

ROOTS OF RACISM

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“Nothing is more susceptible to oblivion than an argument, however ingenious, that has been discredited by events; and such is the case with the body of writing which was produced in the antebellum South in defense of Negro slavery.” So wrote Eric McKittrick in a history book he edited, *Slavery Defended: The Views of the Old South* (1963). McKittrick was correct. At the end of the twentieth century very few people are aware of the existence, much less the contents, of the vast mass of books, essays, pamphlets, magazine and newspaper articles, and printed sermons and speeches in which the institution of black slavery was enthusiastically and aggressively defended, even extolled, by proslavery advocates in the Old South.

There were very few published defenses of slavery in the Old South prior to 1830. The great bulk of the Old South's proslavery writings date from the period 1830 until 1865, during which slavery was not only defended without apology, but often commended as a positive good. In the 1850's Southern proslavery writings reached their apex, both in terms of quantity and shrillness, whereas Southern antislavery writings, which had always been meager, practically disappeared.

The single most important study of pre-1865 proslavery writings in the South is William S. Jenkins' *Pro-Slavery Thought in the Old South* (1935), which rightfully emphasizes the enormous energy and huge expenditures of time proslavery writers devoted to defending the peculiar institution from all criticism. Every conceivable thesis, every possible line of reasoning, and every form of attack that might support slavery was invoked, conjured up, or set forth, and then repeated endlessly with infinite variations and from every possible angle.

Twentieth century historians, including William S. Jenkins, traditionally have believed that the development of a systematic defense of slavery was a phenomenon unique to the Old South. That belief has, however, been exploded as mythical by Larry E. Tise in his epochal book, *Proslavery: A History of the Defense of Slavery in America, 1701-1840* (1987) (published by the UGA Press). In his monumental treatise, Tise proves beyond any doubt that the earliest systematic defense of slavery in America was made, not by Southerners, but by conservative Northern intellectuals--clergymen, professors, and college presidents--who in their writings and speeches during the first third of the nineteenth century constructed an elaborate conservative ideology which included a vociferous proslavery advocacy as one of its cornerstones. In defending slavery these nonslaveowning Northerners, many of them New Englanders who were Federalists or ex-Federalists, advanced all of the proslavery arguments which until recently were associated only with the Old South. “There was nothing unique about the defenses of slavery uttered in the [Old] South,” Tise writes. “No one [in the Old South] offered a single argument that had not already been used in substantially the same positive language ... in the northern United States early in the nineteenth century.”

Tise further proves in his book that between 1770 and 1830 British and West Indian proslavery writers created an ideological defense of slavery that also featured all the proslavery arguments which flourished in the Old South from 1830 until 1865. These British and West Indian

advocates of slavery “assumed every moral, philosophical, economic, and social position available to defenders of slavery in the English-speaking world,” Tise writes. They were, he adds, “responsible for establishing a slaveholders' philosophy well before the first American southerner attempted to [defend slavery].”

Amazingly, therefore, the latest historical scholarship demonstrates that the Old South's defense of slavery was neither unique nor original. The Old South's proslavery writings were not only wholly despicable; they were also entirely derivative. Nearly everything Southerners wrote to uphold slavery had already been written by Northern or British proslavery advocates.

The Old South's lengthy list of proslavery publications includes two important books, one nonfiction and the other fiction, written by Georgians.

The first, *An Inquiry into the Law of Negro Slavery* (1858) (reprinted by the UGA Press in 1999), by the noted Thomas R. R. Cobb, is an erudite treatise on slave law tragically flawed by its glorification of slavery and its curt dismissal of slavery's defects as minor and excusable. Cobb, a lawyer from Athens, also authored the Confederate Constitution and the Georgia Constitution of 1861, and was one of the founders of the UGA School of Law. In 1860 when South Carolina became the first state to secede he placed illuminated letters on his Prince Avenue home reading “RESISTANCE TO ABOLITION IS OBEDIENCE TO GOD.” Later a general in the Confederate army, Cobb was killed in 1862 at the Battle of Fredericksburg within sight of the house where his parents had been married; he is buried in Oconee Hill Cemetery.

The other book is a novel, *Nellie Norton: or, Southern Slavery and the Bible*, written by an obscure 44-year old Macon Protestant clergyman, Ebenezer Willis Warren. Published in 1864, *Nellie Norton* is one of the very last defenses of the institution of black slavery penned in the Old South. Never reprinted, the novel has languished in obscurity since its publication; the only copy available locally is on microfilm in the UGA Main Library.

The novel begins in a year which is not specified, but appears to be around 1859. Most of the events in the novel take place between November of that year and the following July.

The childish plot of *Nellie Norton* is easily summarized.

