

Canada's Slave Trade

Slavery? In Canada? How could it be? A little booklet called *Slavery and Freedom in Niagara*, by author Michael Power of Welland, Ontario, has recently landed on my desk, and got me going on this subject. In school we learn only that Canada-the-good served as a kind of Holy Land for persecuted slaves who escaped from a barbaric U.S.A. This has created an unjustified belief in our moral superiority.

For around the year 1780 there were an estimated 4,000 blacks living in the Canadian British colonies, of whom about 1,800 were slaves. Canada's first anti-slavery law (of sorts), of July 9, 1793, did not exactly outlaw slavery. It was called "An Act to Prevent the Future Introduction of Slaves." In other words, slavery would remain legal - but no more slaves could be imported to Canada.

Now it is easy to spring to judgement on all this, until we recall that slavery, practiced at some point prior to this century by almost every known civilization, and defended by Plato and Aristotle as "natural," was until very recently protected by international law. In the Eighteenth century, even freedom philosopher John Locke argued it was morally preferable to the death penalty, which is what many slave captives might otherwise have received.

Slavery was widely practiced in Africa for millennia by blacks who sold blacks to each other, to Arabs, and to whites. The U.S. census of 1830 records that 10,000 slaves were owned by "free men of colour." The last nations to outlaw slavery were those on the Arab peninsula, in 1962!

When Columbus arrived in the New World in 1492, he discovered that slavery was already widely practiced by the local Tiano, Arawak, and Carib tribes, along with cannibalism and torture. Many American and Canadian Indian tribes, such as the Tonkawa of Texas, or the Kwakiutl of British Columbia, had been slaveholders (or cannibals, or both) since forever. At the time of white conquest, up to 15% of the Kwakiutl were slaves to their own powerful chiefs. White Europeans arrived in Mexico horrified to discover an Aztec civilization built on slavery, human sacrifice, and cannibalism of up to 250,000 slaves per year!

As for pioneer Canada, Power writes that "slave owning was widespread among the emerging political and social elites of Upper Canada." Peter Russell, Matthew Elliot, and many other distinguished men who sat on the Legislative Council of Upper Canada each owned dozens of slaves.

Most sought to protect their "right" to own slaves by arguing that a slave was legally owned property, and the right to own property was basic to all free societies. Courts that took away legally-owned slaves, could then take away land, or homes, and tyranny would reign.

Farmers asked, who will compensate us for our freed slaves, and the lost benefits from slave

labour? Many settlers were Loyalists who came here because government had promised them cheap land on the condition they clear it. So slaves were purchased specifically for that purpose. The government had lured them. Was the government now going to ruin them?

An irony of the history of slavery in Canada, is that many individual U.S. States (Delaware, Michigan, Rhode Island, and Connecticut), had banned slavery outright twenty years before Canada prohibited (only) the future importation of slaves. So the state of Michigan, Power writes, became "an instant haven for slaves escaping from Upper Canada!" Canadian slave-owners complained bitterly, imploring our Lieutenant-Governor to stop what was in effect a reverse underground railroad. He refused.

A friend, expressing his instant moral repugnance, asked, "How could they not see the immorality of it?" I replied, "Just like we do not see our own." Slaves were legally defined as non-persons. Might future moralists not wonder, for example, at our own torturous moral and legal chicanery granting modern mothers the legal "right" to vacuum out - or even crush heads and tear limbs off - young babies in their own wombs? They can only do so because the unborn human baby is defined in our criminal law as a "fetus," a non-person. The very same modern liberals who violently deplore slavery, as violently defend the right to abortion on demand. They don't "see" their immorality. Neither did slave owners.

Are we much better off? In past times, though less than five per cent were slaves, the average citizen, white or black, was quite free of the thousands of meddling laws and controls that deeply invade our privacy - and had to pay not a penny of income tax. Yet today entire populations in the "free world" are tax slaves to massive governments for more than half of every year of their lives - and face physical imprisonment if they refuse to pay. Ownership is not necessary. That's why the American revolutionist Josiah Quincy in 1774 cried out against tax slavery, saying "I speak it with grief - I speak it with anguish - I speak it with shame - I speak it with indignation - we are slaves, the most abject sort of slaves."

© William Gairdner