

The face of slavery: them dark days



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Twentieth-century scholars of slavery have both slavery's effects on the slave mentality and the development of culture (or lack thereof) and the existence of paternalism among the slave-holding class. However, authors such as Ulrich Phillips, Kenneth Stampp, and Eugene Genovese all approach the subject on broad, comprehensive terms, paying little or no attention to the individual. Dunsiberre, in his three-part book, *Them Dark Days*, tries to approach the situation from the opposite stance, hoping to find the greater truths behind slave life not in broad conceptual analysis, but in the individual. He gives names and faces to both the slaves and their masters. In doing so, he presents a grim picture of slave life under the peculiar institution: one that was neither paternalistic, nor civilizing. The central theme of his work, as stated in the Preface, is that slavery was even more horrific than previously thought. Paternalism, which he carefully qualifies, existed only to increase the fortunes of the masters through the newly-evolved capitalist mentality. Hatred and insubordination lurked in the minds of even the most privileged slaves. Through looking at detailed plantation records, travel journals and WPA interviews, Dusingerre constructs a very personal picture of slavery in the south. By exclusively dealing with the rice planting regions of Georgia and South Carolina, the author asserts that the slaves were not passive, although their rebellion only had limited success, and indeed no chance for true success. As the Yankee armies marched southward, and rice gave way to cotton and tobacco, the fortunes of the rice-planting class waned until the crop was extinct altogether. Among many of the caricatures Dusingerre paints are those of the slave-holding class themselves. Charles Manigault, his son Louis, and South Carolinian planter and later governor Robert Allston, to whom Dusingerre loosely applies the

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term “Gentlemen Capitalists”, established the Gowrie rice plantation just outside of Savannah, Georgia and its northern contemporaries Pee Dee and Chicora Wood, respectively. These enterprises were risky at best, as unpredictable forces such as disease, flood, and Civil War all determined the profitability of each year’s crop. However, these gentlemen planters were able to turn a profit. In the case of the Manigaults, an initial investment of \$49,500 gradually turned into a respectable sum of \$266,300 – a number that Dusiaberre qualifies as including land and slave holdings. In addition, the sum is more than twice that of the 3% fixed-rate interest the shaky American bonds of the time had to offer. On the other hand, the cost of acquiring such a fortune was great, as \$67,200 in Gowrie slaves were lost to disease and over-work, while the birth rate remained significantly lower. As a “Gentleman Capitalist”, Charles Manigault instilled a genteel education in both his wife and children. Travel, he believed, was essential to the development of the individual, and he applied this theory by spending several years with his family in France. He also made trips for business and pleasure to Wales, Egypt, and the Orient. As a wedding present for his second-born son, Louis, he gave the couple 10,000 dollars to spend on a trip through Europe. Dusiaberre also focuses on Robert Allston’s Pee Dee and Chicora Wood plantations. Although somewhat lenient towards his slaves in some regards, Allston’s employment of tough overseers and emphasis on iron-fisted discipline created animosity amongst the slaves working for him. Unlike Charles Manigault, Allston despised absenteeism, and set up a residence near the plantation so that he could closely monitor its activities. Although ruthlessness prevailed amongst the slave-holding classes of the cotton-growing Southwest, one would not expect it of the well-bred Atlantic

Coast rice growers. This was not the case, however, as the Manigault callousness has been well-documented in startling slave mortality rates. From 1833 to 1861, the slave mortality rate was nearly double that of the birth rate, while the infant mortality rate was a ghastly 90% – not including miscarriages and still-births. Pregnant women were privileged to have the medical attention of the well-trusted overseer, whose lack of expertise no doubt helped contribute to the 97 deaths of the 109 children born at Gowrie between 1855 and 1855. In only one year did the birth-rate exceed the mortality rate, as poor medical attention, cholera, measles, dysentery, and malaria decimated the Carolinian gentleman's capital. Other problems included child-bearing risks and drowning. White people were not immune to the forces of nature, as is evidenced by Gowrie's loss of four overseers over the course of those same years, but an analysis of the statistics reveals a profound difference in mortality rates between whites and blacks. DusiBerre asks the obvious question: why would a businessman, or more correctly a paternalistic businessman, allow his capital to die so frequently? The answer, he believes, lies in the nature of the system itself. Firstly, the paramount objective of maintaining slave-order and discipline undermined economic concerns, or, at the very least, evolved from them. A runaway slave who dies of the perils inherent in hiding out in a swamp sets the example for other slaves, and is therefore more valuable dead than alive and free.

