

# "GOODBY TO SAMBO"

## THE CONTRIBUTION OF BLACK SLAVE

### NARRATIVES TO THE ABOLITION MOVEMENT

#### I.

In 1962 Kenneth Lynn wrote in the introduction to the Harvard edition of Uncle Tom's Cabin:

The shame of American literature is the degree to which our authors of the 1830's and 1840's kept silent during the rising storm of debate on the slavery issue.<sup>1</sup>

We need not feel quite so ashamed if we stretch our notion of "American literature" and "our authors" beyond Cooper and Poe, Hawthorne and Melville, to include a large group of black writers which made a significant contribution to the anti-slavery debate during the very years which Kenneth Lynn finds so barren.

I want to focus attention on black contributions to the abolitionist cause and specifically on the fugitive slave narratives which appeared in large numbers on Northern book markets during the 1830's and 1840's.<sup>2</sup> First, abolition societies sponsored them--sometimes even directed, produced and ghost-wrote them; secondly, they added the literary form of the autobiography and adventure story to the largely prosy production of sermons, tracts, speeches, and essays which we tend to think of as making up the bulk of abolitionist writings; and, most important of all, they provided new images of the Negro and the Southern plantation system which challenged the current stereotypes and gave to Mrs. Harriet Beecher Stowe the needed models and materials to transform into the most effective popular indictment of American slavery in the nineteenth century.

#### II.

The period between 1831 and 1851, between the appearance of William Lloyd Garrison's Liberator and Uncle Tom's Cabin, saw both a growing public interest in the slavery question and an ever-increasing flow North of fugitive slaves. Looking for temporary relief or for aid in locating housing and work, fugitives often visited the offices of anti-slavery societies for help. Many of them were

invited to give a personal testimony to the society's membership or the public, and the more articulate were frequently hired to ride the abolitionist circuit, raising funds and propagandizing for the abolition of slavery. Armed with the recommendations from presidents of local societies many former slaves, such as Lewis and Milton Clarke, James W. C. Pennington, and Frederick Douglass, made a career out of lecturing about their personal experiences and exposing the institution of slavery. Their narratives were simply outgrowths of their public accounts. James W. C. Pennington's preface to his account is typical:

The brief narrative I here introduce to the public, consists of outline notes originally thrown together to guide my memory when lecturing on this part of the subject of slavery.<sup>3</sup>

The slave narratives had two main purposes. One was to expose the workings of slavery by cataloging the hardships, sufferings, and cruelties which the institution caused. The other was to build a sympathetic picture of the narrator. Some played up one side. "This little book is a voice from the prison-house, unfolding the deeds of darkness which are there perpetrated," read the preface to the Narrative of William Wells Brown.<sup>4</sup> They also played up the sentimental or the sensational. Who would have paid attention to the pious preface of Henry Box Brown's narrative, which stated that the book had not been introduced to the public "for the purpose of administering to a prurient desire 'to hear and see some new thing,'" when the title read: Narrative of Henry Box Brown, who escaped from slavery enclosed in a box three feet long, two wide, and two and a half high!" But, sensational or serious, the "prison-house view" helped to wipe away from Northern eyes the mists of sentiment through which they, with the aid of saccharine plantation roman-

cers like Caroline Howard Gilman, were only too apt to view the workings of the "patriarchal" institution.

For readers who felt that slavery was basically a sound institution whose abuses were open to reform without emancipating the Negro, the portrait of the sympathetic black narrator was probably more persuasive. Negro narrators were anxious to show that their own aspirations matched those of their white contemporaries. They described their yearnings for freedom, their attempts while in slavery to get independent work, to get an education, to join a church, to insure family stability and, once in the North, to take part in a freer society on its own terms. The successful Negro freeman had many faces and occupations. Whether he was a farmer, like Charles Ball; a minister, like Pennington; an abolitionist, like Douglass; a businessman, like Paul Cuffe; or a laborer and small tradesman, like William Grimes, the successful black freeman was the most effective indictment against the Negro as slave.

