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An American paradox

by [Marc Arkin](#)

A review of *Rough Crossings: Britain, the Slaves, and the American Revolution* by Simon Schama and *In the Name of the Father: Washington's Legacy, Slavery, and the Making of a Nation* by Francois Furstenberg.

In 1775, after a decade of colonial protest over parliamentary taxation, Samuel Johnson famously complained, “How is it that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty among the drivers of negroes?” It was a good question and one that has dogged Americans ever since. That strident demands for freedom and equal rights under law came from a place where slavery was interwoven with everyday life, both North and South, has been called the central paradox of American history. As the dean of American historians, Edmund S. Morgan, wrote in the introduction to his own effort to unravel the problem, *American Slavery, American Freedom* (1975), “The paradox is American, and it behooves Americans to understand it if they would understand themselves.”

That chattel slavery contributed to the formation of the world’s longest-lasting republic is both true and almost beyond modern comprehension. In 1790, the nation’s first census counted nearly 700,000 slaves, almost 18 percent of the entire population. In the South’s most populous state, nearly four out of ten Virginians were slaves. And, despite fitful misgivings about the contradiction between ideals and practice, the slave population continued to grow over the next sixty years. On the eve of the Civil War, it had reached almost four million. Of the first seven American presidents, only John Adams and his son, John Quincy Adams, did not own slaves. When white Americans passionately attacked political oppression as “slavery,” it was more than a mere figure of speech; they knew exactly what slavery meant.

This paradox has drawn historians like moths to a flame. The current bumper crop of books about the topic will only increase as the Anglo-American world approaches the bicentennial of two landmarks of the antislavery movement: Britain’s “Bill for the Abolition of the Slave Trade” and the American act outlawing the importation of slaves into the United States. Both were passed in 1807 and became effective on January 1, 1808. Neither actually ended slavery within their respective territories. That day did not come for British possessions until 1833; for the United States, slavery was not formally abolished until the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865. One indication of the depth of the scholarly field—and its seductive difficulties—is that two of the most recent entries, Simon Schama’s *Rough Crossings: Britain, the Slaves, and the American Revolution* and François Furstenberg’s *In the Name of the Father: Washington’s Legacy, Slavery, and the Making of a Nation*, were preceded in recent memory by two works each covering more or less the same ground: Adam Hochschild’s *Bury the Chains: Prophets and Rebels in the Fight to Free an Empire’s Slaves* (2005) and William Wiencek’s *An Imperfect God: George Washington, His Slaves, and the Creation of America* (2003).

Rough Crossings is likely to be the most successful of the four, equipped as it is with a celebrity author, who is currently giving readings, complete with musical accompaniment, in New York. And, let me say immediately, it is a compelling, vivid, even entertaining read—if a litany of racial mistreatment, government misdeeds, and bad weather of Biblical proportions can ever be said to be entertaining. To his credit, Schama puts a slightly different spin on the material by exploring the common perception among blacks in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century that the British were their best allies in the search for emancipation and equality. When all is said and done, however, the book doesn't quite hang together, as if the topic proved too unruly even for the prodigious talents of Professor Schama.

Although the title *Rough Crossings* conjures up slavery's dread Middle Passage, the voyage from Africa to the new world figures little in the book. Perhaps its most sensational appearance is a brief discussion of the infamous case of the *Zong*. (Insurers sued the *Zong*'s owners after the ship's captain threw overboard entire coffles of slaves—living and dead chained together—in an effort to take advantage of a provision in the vessel's policy that allowed claims for property jettisoned to save the ship but not for ordinary cargo losses, such as slaves who dies of disease in transit.) Instead, the book careers back and forth between four storylines: the development of the early British antislavery movement, black participation on the British side in the American Revolution, British resettlement of black loyalists in Nova Scotia, and British abolitionist efforts to establish a colony of free blacks in Sierra Leone.

The book is divided into three parts. The first, entitled “Greeny” after the pioneering British abolitionist Grenville Sharp, begins with Sharp's 1765 antislavery epiphany and quickly moves to his behind-the-scenes role in Somerset's Case (1772). This legal decision is better known for what contemporaries thought it said, that slavery was incompatible with the “pure air of England,” than for what Lord Mansfield actually held—that slaves could not be involuntarily transported out of England. Quick cut to the American Revolution, where the British offer slaves freedom in exchange for service, at once inflaming American fears of a servile insurrection and leaving slaves owned by loyalists untouched. Something like 30,000 slaves flocked to British lines—Schama's numbers are a little shifty—where they endured hideous privations, and were raked by smallpox to boot. The British abandoned five hundred of the dying on Virginia's Gwynn's Island alone, and may well have sent some of the sick behind patriot lines, in a primitive form of biological warfare. That effort was largely ineffective, since Washington required that all Continental soldiers—black and white—be inoculated against the disease.

