

## Benjamin Drew, Narratives of Escaped Slaves (1855)

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*Benjamin Drew was a Boston abolitionist who interviewed scores of ex-slaves who had escaped into Canada. These interviews were compiled and published as "The Refugee; Narratives of Fugitive Slaves in Canada Related by Themselves." Along with hundreds of other narratives, these testimonies form a dramatic answer to the southern position that slaves were well treated and much happier than northern laborers. These narratives were powerful tools for abolitionists who used them to stir a northern population often content to accept a positive view of slavery.*

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[Mrs. James Steward]

The slaves want to get away bad enough. They are not contented with their situation.

I am from the eastern shore of Maryland. I never belonged but to one master; he was very bad indeed. I was never sent to school, nor allowed to go to church. They were afraid we would have more sense than they. I have a father there, three sisters, and a brother. My father is quite an old man, and he is used very badly. Many a time he has been kept at work a whole long summer day without sufficient food. A sister of mine has been punished by his taking away her clothes and locking them up, because she used to run when master whipped her. He kept her at work with only what she could pick up to tie on her for decency. He took away her child which had just begun to walk, and gave it to another woman - but she went and got it afterward. He had a large farm eight miles from home. Four servants were kept at the house. My master could not manage to whip my sister when she was strong. He waited until she was confined, and the second week after her confinement he said, "Now I can handle you, now you are weak." She ran from him, however, and had to go through water, and was sick in consequence.

I was beaten at one time over the head by my master, until the blood ran from my mouth and nose: then he tied me up in the garret, with my hands over my head - then he brought me down and put me in a little cupboard, where I had to sit cramped up, part of the evening, all night, and until between four and five o'clock, next day, without any food. The cupboard was near a fire, and I thought I should suffocate.

My brother was whipped on one occasion until his back was as raw as a piece of beef, and before it got well, master whipped him again. His back was an awful sight.

We were all afraid of master: when I saw him coming, my heart would jump up into my mouth, as if I had seen a serpent.

I have been wanting to come away for eight years back. I waited for Jim Seward to get ready. Jim had promised to take me away and marry me. Our master would allow no marriages on the farm. When Jim had got ready, he let me know - he brought to me two suits of clothes - men's clothes - which he had bought on purpose for me. I put on both suits to keep me warm. We eluded pursuit and reached Canada in safety.

[Mrs. Nancy Howard]

I was born in Anne Arundel County, Maryland - was brought up in Baltimore. After my escape, I lived in Lynn, Mass., seven years, but I left there through fear of being carried back, owing to the fugitive slave law. I have lived in St. Catherines [Ontario, Canada] less than a year.

The way I got away was - my mistress was sick, and went into the country for her health. I went to stay with her cousin. After a month, my mistress was sent back to the city to her cousin's, and I waited on her. My daughter had been off three years. A friend said to me - "Now is your chance to get off." At last I concluded to go - the friend supplying me with money. I was asked no questions on the way north.

My idea of slavery is, that it is one of the blackest, the wickedest things everywhere in the world. When you tell them the truth, they whip you to make you lie. I have taken more lashes for this, than for any other thing, because I would not lie.

One day I set the table, and forgot to put on the carving-fork - the knife was there. I went to the table to put it on a plate. My master said, - "Where is the fork?" I told him "I forgot it." He says, - "You d - d black b - , I'll forget you!" - at the same time hitting me on the head with the carving knife. The blood spurted out - you can see. (Here the woman removed her turban and showed a circular cicatrices denuded of hair, about an inch in diameter, on the top of her head.) My mistress took me into the kitchen and put on camphor, but she could not stop the bleeding. A doctor was sent for. He came but asked no questions. I was frequently punished with raw hides - was hit with tongs and poker and anything. I used when I went out, to look up at the sky, and say, "Blessed Lord, oh, do take me out of this!" It seemed to me I could not bear another lick. I can't forget it. I sometimes dream that I am pursued, and when I wake, I am scared almost to death.

