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Teaching American History
Year Two

**A Review of the book: Abolition: A History of Slavery and Antislavery by
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The history of slavery begins with the history of man. Historically, slavery was a part of the social structure of most, if not all cultures and certainly was the weft of the social fabric of the Western World. In his book Abolition: A History of Slavery and Antislavery, historian and University Professor of History and Sociology at the University of Pittsburgh, Seymour Drescher presents a history of slavery and abolition of the past five hundred plus years focusing mostly on the Western World.

While Drescher's book focuses primarily upon the modern era, he does review the history of slavery prior to 1500 A.D., particularly looking at the ideas of who could justifiably enslave whom. Prior to the Atlantic Slave Trade, one of the major slave trading cultures in Europe were the Vikings. These Norsemen would bring enslaved Slavs from the Baltic regions to sell in the slave markets in the Mediterranean region. While the Catalonians were one of the first people to demand the end of serfdom and bondage during the ten years Catalonian Civil War of 1462, elsewhere in the Mediterranean region, slavery was a way of life. The right to enslave people was based upon religion (both Christian and Muslim nations supported the enslavement of heretics), war and birth. "When the enslavability of Orthodox Greeks by western Europeans became more uncertain, traders turned to Muslim Albanians, Bosnians, and Bogamils. Well into the seventeenth century, Christina Russians, Moscovites, Lithuanians and Poles were still

enslaving each other's war captives."(p. 13) However, in England and France, slavery was on the decline fairly early. "The general thrust of northwestern European institution and ideological development before 1500 was toward the recognition of the peasantry as part of the community of freemen." (p.10) In England both serfdom and slavery simply faded away rather than being legally abolished. Yet, even here slavery did not disappear. When France declared that any slave who sets foot on French soil shall be free, they did not include the galley slaves that were manning the French navy. Drescher writes how it was not impossible for an individual in Europe to be born free, become a slave, regain freedom and become a slave owner. "While the Iberians were establishing their Atlantic colonies during the century after the Portuguese exploratory voyages along the sub-Saharan coast (c. 1440 – 1540), more Europeans were enslaved in North Africa than were Africans in Europe, the Atlantic islands, and the Americas combined. Well into the early seventeenth century, the number of Africans landing in the Americas did not exceed the number of enslaved Europeans landed in Africa." (p. 29)

It was the settling of the New World that lead to new heights in slavery and in slave trade and it is with this expansion that slavery becomes racially based. The enslavement of Native Americans did not prove successful but the as the demand for labor increased so did the demand for slaves both from Africa and from Asia. Spain did eventually limit the importation of slaves from Asia due to the growing free-market labor in Mexico but slaves from Africa continued to pour in to the Spanish, Portuguese, French and English colonies. This set up a conundrum of sorts for the English and the French. In England, the question of the legality of slavery in England alone (not her colonies) was finally settled by the Somerset Case in 1772. This decision resulted in the ultimate freeing of all slaves in England including those brought to England by American colonists. Yet throughout the British colonies, slavery had a major impact on all of the

colonies. Even the New England colonies where slavery was never widespread benefited from by slavery through slave trade.

“In the famous words of Samuel Johnson, American cried for freedom were “yelps for liberty” from “drivers of Negros.” (p.119) Drescher discusses the role and the conditions of slavery during the American Revolution in both the colonies/United States and in the British controlled islands of the Caribbean as well as the tenuous position of the free black population in the States at that time. It was during this time that the importation of slaves fell to its lowest in the island economies. But, after two wars with Great Britain, the only two presidents who had not been slave holders were John Adams and John Quincy Adams both “vigorously affirmed to the British government that their nations slaves’ status as property trumped their status as human beings.” (p.133) Great Britain, meanwhile, restated and expanded the reach of the Somerset Decision to include Canada, thus making it impossible for the United States to retrieve runaway slaves that escaped into Canada. “By the 1820’s successive legislative acts made American penalties against importing Africans among the harshest in the world,” (p. 138) yet Chief Justice John Marshall held” slave trade was contrary to the laws of nature but consistent with the law of nations.” (p. 313)

Drescher dedicates a fair number of pages to the slavery/abolition movement in the United States during the period of time between the American Revolution and the American Civil War that I will not review here. Less familiar, however was the impact of the French Revolution of the Caribbean and the abolition activities of the British during this same period of time. It was the French Revolution that triggered the largest slave rebellion in the new world. On the island of Saint Domingue slaves rose up against both the white and the mulatto upper and middle classes, in a rebellion that even Napoleon could not quell. The revolt let resulted in the

independent nation of Haiti . Twenty years later following a number of abolition petitions to Parliament slaves on the island of Jamaica revolted in what is known as the Baptist War, but without the same success nor the same amount of bloodshed.

Dreschler continue to discuss slavery and the various methods used by the abolitionists focusing primarily on the New World as well as a focus on English abolition activity. He does address later activities, however briefly, particularly of the English efforts in India and the Muslim world. He then takes an unexpected turn to what he refers to as reversion in Europe and discusses the enslavement of millions of Jews and others by Hitler and the Nazi regime. But, interestingly, he gives little attention to slavery in Asia. "In Asia and the islands of the Pacific Ocean, the Japanese government impressed millions of foreigners into labor services for indefinite periods of time. One of the most distinctive features of wartime coerced labor in Asia was the systematic conscription of women for sexual services."(p.450) However, he addresses this Asian slavery in two paragraphs.

Dreschler's book is an in depth look at slavery over the past five hundred years and in certain areas of the world. However, I found the book to be too broad-based an attempt to cover too much information over too long a time period. Drescher's omission of some regions and the passing reference of others regions gives one the impression that slavery was, for the most part, limited to the Western World (at least on a large scale). Little is mentioned of the slavery of India or the slavery in sub-Sahara Africa and there is no mention of slavery in Asia prior to World War Two. These omissions would be more acceptable had the book more focus. Rather, I found it in some cases to be repetitive (particularly in the discussions of French galley slaves) and in others too focused on numbers and dates. Drescher also seemed overly focused on the British abolition movement and offers a comparatively brief discussion of the American

Drescher, Seymour, A, Abolition: A History of Slavery and Antislavery, 2009, Cambridge
University Press