural (still less racial) bias edged the English (and other Europeans) into using Africans as slaves' (p.24). This argument sits uncomfortably, however, with some other recent studies, where it is claimed that the origins of the transatlantic trade in enslaved Africans may have had as much to do with ideological resistance to enslaving whites among European- and American-based slave traffickers as with the relative costs of supplying African and other labour to the Americas (David Eltis, 'Europeans and the Rise and Fall of African Slavery in the Americas: an Interpretation', *American Historical Review*, 98 (1993), pp.1299-1323). If this last argument is correct, it suggests that European racial attitudes to labour helped to shape the patterns of transatlantic slavery rather than, as Walvin and others before him have tended to argue, that slavery gave rise to racism, notably during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when planters in the Americas and their allies in Europe sought to legitimise continuing enslavement of Africans in the face of growing external pressure to end the institution. The relationship between slavery and racism is likely to remain a controversial issue.

In discussing the conditions experienced by Africans under slavery, Walvin is at pains to emphasise the diversity of plantation regimes in British America and the variations in demographic outcomes for slaves of life in the Americas. In particular, he draws out the contrasts between island and mainland fertility rates of slaves and highlights the importance of crop types and associated labour patterns in determining the reproductive capacity of female slaves. He is also anxious to stress that, while they were subject to the arbitrary rule and violence of their owners, slaves were, nevertheless, able to influence some aspects of their lives, notably in their domestic quarters and through the cultivation of their garden plots and resistance to loss of customary free time. How slaves rebuilt their lives and reconstituted their identities after the trauma of enslavement in Africa and forced passage to the Americas forms a central part of Walvin's story, and

offers his readers perhaps some of the most revealing insights into trends in recent research on slavery. The precise question or problem that Walvin attempts to address in each of the six chapters that he devotes to slave life on the plantations is not always fully articulated. But it is clear from his discussion that enslaved Africans themselves used every available opportunity to re-negotiate their conditions of work and to question, usually quietly and stealthily but sometimes violently, the authority of their owners. In this respect, we are reminded that, despite obvious contrasts, there were parallels between employer-employee relations under forced and free labour regimes.

African resistance to enslavement, notably in the form of rebellions, has regularly been included among the catalogue of factors that historians cite to explain the ending of slavery in the nineteenth century. British efforts to abolish the Atlantic slave trade and slavery after 1807 have, of course, been extensively discussed by historians, but why the leading and most successful slave-trading nation in 1807 became 'the world's pre-eminent abolitionist force' during the nineteenth century remains, in Walvin's words, one of the 'more perplexing questions in the history of slavery' (p.158). Walvin is rightly cautious in approaching this issue, but his interpretation of shifts in British attitudes towards the slave trade and slavery seems to owe little, if anything, to economic factors. Britain's abolition of its trade in slaves in 1807 was not, he argues, 'simply a question, as many have claimed, of declining slave-based fortunes ... for it is abundantly clear that the slave system continued, throughout the last years of the eighteenth century, to bring profit and material well-being to most of those actively involved' (p.162). Nor, he goes on to argue, was it evident that slavery would 'die a natural death' (p.164) in the British Caribbean, even after the abolition of the British slave trade in 1807 and the growth of rebelliousness among the slave populations in the British islands in 1816-31. For Walvin, the key to the rise of British abolitionism lay not in the economics of slavery but in social change within Britain itself, notably rising demands for reform in general and a growing appreciation of the brutality of a system that incorporated increasing numbers of Christian slaves. Knowledge of the violence with which slave rebellions in Barbados in 1816, Demerara in 1823, and Jamaica in 1831 were suppressed was, in Walvin's words, 'grist to the abolitionist mill' (p.165), but it was the reform of Parliament in 1832 that was, he suggests, the decisive event in ending slavery in the British West Indies after 1833.

Walvin's interpretation to British abolitionism may be the area of *Questioning Slavery* that evokes the most heated reaction. It will certainly be questioned by those who, like the late Eric Williams, tend to emphasise shifts in the fortunes of slave-based West Indian economies after the American Revolution in seeking to explain British moves against the slave trade and slavery. As with other issues relating to transatlantic slavery after 1500, debate over the relative importance of economic and non-economic factors in ending slavery in British America will continue. But for all students of slavery, the strength of Walvin's approach to abolitionism lies in the fact that it places the issue of the enslavement of Africans at the heart of ideological debates over property rights, labour, and political representation in Britain during the initial stages of industrialisation. Slavery was not only central to the development of Britain's first colonial empire, therefore, but concern about enslaved Africans also helped to shape the direction of political and social change in Britain after 1783. In this respect, Walvin's claim that slavery has moved from 'the margins of scholarly interest' to the centre of 'modern historical scholarship' (p.vii) is well merited and should offer some satisfaction to those who might wish to emphasise more than Walvin does the closeness of ties between the economics of slavery, abolition, and social change in Britain during the early stages of industrialisation.

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