Despite much shabby treatment, blacks played a key, and largely unsung, role in the British campaign as spies, scouts, sailors, and ship's pilots, the last two explored to better advantage in W. Jeffrey Bolster's 1997 *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail*, a fascinating study of black maritime culture in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. With the Continental victory, the British had to decide what to do with the blacks who had taken refuge as free people under royal protection in the loyalist enclaves of Charleston, Savannah, and New York. Doing his best as an officer and a gentleman, the British commander Sir Guy Carleton steadfastly refused Washington's demand to surrender all runaways—Washington himself lost a number of slaves from Mount Vernon—and conveniently ignored the treaty provisions by which his own government required him to do so. With his fellow officers, Carleton issued certificates of freedom and arranged for approximately three thousand blacks to be transported to Nova Scotia (again, dodgy numbers) along with white loyalists.

Now, quick cut back to England, where the antislavery movement is becoming better organized under the largely Quaker Committee of Six and the peripatetic Thomas Clarkson, reinforced by such figures as William Wilberforce, Josiah Wedgwood, and the author Olaudah Equiano, a sailor, adventurer, and former slave of uncertain origins—and himself the subject of a recent well-received

biography by Vincent Carretta. This alliance, which eventually yielded both a black colony in Sierra Leone and the British Abolition Bill, is the subject of Adam Hochschild's far more detailed and workmanlike account. Schama, however, barely reaches Sierra Leone before returning to Nova Scotia. To summarize, in both places, the conditions are horrible, and the black settlers have to struggle with everything from racist officials and broken promises for land and subsidies to unfamiliar crops, bad soil, and worse weather, be it towering snow drifts or epic rains. The Sierra Leone colony does have certain problems all its own: It is purposely drawn from London's black poor whose work ethic is somewhat suspect; it is quickly caught up in indigenous tribal politics; and it is located downriver from the area's largest slave trading depot, Bance Island, on which the colonists come to depend for supplies. Hochschild is particularly good on this awkward relationship and takes a persuasively negative view of one of Schama's key eyewitness sources, Anna Maria Falconbridge, wife of the colony's commercial agent. Yet few people can match Schama in his eye for British eccentricity, a quality in abundance among both the abolitionists and their fellow travelers.

The narrative now enters its second section, titled "John" after John Clarkson, Thomas's younger brother, who became governor of a reformed Sierra Leone colony, somewhat despite himself. The story picks up in 1791, with the defeat of Wilberforce's parliamentary motion to end the importation of slaves into the West Indies, spends a brief interlude exploring the impact of the French Revolution on the British abolitionists, and then segues back to Canada as the dispirited abolitionists decide that the way to restore their cause is to restock the Sierra Leone venture with hardworking Nova Scotian loyalists. Despite an incredible trail of broken promises, the Nova Scotians still retain their faith in the British. So, relying on Clarkson's promises of land and subsidies, they uproot again and move to Africa, in a naval convoy of eighteen ships carrying some 1,196 people, led by Clarkson, who, despite his naval commission, had barely commanded a ship before.

Perhaps as a result, they leave in mid-January and immediately run into savage North Atlantic gales, while Clarkson himself lies unconscious with a high fever on what everyone believes to be his deathbed. After a near-burial at sea, he revives only to discover that he has forgotten how to navigate. Somehow, despite all this, the convoy lands safely and the colonists repeat the now predictable litany of broken promises for land and subsidies, misunderstandings with the home organization, bad climate, and worse insects. (The description of the red ants and giant cockroaches that come out in the rainy season is not for the weak-stomached.) Clarkson emerges as something of a saint, so, inevitably, he is stripped of his governorship and replaced by a series of insufferable evangelicals, including Zachary Macaulay. In the end, the colony is invaded by the French, revolts against its English governors, is invaded by the abolitionists with the help of Maroon mercenaries from Jamaica, and is finally subsumed into the British Empire.