**Harriet Wilson, From *Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black* (1859)**

*Born in Fredericksburg, Virginia, Harriet Wilson wed Thomas Wilson in 1851 in New Hampshire. Her book, our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black, in a Two-Story White House, North: Showing That Slavery's Shadows Fall Even There is believed to be the first novel by an African-American woman published in America. It focuses on the life of a woman of mixed racial heritage who works as an indentured servant for a white family in the North.*  
SOURCE: Boston: Printed by Geo. C. Rand & Avery. 1859.

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Chapter 1: Mag Smith, My Mother  
Oh, Grief beyond all other griefs, when fate  
First leaves the young heart lone and desolate  
In the wide world, without that only tie  
For which it loved to live or feared to die;  
Lorn as the hung-up lute, that ne'er hath spoken  
Since the sad day its master-cord was broken!  
Moore

Lonely Mag Smith! See her as she walks with downcast eyes and heavy heart. It was not always thus. She had a loving, trusting heart. Early deprived of parental guardianship, far removed from relatives, she was left to guide her tiny boat over life's surges alone and inexperienced. As she merged into womanhood, unprotected, uncherished, uncared for, there fell on her ear the music of love, awakening an intensity of emotion long dormant. It whispered of an elevation before unaspired to; of ease and plenty her simple heart had never dreamed of as hers. She knew the voice of her charmer, so ravishing, sounded far above her. It seemed like an angel's, alluring her upward and onward. She thought she could ascend to him and become an equal. She surrendered to him a priceless gem, which he proudly garnered as a trophy, with those of other victims, and left her to her fate.

The world seemed full of hateful deceivers and crushing arrogance. Conscious that the great bond of union to her former companions was severed, that the disdain of others would be insupportable, she determined to leave the few friends she possessed, and seek an asylum among strangers. Her offspring came unwelcomed, and before its nativity numbered weeks, it passed from earth, ascending to a purer and better life.

"God be thanked," ejaculated Mag, as she saw its breathing cease; "no one can taunt her with my ruin." Blessed release! may we all respond. How many pure, innocent children not only inherit a wicked heart of their own, claiming life-long scrutiny and restraint, but are heirs also of parental disgrace and calumny, from which only long years of patient endurance in paths of rectitude can disencumber them.

Mag's new home was soon contaminated by the publicity of her fall; she had a feeling of degradation oppressing her; but she resolved to be circumspect, and try to regain in a measure what she had lost. Then some foul tongue would jest of her shame, and averted looks and cold greetings disheartened her. She saw she could not bury in forgetfulness her misdeed, so she resolved to leave her home and seek another in the place she at first fled from.

Alas, how fearful are we to be first in extending a helping hand to those who stagger in the mires of infamy; to speak the first words of hope and warning to those emerging into the sunlight of morality! Who can tell what numbers, advancing just far enough to hear a cold welcome and join in the reserved converse of professed reformers, disappointed, disheartened, have chosen to dwell in unclean places, rather than encounter these "holier-than-thou" of the great brotherhood of man!

Such was Mag's experience; and disdaining to ask favor or friendship from a sneering world, she resolved to shut herself up in a hovel she had often passed in better days, and which she knew to be untenanted. She vowed to ask no favors of familiar faces; to die neglected and forgotten before she would be dependent on any. Removed from the village, she was seldom seen except as upon your introduction, gentle reader, with downcast visage, returning her work to her employer, and thus providing herself with the means of subsistence. In two years many hands craved the same avocation; foreigners who cheapened toil and clamored for a livelihood, competed with her, and she could not thus sustain herself. She was now above no drudgery. Occasionally old acquaintances called to be favored with help of some kind, which she was glad to bestow for the sake of the money it would bring her, but the association with them was such a painful reminder of by-gones, she returned to her hut morose and revengeful, refusing all offers of a better home than she possessed. Thus she lived for years, hugging her wrongs, but making no effort to escape. She had never known plenty, scarcely competency; but the present was beyond comparison with those innocent years when the coronet of virtue was hers.