### III.

The narratives of Henry Bibb, William Wells Brown, Solomon Northup, Frederick Douglass, and Josiah Henson were popular then and are still quite readable today.<sup>6</sup> The last two, the Narrative of Frederick Douglass (1845) and the Life of Josiah Henson (1849), contributed the models for Uncle Tom and for George Harris in Uncle Tom's Cabin<sup>7</sup>--characters which significantly altered the American public's image of the Negro before the Civil War. William Grimes, a less respectable fugitive than Henson or Douglass, accomplished nothing as remarkable as they, but the sale of his more average account at least helped keep his head above water and showed something of the fate of the fugitive in the inhospitable Northern city.

Frederick Douglass' narrative was the most popular slave account which appeared before the Civil War. It appeared in 1845 and a first edition was sold out in four months. Within the year, four more printings supplied the popular demand, and it was re-issued in 1848 and 1849. By 1850, 30,000 copies had been sold in the United States and the British Isles. By the turn of the cen-

tury, Douglass had published three separate autobiographies. At least one version was available in England, France, Germany, and Sweden.

The dominant image that emerges of Frederick Douglass in his 1845 narrative is that of the intelligent and militant black reformer whose method of handling ambiguous and threatening situations in life is confrontation.

Born of a slave mother whom Douglass saw only twice in his life and of a white father whom he never saw, he was sent when quite young to the city of Baltimore to be trained for the reputedly easy task of the house-servant. His master and mistress, a Mr. and Mrs. Hugh Auld, are to begin with quite friendly to the young boy. But this kindness does not last for long. Mr. Auld catches his wife trying to teach young Frederick how to read and lectures her that teaching him is "unlawful, as well as unsafe," and that learning spoils "the best nigger in the world" by making him "unmanageable," "discontented," and "unhappy."<sup>8</sup> But the young boy has been listening at the door and these are the thoughts he takes away with him:

It was a new and special revelation, explaining dark and mysterious things, with which my youthful understanding had struggled, but struggled in vain. I now understood what had been to me a most perplexing difficulty--to wit, the white man's power to enslave the black man. It was a grand achievement, and I prized it highly. From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom.<sup>9</sup>

Frederick Douglass now takes to the streets to continue what Mrs. Auld began. By bribing little white street urchins with bread, Frederick Douglass manages to trick them into repeating to him their lessons in school.

From the Aulds, he is sent to another Baltimore relation to work on a plantation. Here he proves so troublesome that he is sent away to be tamed by Edward Covey, a "slave-breaker" in the neighborhood. Fed a steady diet of whipping and work, Frederick Douglass admits that Covey succeeded in breaking him:

I was somewhat unmanageable when I first went there, but a few months

of this discipline tamed me. Mr. Covey succeeded in breaking me. I was broken in body, soul, and spirit. My natural elasticity was crushed, my intellect languished, the disposition to read departed . . . and behold a man transformed into a brute!<sup>10</sup> The burden of Douglass' social criticism is given in the last seven words: "behold a man transformed into a brute!" His early separation from parents "to hinder the child's affection towards its mother";<sup>11</sup> the joint efforts of Mr. and Mrs. Auld to keep him from learning to read and write; the humiliation of being ranked with pigs, cows, and horses on the plantation; and the efforts of Mr. Covey to break him all point to the same conclusion: that slavery far from being the vaunted school for civilizing Africans was instead a school for institutionalizing blacks to slavery.

Douglass' simple discovery explains the angry note in the narrative. For Douglass, the method of handling attempts to squeeze him into docility and obedience becomes confrontation. Following a beating by Covey, Douglass turns on him, grabs his throat, and fights with him for two hours. The result is that Covey doesn't dare lay a finger on the sixteen-year old Douglass for the rest of his stay. Douglass writes:

This battle with Mr. Covey was the turning-point in my career as a slave. It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood. It restored the departed self-confidence, and inspired me again with a determination to be free.<sup>12</sup>

Frederick Douglass finally escapes after all attempts at bettering himself in Baltimore fail. In New Bedford, he finds work and fellow blacks "who had not been seven years out of their chains" living better "than the average of slave-holders in Maryland."<sup>13</sup>

The Life of Josiah Henson, which appeared four years after Frederick Douglass' narrative, tells the story of a remarkable slave who was well-treated in his youth and was respected and admired as a preacher by blacks as well as whites. Eventually, he flees to Canada and establishes himself as a respected farmer and colonist.