The last section is a fast-forward, entitled "Endings, Beginnings," which makes a painfully earnest effort to tie all the strands together, concluding with the 1846 English visit of the American abolitionists Frederick Douglass and William Lloyd Garrison during which they meet the eighty-six-year-old Thomas Clarkson. At the close of his triumphant lecture tour, Douglass announces that only in England, under "monarchical justice," has he received true "recognition of [his] manhood." After 397 pages of mostly bad behavior by Britons, that conclusion does little to enhance Douglass's historical reputation for insight into his fellow man. And it certainly does little to resolve the underlying question of whether Great Britain deserved its reputation among America's blacks, although it does establish that Britons rarely tired of celebrating their moral superiority to their former colonists.

Aside from the difficulties engendered by the jumpy narrative line, Schama has a penchant for recreating the inner life of his characters in a manner more appropriate to a work of fiction. Taking the two devices together, you can almost hear the voice-over in the Ken Burns documentary that is

sure to come. Schama's interior monologues are especially problematic since his footnotes do not make clear when he is relying on a source, such as Grenville Sharp's diary, and when he is simply assuming what some historical figure might have felt if only he or she had the benefit of a twenty-first-century sensibility. More broadly, Schama's writing has a kind of *gotcha* glibness. Sometimes it actually works, as when Jefferson attempted to blame "the Christian King" George for the institution of American slavery in the Declaration of Independence, a charge he was forced to withdraw at the insistence of other delegates to the Continental Congress. Sometimes it doesn't, as when Schama accuses Benjamin Franklin, an early opponent of slavery, of being a hypocrite about the subject. And sometimes it verges on the cheap shot, as when he opines that evidence of a possible Continental massacre of blacks on Georgia's Tybee Island will never be discovered because the place "now enjoys a happy reputation as a prime spring and summer resort, complete with Beach Bum Festival and birding amidst the woodstorks and herons," and "no one is going to go poking around the dunes for the remains of African-Americans."

Indeed, the entire work is shot through with overstatement, as if, despite the intrinsic interest of the material, Schama felt the need to over-egg his pudding. Even the most skeptical historian would find it hard to credit Schama's remark that the "revolution, first and foremost, mobilized to protect slavery." While Thomas Peters, one of the Nova Scotia loyalists, may have been an early black political leader, he can't really lay claim to being the first, nor was the 1792 election in Sierra Leone the first time blacks voted in any election. Whatever else one may say for Massachusetts, free black men voted in state elections at least from the adoption of the Commonwealth's constitution in 1780; Boston's blacks played a pivotal role in the 1796 election of Federalist Harrison Gray Otis to Congress. Indeed, free blacks were generally entitled to vote in state elections throughout the North until the second decade of the nineteenth century. What is more, the earliest black political leader—if you don't count the informal "African governors" elected by black communities throughout colonial New England—was probably Boston's Prince Hall, who was active in Massachusetts politics from the mid-1770s until his death in 1807. In 1786, Hall generously offered Governor Bowdoin seven hundred black soldiers to help put down Daniel Shays's rebellion, an offer that Bowdoin declined for obvious reasons.

The book is riddled with even more obvious slips. On page 303, John Kizell is the nephew of a Sherbro chief; eighteen pages later, he is promoted to the chief's son. The first time we meet Boston and Violet King, they have children. Four pages later, on the same boat, they are childless. David Walker, the American black author, was an old clothing dealer, not a tailor, as he is portrayed in the epilogue. Even if such errors are merely the result of authorial haste and editorial inattention, they are a troubling distraction.

Like *Rough Crossings*, Furstenberg's *In the Name of the Father* does not quite line up with its title. Instead, it falls into a relatively new scholarly genre, the history of reading and readership, and—with a little help from literary theory—the interrelationship between the two. Furstenberg's self-described goal is to study how iconic civic texts both fostered political loyalties and created personal identities in the early years of the republic. His primary focus is on the role that George Washington's image played in creating an American nationalist identity that valued autonomy while accepting slavery. This is all pretty heady stuff, and the argument can get a little strained. Reduced to its essentials, it appears to go something like this: If Washington was depicted as a father of his country in the public sphere, and a father to his slaves in the domestic sphere, then republican nationalism and slavery could co-exist "in the name of the father."

There is a less plausible coda in which the author takes on the problem of consent by the governed in an ongoing republic. He suggests that the pro-slavery argument that the absence of slave resistance effectively showed consent to their fate contributed to an equally passive understanding of republican citizenship. Along the way, the reader is treated to some rather obscure musings on the

nature of patriarchy, as in “the threat slavery posed to the nation . . . may well have strengthened the patriarchal elements of early U.S. nationalism, pushing it more toward a nationalism of descent than would otherwise have been the case.”