Nellie Norton, a beautiful, high-minded young woman from New England who fervently believes that slaves are cruelly oppressed by their masters and that slavery should be abolished, travels with her mother by steamboat to Savannah to visit slaveowning relatives who live on a plantation. During her sojourn in Georgia Nellie's views regarding slavery undergo a sea-change. She participates in or listens to long discussions on the pros and cons of slavery; she talks and visits with slaves; she attends a slave wedding and a slave funeral; she discovers that slaves are well-fed, well-clothed, and kindly treated; she learns that slaves are happy and do not wish to be emancipated; she comes to realize that black persons benefit from slavery; and, finally, she concludes that Southern slaveowners have been the victims of “malignant abuse” and “wicked and malicious slander” by Northerners ignorant of the virtues of slavery. As a result Nellie abandons her Abolitionist beliefs and embraces the view that Southern slavery is just and moral. Nellie falls in love with and marries a slaveowner and moves to Georgia to live with him

on his plantation. When the novel ends the Civil War is raging and Nellie has turned her home into a hospital for wounded Confederate soldiers.

Perhaps a third of the novel is devoted to tiresome, seemingly interminable debates on slavery between Nellie and her Northern church minister (who has come to visit Nellie in Georgia), both of whom take an antislavery stance, and Nellie's slaveowning relatives and their slaveowning friends, who militantly defend slavery. In all these discussions the proslavers consistently come out on top, despite their repeatedly making such statements as "the world is wrong [on the issue of human slavery], and the South must set it right;" "the world is in error, and is dependent upon the South for the truth;" "the welfare of the negro is best promoted when he is under the restraints of slavery;" and "slavery is the normal condition of the negro."

There were a number of standard lines of argument used over and over in defense of slavery in the Old South, and Nellie Norton makes use of almost all of them.

The scriptural, or Bible, argument was, according to William S. Jenkins, "probably ... the most elaborate and systematic statement of any of the types of pro-slavery argument." In essence the scriptural argument was the claim that the Bible and the Christian religion favor slavery, including the form of black slavery practiced in the Old South.

Most of the defense of slavery in *Nellie Norton* involves reliance on the Bible argument, as is evident from the novel's subtitle, *A Scriptural Refutation of the Principal Arguments Upon Which the Abolitionists Rely: A Vindication of Southern Slavery From the Old and New Testaments*. According to William S. Jenkins, Leviticus 25:44-46 (relating to the buying, keeping, and inheriting of bondmen and bondmaids) was "the rock of Gibraltar in the Old Testament" justification of slavery, and, sure enough, that passage is quoted and relied upon several times in the novel by proslavery characters.

Other passages in the Old Testament frequently cited by Old South proslavers--for example, Exodus 21:2-6 (relating to the slavery of poor Hebrews) and Deuteronomy 15:16-17 (also relating to the slavery of poor Hebrews)--are invoked in *Nellie Norton* to prove that God instituted slavery, approved of it, and intended it to be perpetual. To prove that the black race was particularly intended by God to be the slaves of the white race, Nellie Norton's proslavers cite Genesis 9:26-27 (relating to the curse of Canaan), another passage frequently cited by proslavery advocates in the Old South. "There is nothing, not one word," a proslaver says to Nellie, "in the Old Testament to condemn, but very much to establish, enforce, and regulate slavery."

The apologists for slavery in *Nellie Norton* also trot out the usual arguments Old South proslavers would make in regard to the New Testament. The Golden Rule is not inconsistent with human slavery; both Ephesians 6:5-8 (exhorting servants to be obedient to their masters), Titus 2:9-10 (also exhorting servants to be obedient to their masters), and Colossians 3:22-24 (requiring slaves to obey their masters) justify slavery; "in the catalogue of sins denounced by the Savior and His Apostles, slavery is not once mentioned;" "not one word is said by the prophets, apostles, or the holy Redeemer against slavery;" and "the Apostles admitted slaveholders and their slaves to church membership, without requiring a dissolution of the

relation.”

Not surprisingly, therefore, *Nellie Norton* is replete with such dizzying assertions as “slavery is right, and its enforcement is according to the Scripture,” “slavery is taught in the Bible, and instituted in Heaven,” “God has ordained slavery,” “slavery was made perpetual by the positive enactment of heaven,” and “there cannot be found ... in the Bible a single injunction to slaveholders to liberate those held by them in bondage.” To abominate slavery, Nellie is told by a proslaver who constantly gets the best of her in the slavery debates, “is to abominate the law of God, and the sentiments inculcated by his holy prophets and apostles.” Therefore, a slave “cannot sunder bonds which bind him to his earthly master, without breaking those which unite him morally to his Redeemer.”

Perhaps the two most absurd statements in this novel brimming with absurd statements occur when Nellie is told, “the Bible is a pro-slavery Bible, and God is a pro-slavery God,” and “the North must give up the Bible and religion, or adopt our views of slavery.”

Apart from the scriptural argument, the defense of slavery most frequently raised by its defenders was the ethnological argument--that black people were physically, mentally, and morally inferior to whites and therefore deserving of being kept as slaves. As William S. Jenkins notes: “The entire pro-slavery thought was imbued with the belief of Negro inferiority.” The Old South's proslavery writings were therefore almost always infected with the evils of racism.