Brought up in the family of kindly and jovial Dr. McP., Henson writes: "My master and fellow servants used to look upon me, and speak of me, as a wonderfully smart fellow, and prophesy the great things I should do when I became a man."<sup>14</sup> First he is made a driver and when he is able to turn in his overseer for cheating, his master gives him the job and he is able to turn out double crops with a cheerful labor force.

One day, he hears the preaching of an evangelist and becomes converted. This conversion he regards as the greatest change in his life:

. . . I date my conversion, and my awakening to a new life . . . from this day so memorable to me. I used every means of inquiry into religious matters; and so deep was my conviction of their superior importance to everything else, so clear my perception of my own faults, and so undoubting my observation of the darkness and sin that surrounded me, that I could not help talking much on these subjects with those about me, and it was not long before I began to pray with them, and exhort them, and to impart to the poor slaves those little glimmerings of light from another world, which had reached my own eye.<sup>15</sup>

Like Uncle Tom, who Harriet Beecher Stowe modeled after him, Josiah Henson takes care of both the plantation and his master. Like Uncle Tom, Josiah Henson has no reason to think highly of his master's moral character, "but it was my duty to be faithful to him in the position which he placed me,"<sup>16</sup> and he helps him home after drunken brawls, visits to taverns, gambling-houses, and cockfights. He even brings himself to forgive his master "the causeless blows and injuries he had inflicted upon me in childhood and youth."<sup>17</sup> So well has Josiah Henson learned to do his master's bidding that when the latter is bankrupted, Josiah Henson leads his fellow slaves through the free state of Ohio and delivers them back into slavery to his master's brother in Kentucky.

When an attempt to sell him fails, he flees to Canada before a second attempt materializes. Here, after a few years of working for others, he settles himself and his family on a plot of land and helps found a colony to enable other fugitive

slaves to learn what Josiah Henson feels are the essential values of the Yankee spirit: "energy, enterprize, and self-reliance."<sup>18</sup>

The 1825 Life of William Grimes does something else again. His is essentially a string of hard luck stories. He does not triumph over any obstacles; in fact he is lucky to emerge with his head above water. William Grimes does not control events as does Josiah Henson, nor does he confront them as does Frederick Douglass. Instead, he changes his behavior to suit the moment. His chief virtue is his adaptability. His deception of various Southern masters, his numerous small jobs in the North, his chameleon-like capacity for changing with his environment might have earned him the motto of a Simon Suggs: "It's good to be shifty in a new country!"

Like Dr. McP., Josiah Henson's first master, one Colonel Thornton lets him be keeper of the house-hold keys--to the jealousy of the other slaves. Later, he is sold to a relative living near Thornton. When a passing stranger asks him whether he wouldn't like to live with him in Savannah, William Grimes senses better things to come and takes him up on his offer. But when he finds out that his new master is Jewish, Grimes becomes so disgruntled that he tries to break his own leg to avoid traveling further. While the master succeeds in bringing Grimes to Savannah, his troubles do not end there.

Once in Savannah, Grimes goes on a hunger-strike. For several months, he refuses all food sent him by his master, though he keeps alive by smuggling food undetected from the kitchen. In desperation, his master sells him to a free black man whom Grimes has coached to buy him. Only a few days later, his former master is chagrined to see his former slave perched as a coachman on top of the carriage of a new master--an Oliver Sturges of Connecticut.

Successive episodes find him changing masters almost at whim. He works for a printer, a doctor, on a plantation; is sold to a navy agent; then works as a cook and a steward, then again, as a coachman. He does undeterminable work for a Mr. White and a Mr. Welman. By this time he has also met a witch, lived in two haunted houses, bitten off the nose of a fellow servant, beaten up a

driver, and spent two terms in jail. In jail he also finds the Lord:

About this time, I began to realize that I was a sinner, and that hell would be my portion if I should die in my present situation: and afterwards . . . I sought and obtained the hope of salvation. Blessed by God, I know the path to heaven. I have had sweet communion with the Lord; but alas! I have erred, and gone astray from holiness.<sup>19</sup>

Eventually he escapes from Savannah by ship. On Staten Island, he manages to avoid the health officials and arrives safely in New York. Here, one of the first persons he sees is his former master from Connecticut, Mr. Sturges!