Every year her melancholy increased, her means diminished. At last no one seemed to notice her, save a kindhearted African, who often called to inquire after her health and to see if she needed any fuel, he having the responsibility of furnishing that article, and she in return mending or taking garments.

"How much you earn dis week, Mag?" asked he one Saturday evening.

"Well, Mag," said Jim, after a short pause, "you's down low enough. I don't see but I've got to take care of ye. 'Sposin' we marry!"

Mag raised her eyes, full of amazement, and uttered a sonorous "What?" Jim felt abashed for a moment. He knew well what were her objections. "You's had trial of white folks, any how. They run off and left ye, and now none of 'em come near ye to see if you's dead or alive. I's black outside, I know, but I's got a white heart inside. Which you rather have, a black heart in a white skin, or a white heart in a black one?"

"Oh, dear!" sighed Mag; "Nobody on earth cares for me - "

"I do," interrupted Jim.

"I can do but two things," said she, "beg my living, or get it from you." "Take me, Mag. I can give you a better home than this, and not let you suffer so."

He prevailed; they married. You can philosophize, gentle reader, upon the impropriety of such unions, and preach dozens of sermons on the evils of amalgamation. Want is a more powerful philosopher and preacher. Poor Mag. She has sundered another bond which held her to her fellows. She has descended another step down the ladder of infamy.

## The Compromise of 1850

*The Missouri Compromise permitted Missouri to become a slave state, maintained political balance by admitting Maine as a free state, and banned slavery north of the 36°30' line of latitude in the old Louisiana Territory.*

SOURCE: Congressional Globe, 31st. Congress, 1st. Sess., 1850, Appendix pp. 115-16, 452 -55

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### Clay Proposes Compromise (January 29, 1850)

It is desirable for the peace and harmony of the Union that all existing controversies between the states, arising out of the institution of slavery, be settled amicably upon a fair, equitable, and just basis. Therefore,

Resolved, That California ought to be admitted as a state without Congress placing any restriction on the exclusion or introduction of slavery within the boundaries of that state.

Resolved, That since slavery does not exist by law, and is not likely to be introduced into any of the territory acquired by the United States from the Republic of Mexico, Congress ought not to provide by law either for its introduction into or exclusion from any part of that territory. Appropriate territorial governments ought to be established by Congress in all of the territory, outside the boundaries of the proposed State of California, without the adoption of any restriction or condition on slavery.

Resolved, That it is unwise to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia, while slavery continues to exist in Maryland, without the consent of that State, without the consent of the people of the District, and without just payment to the owners of the slaves within the District.

But resolved, That it is wise to prohibit within the District the slave trade of the slaves brought in from states or places outside the District. They should not be sold within the District nor sent to markets outside the District of Columbia. Resolved, That a more effective law ought to be made, according to the requirement of the Constitution, for the

return of slaves who may have escaped into any state or territory in the Union. Resolved, That Congress has no power to promote or obstruct the slave trade between slave-holding states, but

whether slaves may be admitted or excluded from a state to which they are brought depends entirely on that state's particular laws.

### **Calhoun Replies (March 4, 1850)**

A single section, governed by the will of a numerical majority, now controls the government and its entire powers. The North has absolute control over the government. It is clear, therefore, that on all questions between it and the South, where there are different interests, the interests of the South will be sacrificed to the North, no matter how oppressive the effects may be. The South possesses no political means by which it can resist.