Racist attitudes toward black persons pervade the proslavery pronouncements of the slaveowners in *Nellie Norton*. Blacks are said to be “exceptions to the common brotherhood” of man; black persons are characterized as “sensual and stupid, lazy, improvident, and vicious,” and as “an ignorant, degraded, indolent people” who could “never ... be equal with the white man.”

Since, according to *Nellie Norton's* slaveholders, the inferiority of blacks to whites was “designed by their creator [i.e., God],” the ethnological argument in the novel dovetails nicely with the Bible argument.

Another standard defense of slavery found in *Nellie Norton* was what might be deemed the escapist argument. It involved what historian Ralph E. Morrow calls “the escape into a world of unreality”--justifying slavery by depicting it idyllic terms. This “vein of sentimentalism in proslavery literature,” as Morrow puts it, is everywhere evident in *Nellie Norton*. One proslaver assures Nellie, “The slaves have many rights. The right of life and limb, the right to be fed and clothed, to be nursed when sick, and cared for in old age when they become helplessly infirm. They are rightfully entitled to protection from ill treatment.” Slave children in *Nellie Norton* are depicted as “fat and saucy, jolly and lively;” they engage in “cheerful songs and merry laughter.” Adult slaves are “happy Ethiopians” with “bright countenance[s], ... smiling face[s], and ivory teeth” who “are fed bountifully, clothed well, nursed when indisposed, and afforded [a] suitable diet,” and who “talk, and laugh, and sing, and pat, and dance,” and spend their time “singing, dancing, laughing, chattering.” The slaves love and are utterly devoted to their masters, who in turn are “highly cultivated ... men of superior general intelligence, refined, polite, [and] genteel.” “I know of no case where the master lives on his plantation with his slaves but what they are treated with justice and moderation,” a proslaver says to Nellie. Like other romanticized

accounts of slavery written in the Old South, therefore, Nellie Norton presents what Ralph E. Morrow refers to as “a vision of a paradisaical order”--highly romanticized and totally unreal.

Another usual Old South defense of slavery was the historical argument--that history proves there has always been slavery and always will be slavery. “The truth is, the world never has, and never can exist without slavery in some form,” Nellie is told. “Where is the country or the period of history wherein slavery did not exist in some shape or other? ... Slavery has always existed, and will continue so long as there is a disparity in the intellect or energy of men.”

Since, according to *Nellie Norton*, God ordained and sanctioned slavery, and since, moreover, according to the novel, God not only placed blacks under the curse of subjection but also created the racial differences which render blacks fit for slavery, the novel's historical argument for slavery meshes neatly with both the scriptural and ethnological arguments for slavery.

Nellie Norton contains numerous other standard Old South defenses of slavery, but only one of these, the ad hominem argument, will be mentioned here. It was common for advocates of slavery to demonize the Abolitionists, and *Nellie Norton* bristles with vituperative castigations of Abolitionists. Abolitionists are “ruthless” and “fanatical.” Abolitionists take positions “which embody the worst forms of infidelity ever known to the world.” Abolitionists are sounding “the funeral knell of a pure Christianity.” “I tell you,” one of the proslavers in the novel shouts, Abolitionists are guilty of “an offense against God, the Bible, religion, the peace of the Christian world, and against common sense, and the more enlightened experience of the age.”

Why were books such as *Nellie Norton* written? Why did the Old South produce such a torrent of defenses of slavery after 1830, especially in view of the fact that very few criticisms of slavery were being written in the South and that almost all white Southerners (slaveowners and nonslaveowners alike) supported slavery? Historians disagree on the answer to these questions. Some historians, including William S. Jenkins, say that the proslavery literature was aimed at proselytizing Northerners and combatting the Abolitionist writings that were being smuggled into the South. Some historians, including Ralph E. Morrow, say that the real motive of Southerners was to assuage the guilt feelings they felt about holding human beings in bondage. Historian David Donald suggests that “the proslavery writers ... were not so much defending slavery-as-it-was as they were dreaming of the South-as-it-might-have-been.”

Whatever the validity of these explanations for Southern writings defending slavery, there can be no doubt why *Nellie Norton* was written. In the short preface to the novel, author Ebenezer Willis Warren explains that the purpose of the novel was to “set the question [of slavery], as to its moral aspect, forever at rest.” Like so many white Southerners of the time, Warren thought not only that slavery was morally right, but that this could be conclusively demonstrated.

Nellie Norton's preface is dated May 4, 1864. Three days later, Gen. William T. Sherman's three powerful Union armies opened the Atlanta campaign by advancing on Gen. Joseph E. Johnston's Confederate army near Dalton. In less than a year Southern slavery was dead. This was not because white Southerners rejected slavery; most of them saw in it nothing to be ashamed of. Nor was it because there was a dearth of proslavery defenders in the South; the number of such defenders was legion. Finally, it was not because of an absence of proslavery literature; written

defenses of slavery flooded the Old South.

Slavery ended because, as on other occasions in American history, Southern intransigence and obtuseness made it necessary for the Federal Government, by force of arms, to compel the American South to give up execrable practices which, as *Nellie Norton* shows, most white Southerners thought godly.