From here on the narrative becomes confusing. Driven on from one location to the next out of fears, real or imagined, of seeing former masters, he tries on a series of jobs at different locations as barber, laborer, pimp, and grocer. Like Deacon in The Sound and the Fury, Grimes caters to Yalies by running a shop. But just as other shop keepers are going to run him out of town on a morals charge, a former master catches up with him and forces him to sell his house and property. The end of the book leaves him legally free but destitute. Yet his former exploits leave little doubt in the reader's mind that he will endure.

While William Grimes achieved nothing either remarkable or respectable, his narrative showed that a black man needn't have the leadership capacities of a Josiah Henson or the oratorical abilities of a Frederick Douglass to stay alive in the hostile environment of the Northern city. That the narrative, though, suggested a kind of failure to achieve a stable life was taken up later by pro-slavery writers who were to take such a character as William Grimes, make him a little happier in the South, a little less successful in the North, and have him return after failure to a life of limited but secure happiness back on the home plantation.

The images that emerge of Frederick Douglass, Josiah Henson and even William Grimes are miles apart from the Negro figures of popular imagination. They countered the tendency of the public

to see the Negro in the light which novelists of the day depicted him: the comic-erratic household servant Caesar of Cooper's The Spy; the senile-dependent bodyguard Yaap of his Littlepage Trilogy; the unsteady synthesis of civilization and barbarism of Scipio in Simms' Mellichampe; and the half-monkeys and children of Kennedy's Swallow Barn. For the abolition societies who sponsored and promoted newspapers, magazines, almanacs, tracts, and speeches, the slave narratives, whether oral or written, provided raw materials and models of black men and women which showed what the black man had suffered and what he could do when removed from slavery. These were the sources to which Harriet Beecher Stowe turned when she visited the so-called Anti-Slavery Rooms in Boston to bolster the book which was to become Uncle Tom's Cabin. Here she found Theodore Weld's Slavery as It Is, and the narratives of Josiah Henson, Lewis Clarke, and, probably, Frederick Douglass. From Josiah Henson and Frederick Douglass emerge Uncle Tom and George Harris.

#### IV.

The two main lines of action in Uncle Tom's Cabin lean heavily on the two most familiar lines of action found in the slave narratives: the journey through slavery followed by the escape North. The escape sequence was adventurous and later gave the narrator a chance to show what he could do once in the land of freedom. The other enabled the narrator to sketch a series of pictures of life on different plantations and to reveal the abuses found there.

The George Harris escape sequence gets fairly conventional treatment. Like Frederick Douglass, George Harris is simply a man whose intellectual abilities and moral qualities--and skin color--have placed him above his social rank. He chafes in bondage. To Eliza he justifies his escape North in the same angry tone as Frederick Douglass. Speaking of his master, George Harris asks:

... what right has he to me? I'm a man as much as he is. I'm a better man than he is. I know more about business than he does; I am a better manager than he is; I can read better than he can; I can write a better hand --and I've learned it all myself,

and no thanks to him--I've learned it in spite of him; and now what right has he to make a dray-horse of me? To take me from things I can do, and do better than he can, and put me to work that any horse can do?<sup>20</sup>

When George is pursued by slave-catchers, he chooses, like Douglass, the way of confrontation, and he shoots at Tom Loker. His destiny up North follows that of the self-made man. In Montreal he is employed as a mechanic during the daytime while he finishes up an education at night. An unexpected sum of money lets him study further in Paris and travel to Liberia as a sort of missionary of Anglo-Saxon progress.

Mrs. Stowe adapted Josiah Henson more imaginatively. From his Life she took the figure of the forgiving, totally trustworthy and earnestly religious black preacher and made his personal ethic--his practice of the simplest kind of Christian piety, familiar to every graduate of the nineteenth-century American Sunday school --cast dark shadows on the morality of his masters.