Now, this obscurantism is a bit of a shame, because Furstenberg has actually unearthed some very interesting material about Washington’s place in early popular culture—for example, the widespread suggestion that the Farewell Address, in which he declined a third term, should be bound into family Bibles and the frequent identification of Washington with Jesus in print and visual media. Furstenberg’s work sheds a very interesting light on the early phases of American civil religion, tracing the parallel use of texts in both evangelicalism and nationalism.

The chapter on Parson Weems—he of the cherry tree myth—is particularly entertaining and suggestive. Weems, it turns out, was educated in Edinburgh during the heyday of the Scottish Enlightenment, became the first Episcopal clergyman ordained after the Revolution, with the intercession of John Adams and Benjamin Franklin, and transformed his ministry into that of an itinerant bookseller and literary entrepreneur who traveled the length and breadth of the South in a cart loaded with merchandise, performing the odd service along the route. His mission was to spread a moralizing nationalistic culture to the hinterlands through books, preferably very cheap ones, directed, as he said, to the “gustum populi Americani.” A realist at heart, Weems once said of selling “Puritanical” books in the South, “you might as well send Fiddles to a Methodist conventicle.” Weems’s manipulation of Washington’s image created a domesticated evangelical patriarch suited to a nineteenth-century audience, even if he bore little resemblance to the factual record. Like many nineteenth-century prints of Washington, Weems seems to have edited out the slaves, a telling factor in itself.

Although Furstenberg does touch on Washington’s own ambiguous relationship with slavery during his lifetime, his concern is more with how subsequent generations interpreted that ambiguity. They had the choice of Washington the lifelong benevolent master or Washington the deathbed emancipator. In this, perhaps, they were like Washington himself, who had the choice of two wills on his deathbed and threw one into the fire. The one that survived freed all the slaves that he himself owned on the death of his wife; he was powerless to affect the status of the so-called dower slaves that came to Martha through the estate of her first husband. To trace the growing misgivings that Washington had about slavery and, more particularly, about separating slave families, the reader has to turn to Henry Wiencek’s strongly felt *Imperfect God*.

As Wiencek documents, the historical Washington bought and sold slaves as a young man, and even raffled off children to collect a debt, apparently without compunction. Wiencek suggests that Washington’s attitudes began to change during the Revolution, when he commanded both black and white troops. Wiencek thus supplies the patriot side of the story left out of Schama’s book and is an effective tonic to some of its claims. For example, although Schama makes much of Congress’s ban on black troops, blacks comprised as much as thirteen percent of Washington’s army, often serving as substitutes for more prosperous whites, and often in return for a promise of manumission from Northern owners. Black mariners were an essential part of the patriot forces, commemorated by Emmanuel Leutze’s famous painting *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, which depicts Washington with a black soldier at his side. The man’s name was Prince Whipple, and he was the slave of a New Hampshire officer.

Wiencek shows evidence from as early as 1789 that Washington was secretly contemplating the emancipation of his slaves, using his western lands to finance the effort and writing privately of his repugnance at a “certain species of property which I possess.” Wiencek suggests that this—and Washington’s growing concern about separating slave families—had a more private aspect: Martha Washington’s enslaved mulatto half-sister, Ann Dandridge, had borne a son by Martha’s reprobate son, Jacky Custis. And, Wiencek delicately explores the possibility that Washington himself may

have fathered West Ford, one of his brother John's slaves. Whatever the source, Weincek documents Washington's increasing alienation from the slave culture in which he had grown up, even as he continued to live within it. As a political matter, Washington stated bluntly: "I can clearly foresee that nothing but the rooting out of slavery can perpetuate our union." But, more strikingly, in a remark taken down by Jefferson, Washington commented to his Secretary of State, Edmund Randolph, that if the Union split apart into North and South, "he had made up his mind to remove and be of the Northern."

All of this shows that historians can tell us quite a bit about what people did as they lived the contradiction between slavery and freedom, but very little about how they managed it. When historians come to explaining the how, the theories they advance are likely to be pretty unsatisfying. Richard Brookhiser has probably come as close as anyone, suggesting that Washington at least "encompassed the contradictions the way that all men, including ourselves, encompass their contradictions: by not thinking of them." But, of course, the Framers did think of them—at least some of the time—and when they did, they were very uncomfortable. Which is, perhaps, why the paradox has continued to fascinate and trouble Americans for more than two hundred years.

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