Absenteeism and cost-cutting were also important factors. As for families, they were on very precarious footing at Gowrie, and were inevitably unsuccessful. In the chapter " Unhappy Families", the author tirelessly reconstructs the family histories of those living on the Georgia plantation. The perils that these families faced were uncountable. If by chance a pair of

slaves reached adulthood, they could expect any manner of separation, including death, deportation, and voluntary separation. Furthermore, if they were lucky enough to have any surviving offspring, their children were unlikely to survive the tribulations peculiar to the rice-growing region or their master's distaste for slave unions. DusiBerre points out the recent efforts of scholars to accentuate slave morality and family values in the face of an institution that clearly made every effort against it, but warns: "there may be a danger of exaggerating how much the slaves were able to achieve against the odds" (p. 121). Much has been made about the slave's proclivity for insubordination, ranging from simply malingering to full-scale rebellions. DusiBerre, for his part, maintains that a rebellion in the rice growing regions was an impossibility. A slave-holder like Charles Maginaut, his sons, or the overseer could walk confidently through a field of a hundred slaves without fear. A series of three distinct, yet cruel threats kept his slaves in fear of their master's hand. First, he would have the slave flogged, which he often euphemized as "just punishment", by either the overseer or, preferably, another slave. Second was a trip to the Savannah jail house, where the slave would repeatedly be flogged over the course of his stay. The advantage of this was that the slave was whipped by a complete stranger, directing the slave's anger at someone besides the owner or overseer; also, detainment meant that he could not run away at night. The third and most dreaded form of punishment was being sold down to New Orleans, which was more than an idle threat. Beyond this, there was always a looming reminder of white military prowess that kept the slaves from insurrection – or simply the fear of being reduced to a field-hand for privileged slaves. On Gowrie, the slaves found more mild forms of subversion, such as inefficiency or theft. With

regards to malingering, DusiBerre maintains that while the slaves were often “ inefficient” in their work, they were nevertheless quite “ productive”, and that the slave/profit ratio was great until after emancipation. On the other hand, theft or unauthorized sojourns affected the entire slave population. Within a decade, two dozen fugitives had been charted in Gowrie’s records. Citing Eugene Genovese and Kenneth Stampp, among others, as perpetuators of traditional slave classification, DusiBerre looks to break down the long-held myths about the slave mentality by giving names and faces to his six classifications. Somewhere between the tooth-and-nail rebellion of Nat Turner and the bumbling innocence of “ Sambo” lies the Gowrie plantation slave. Naming examples of each, the author details the personalities and treatment of the “ determined” slave, the “ truculent” slave, the “ cunning” slave, the “ upright conformist”, the “ demoralized opportunist”, and the “ proud” slave. Each vary in their level of indulgence toward their master, yet the common undercurrent is both the impossibility of achieving their goals under such an oppressive institution and a cognitive understanding of the causes and effects of their actions. A good example of this might be the “ cunning” boatman Hector, who, after inheriting an old coat of Charles’, puffs himself up merely to indulge the master’s laughter. “ Hector,” DusiBerre writes, “ was up to playing the required role in order to make his masters feel good” (p. 173). Hector was Louis’s playmate, and a well-liked slave on the Gowrie plantation, and was therefore given privileges. Privilege came in two forms: those extended to the whole gang, and those extended to select individuals. The latter case resulted in the formation of what DusiBerre calls a “ slave elite” at Gowrie. Privileges such as meat, special medical care, holidays, clothing rations, and shoes were doled out on

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select occasions to make the slaves believe they were favored by the master. Sometimes Charles Maginault would deprive the slaves of these amenities only to make them think themselves lucky when they were returned. When the plantation was in-between overseers, Charles and his family relied heavily on privileged slaves such as Driver George or Charles the Trunk Minder. “ Without the assistance of the leading slaves, plantation operations could not have proceeded” (p. 194), Dunsiberre writes. Beyond the material benefits of skilled, privileged slaves, they offered their owners the belief that they were uplifting their slaves by affording them such responsibilities. In Allston’s case, the slave’s “ faithfulness” was the most desired characteristic. However, this privilege was always undermined by a certain degree of hatred, as the paternalistic system Genovese or Phillips envisioned begins to break down under Dusingerre’s careful criticism. Although these “ leading slaves” were granted certain privileges, the author reminds us that the paternalism of the slave-holding class that Eugene Genovese describes in Roll Jordan, Roll should only carefully be discussed with regards to southern rice growers, who were primarily – and above all – capitalists. When the northern armies came through during the Civil War, the Maginaults were somehow astonished to find out that all their trusted house-“ servants” (they rarely used the word slave) had fled, defacing the families cherished portraits along the way. Slavery offered the planter-class ample opportunity to present what they felt was Christian morality and virtue. As an institution, Slavery was the embodiment of white supremacy, and in fighting the Civil War, the Southern states fought not so much to protect slavery, as Dusingerre argues, but to continue white domination from what Robert Allston feared: “ the giving up of our country to the ravages of

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the black race” (p. 351). Britain and France had already abolished slavery, and emancipation was in the air. The treatment white plantations owners experienced upon returning to their homes illuminates the hatred the slaves felt towards the system. In concluding his inquiry, Dusiherre wonders aloud how a benevolent paternalistic society could evoke such hatred in its subjects. Simply put, paternalism did not exist – only hatred of the oppressed for their oppressors, and a capitalistic society of white planters that cared more for their own wealth and family’s prestige than even the most basic necessities of their “servants.”