Can Uncle Tom's love redeem characters both black and white so that they, through love, will loosen the hard bonds of slavery? This question is posed to Senator Byrd, who abandons political expediency to help Eliza. It is posed in different ways to Mrs. Shelby, to Augustine St. Clare and the figures of Eva and Topsy; to Sambo and Quimbo; and most dramatically to Simon Legree. The entire Legree sequence is a long struggle between Uncle Tom and Simon Legree for the possession of each other's souls. Legree's God is Mammon and his gospel that of production. Uncle Tom dies because he refuses to join Legree's church,<sup>21</sup> because he refuses to reveal the whereabouts of Cassy and Emmy, and because he insists upon forgiving Legree.

Mrs. Stowe's biographers have found some of the origins for the emotional power behind Uncle Tom's Cabin in her troubled years in Cincinnati and her emotional break with some of the rigid remnants of Calvinistic theology. The latter explains some of the sympathy with which she treats evangelical piety in Uncle Tom. Whatever her unconscious struggles were, though, Charles Foster reminds us that they had to be worked

up in terms of images and imaginative patterns made available to the conscious mind. The role of the slave narratives, it seems to me, was exactly this: they made available to Mrs. Stowe and to the abolition movement at large new images and imaginative patterns of the Negro as an individual, of the society of which he was a part, and of his future.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Harriet Beecher Stowe, Uncle Tom's Cabin or, Life among the Lowly, edited by Kenneth S. Lynn (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1962), p. vii.

<sup>2</sup>About sixty separate accounts published before the Civil War are listed in Dwight L. Dumond's Bibliography of Anti-Slavery in America (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1961). Mr. Dumond's listing is not exhaustive.

<sup>3</sup>James W. C. Pennington, "The Fugitive Blacksmith or, Events in the History of James W. C. Pennington, Pastor of a Presbyterian Church, New York, formerly a Slave in the State of Maryland, United States," in Five Slave Narratives: A Compendium, Series of the American Negro, his History and Literature (New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1968), p. iv.

<sup>4</sup>William Wells Brown, "Narrative of William Wells Brown, a fugitive Slave,"

(Musgrave, continued from page 93)

<sup>4</sup>King, "A Royalist View of Colored Castes in the Venezuelan War of Independence," *ibid.*, p. 528. See also Richard Morse, "The Negro in Sao Paulo, Brazil," Journal of Negro History, XXXVIII (July 1953), 290-306; and Irene Diggs, "Color in Colonial Spanish America," *ibid.*, pp. 403-426.

in Five Slave Narratives: A Compendium, Series of the American Negro, his History and Literature (New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1968), p. vii. Pagination is separate for each narrative.

<sup>5</sup>Henry Box Brown, Narrative of Henry Box Brown, Who Escaped from Slavery, Enclosed in a Box three feet long, two wide, and two and a half high . . . With Remarks upon the Remedy for Slavery by Charles Stearns (Boston: Brown and Stearns, 1849), p. v.

<sup>6</sup>Gilbert Osofsky has edited three highly readable narratives in Puttin' on Ole Massa: The Slave Narratives of Henry Bibb, William Wells Brown, and Solomon Northup (New York, Evanston, London: Harper and Row Publishers, 1969).

<sup>7</sup>Harriet Beecher Stowe discusses her use of these narratives in her A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin and in her introduction to Uncle Tom's Cabin for the Riverside edition of her complete works, published in 1896, a few months before her death.

<sup>8</sup>Frederick Douglass, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself. Edited by Benjamin Quarles (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1967), p. 58.

<sup>9</sup>Douglass, pp. 58-59.

<sup>10</sup>Douglass, pp. 94-95.

<sup>11</sup>Douglass, p. 24.

<sup>12</sup>Douglass, pp. 104-105.

<sup>13</sup>Douglass, p. 150.

<sup>14</sup>Josiah Henson, The Life of Josiah Henson, formerly a Slave, now an Inhabitant of Canada, as Narrated by Himself (Boston: Arthur D. Phelps, 1849), p. 7.

<sup>15</sup>Henson, p. 13.

<sup>5</sup>William Rose, Heine: Two Studies of his Life and Feeling (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), p. 125.

<sup>6</sup>Prosper Mérimée, Oeuvres Complètes (Paris: Maurice Levaillant, 1933), X, 49.

<sup>7</sup>Mérimée's editor, or possibly Mérimée himself, thoughtfully included a diagram of how slaves were packed "spoon-fashion" into the hold of a typical slaver, so that every slave lay in his own and in others' bodily wastes.