Northern hostility towards the social organization of the South lay dormant a long time. The first organized movement against it began in 1835. Then, for the first time, antislavery societies were organized, presses established, lecturers sent forth to excite the people of the North, and incendiary publications were scattered over the whole South, through the mail. The South was thoroughly aroused. Meetings were held everywhere, and resolutions adopted, calling upon the North to arrest the threatened evil. But petitions poured into Congress from the North, calling upon it to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia, and to prohibit what they called the internal slave trade between the states, announcing at the same time that their ultimate object was to abolish slavery, not only in the District, but in the states and throughout the Union. With the increase of their influence, the abolitionists extended the sphere of their action. In a short time, they had sufficient influence to get the legislatures of most of the northern states to pass acts which in effect repealed the provision of the Constitution that provides for the return of fugitive slaves. This was followed by petitions and resolutions of legislatures of the northern states meetings, to exclude the southern states from all territories acquired or to be acquired, and to prevent the admission of any state into the Union which, by its constitution, does not prohibit slavery.

How can the Union be saved? There is but one way by which it can with any certainty; and that is, by a full and final settlement, on the principle of justice, of all the questions at issue between the two sections. The South asks for justice, simple justice, and less she ought not to take. She has no compromise to offer but the Constitution, and no concession or surrender to make. She has already surrendered so much that she has little left to surrender. Such a settlement would go to the root of the evil, and remove all cause of discontent, by satisfying the South, that she could remain honorably and safely in the Union. Nothing else can, with any certainty, finally and forever settle the question at issue, and agitation, and save the Union.

But can this be done? Yes, easily; not by the weaker party, for it can of itself do nothing—not even protect itself— but by the stronger. The North has only to do justice by conceding to the South an equal right in the acquired territory to do her duty by causing the constitutional provisions related to fugitive slaves to be faithfully fulfilled, to cease the agitation of the slave question, and to provide for an amendment to the Constitution. Such an amendment should restore to the South the power she possessed to protect herself, before the balance between the section was destroyed by this government.

But will the North agree to do this? It is for her to answer this question. But, I will say, she cannot refuse, if she has half the love of the Union which she professes to have, or without justly exposing

herself to the charge that her love of power is far greater than her love of the Union. At all events, the responsibility of saving the Union rests on the North, and not the South.

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### Document Analysis

1. What is Clay's basis for compromise?
2. What would the extremists of the North and South tend to think of this compromise?
3. What is Calhoun's main objection to the compromise?

## When Historians Disagree

### What Caused the Civil War?

James McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988/2003, pp. vii, 40-41.

Both sides in the American Civil War professed to be fighting for freedom. The South said Jefferson Davis in 1863 was "forced to take up arms to vindicate the political rights, the freedom, equality, and State sovereignty which were the heritage purchased by the blood of our revolutionary sires." But if the Confederacy succeeded in this endeavor, insisted Abraham Lincoln, it would destroy the Union "conceived in Liberty" ...

Underlying all of these differences was the peculiar institution. "On the subject of slavery," declared the *Charleston Mercury* in 1858, "the North and South ... are not only two Peoples, but they are rival, hostile Peoples." This rivalry concerned the future of the republic. To nineteenth-century Americans the West represented the future. Expansion had been the country's lifeblood. So long as the slavery controversy focused on the morality of the institution where it already existed, the two-party system managed to contain the passions it aroused. But when in the 1840s the controversy began to

Marc Egnal, *Clash of Extremes: The Economic Origins of the Civil War*. New York: Hill and Wang, 2009, pp. 4-5, 7-8.

Many historians now affirm the traditional wisdom that slavery caused the Civil War...

There are, however, difficulties with this "idealistic" explanation. To begin with, an emphasis on strongly held views about slavery sheds little light on the sequence of events that led to the Civil War. At least since the beginning of the nineteenth century, Northerners had resolutely condemned slavery, even if few advocated immediate abolition. This hostility to bondage, however, marked both the era of compromise, 1820 to 1850, as well as the increasingly bitter clashes of the 1850s, culminating in war. A persuasive interpretation must look elsewhere to explain why a lengthy period of cooperation gave way to one of conflict...

*Clash of Extremes* responds to these concerns. It argues that more than any other reason, the evolution of Northern and Southern economies explains the Civil War...

focus on the expansion of slavery into new territories it became irrepressible.	
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