

Introduction

FOR THE BEST part of four centuries, enslaved Africans were an inescapable and ubiquitous presence in the Atlantic world. The millions of Africans, loaded onto the Atlantic slave ships (and the legions who did not even survive to reach Africa's Atlantic coast) were the human cogs in a vast machine which transformed the face of the Americas, enhanced the well-being of the Western world, and created cultural habits we are familiar with today. This colossal enforced movement of humanity had consequences which reverberate down to the present day. For decades, scholars have argued about slavery and today there is a widespread acceptance that, from the late seventeenth century onwards, slavery was fundamental to the way the West emerged. Less well-known, however, is the fact that slavery exerted an influence far beyond the Western world. In its mature, complex forms (which varied greatly across the Americas) enslaved African labour created tentacles of economic activity which crept into distant corners of the world not normally associated with slavery. The networks spawned by slavery stretched from the edges of European entanglement with the native peoples of the Americas, to remote islands in the Indian Ocean, and

onwards even to the economies of China and Japan. The slave economies came to exercise a powerful, at times irresistible, gravitational pull which drew to itself the products and markets of widely scattered societies. We can catch a sense of this by simply looking at the varied items carried as cargoes of outbound ships from Europe and the Americas heading to Africa. It is obvious too in the details kept in ledgers of American plantations, not to mention the vast quantities of slave-grown commodities – from tobacco to sugar – consumed by people in all corners of the world. By the time slavery was finally outlawed in Brazil in 1888, the world had become addicted to commodities which owed their origins to enslaved Africans.

For centuries, slavery in the Americas depended on the Atlantic slave ships for a continuing supply of enslaved labour. As the Atlantic trade grew in volume and importance, it became increasingly complex. Yet it was, from start to finish, a trading system that was brutal in the extreme. Though it delivered more than eleven million Africans to the Americas, it also killed huge numbers, damaged many more, and left all its survivors with traumatic memories of the oceanic crossing. It remains one of the strange contradictions of slavery that a system which involved violation and oppression on an extraordinary scale, was an essential aspect of a highly complex and sophisticated form of global trade, finance and record-keeping. As Atlantic slavery evolved, it generated a stunning volume of paperwork – and that paperwork enables us to reconstruct histories of slavery. Here lies one of the many great ironies of slavery: the very system which silenced the voices of the enslaved, which treated them as mere items of trade, also described and documented each and every aspect of their lives, their sufferings and their dying. The end result is that we know more about the

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enslaved than we do about almost any of their free labouring contemporaries, for the simple reason that an enslaved person was treated, from start to finish, as a thing: an object, a chattel. And as an object he or she entered the commercial documentation. The enslaved were registered, described and accounted for, from their first encounter with Atlantic slave traders, to the moment they died – at sea or on land. We know about their physical conditions, appearances, ailments, peculiarities, their abilities and personal characteristics, we know about their relationships and their children, their working lives and their dying days. All this is recorded in ways rarely documented for free labouring people of the same eras.

I began my own investigation into slavery in 1967, poring over the lives of an enslaved group of sugar workers in Jamaica. Their lives were entered in huge plantation ledgers, kept at the time on the estate itself. The first, most obvious and revealing fact – which leapt off the crumbling pages – was that the enslaved were listed and tallied just as the beasts of the field and were listed on opposite pages in the ledgers. They were mere items to be recorded alongside other possessions of the plantation owners (who by then were living in England). Many of those slaves had been born in Jamaica, but most were African, acquired by barter and trade, thousands of miles away, and all had been shipped to Jamaica on a slave ship.* The Africans living on Worthy Park in the 1780s were but one small sample

* The terminology used for writing about slavery has changed quite rapidly in recent years. The word 'slave' suggests that the status of the enslaved is defined solely by their enslavement. I have tried to use the word sparingly and opt for alternative words. There are places, however, where the alternatives create literary clumsiness and I use the word for clarity and when it seems more useful.

of millions of others cast ashore in the Americas by an international fleet of slave ships. Today, the slave ship is a familiar image, used time and again to represent slavery itself. Those ships, counted in their many thousands, did more than transport Africans. They also carried huge cargoes of manufactured goods (from Europe, Asia and the Americas) to Africa, and returned to their home ports from the Americas freighted with slave-grown produce. Slave ships were supported by an armada of other merchant ships ferrying goods around the Atlantic's shipping lanes. But the slave ship was the prime engine of the entire system.

Here was a massive commerce in humanity and goods with ramifications in all corners of the globe. It was a business which attracted all of Europe's major maritime nations, and eventually, merchants and investors from Brazil and North America. It scattered Africans and their offspring to all corners of the world and, by the late eighteenth century, they could be found on the precarious frontiers of the Americas to the early settlements of Australia. They had, against their wishes, become global citizens.

On 5 July 1803, Captain Meriwether Lewis set off alone on what was to become an epic overland journey from Washington D.C. to the Pacific coast. Instructed by President Jefferson to form an expedition, Lewis gathered men and equipment as he moved westward. At Louisville he was joined by an old friend and military comrade, William Clark, who brought along a gang of seven men to accompany them, collecting more military and civilian personnel as they travelled on. By the time they set off along the Missouri River in May 1804, the

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expedition had grown to more than forty men, nosing into unfamiliar Indian territory, negotiating with native people who had little or no experience of outsiders. One man in particular attracted great curiosity among the Indians. Clark's personal servant – York – was a giant of a man. He was also a black slave. As the expedition progressed, they encountered Indians who had never before seen a black human being, and York become an object of bemused wonder. The Indians marvelled at the white man's weaponry, compass, magnets and quadrant – but they were astonished by York. In the words of a French trader who was dealing with the Arikara Indians on the Missouri River, the Indians were stunned by the sight of 'a large, fine man, black as a bear, who spoke and acted as one.'*

York proved much more than a curiosity as the expedition's hazardous journey progressed: he became indispensable. Possessed of great physical strength and endurance, York was to be even more important as an arbiter and mediator between the expedition and some of the native peoples they encountered. There were moments when the expedition faced annihilation by suspicious Indians but they were saved by the Indians' fear of York's imaginary magical powers: he was quite unlike any other person they knew.

For all that, York was a slave, just one among a vast army of enslaved people scattered across the Americas. At the time the Arikara Indians first looked in amazement at York there were almost 900,000 living in the young American Republic, the great majority located in the region between Delaware and Georgia (the impact of cotton was soon to change that by

* Robert B. Betts, *In Search of York: The slave who went to the Pacific with Lewis and Clark*, Boulder, Colorado, 1985, pp.57–58.