

**THOUGHTS
UPON
SLAVERY**

THE FIFTH EDITION.

By JOHN WESLEY

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I.

1. BY *Slavery* I mean Domestic Slavery, or that of a servant to a master. A late ingenious Writer well observes, “The variety of forms in which Slavery appears, makes it almost impossible to convey a just notion of it, by way of definition. There are however certain properties which have accompanied Slavery in most places, whereby it is easily distinguished from that mild domestic *service* which obtains in our country.”^u

2. *Slavery* imports an obligation of perpetual service, an obligation which only the consent of the master can dissolve. Neither in some countries can the master himself dissolve it, without the consent of judges appointed by the law. It generally gives the master an arbitrary power of any correction, not affecting life or limb. Sometimes even these are exposed to his will: or protected only by a fine, or some slight punishment, too inconsiderable to restrain a master of a harsh temper. It creates an incapacity of acquiring any thing, except for the master’s benefit. It allows the master to alienate the Slave, in the same manner as his cows and horses. Lastly it descends in its full extent from parent to child, even to the last generation.

3. The beginning of this may be dated from the remotest period, of which we have an account in history. It commenced in the barbarous State of Society, and in process of time spread into all nations. It prevailed particularly among the *Jews*, the *Greeks*, the *Romans*, and the ancient *Germans*: and was transmitted by them to

the various kingdoms and states, which arose out of the *Roman* empire. But after christianity prevailed, it gradually fell into decline in almost all parts of *Europe*. This great change began in *Spain*, about the end of the eighth century: and was become general in most other kingdoms of *Europe*, before the middle of the fourteenth.

4. From this time Slavery was nearly extinct, till the commencement of the sixteenth century, when the discovery of *America*, and of the Western and Eastern coasts of *Africa*, gave occasion to the revival of it. It took its rise from the *Portuguese*, who to supply the *Spaniards* with men, to cultivate their new possessions in *America*, procured Negroes from *Africa*, whom they sold for Slaves to the *American Spaniards*. This began in the year 1508, when they imported the first Negroes into *Hispaniola*. In 1540, *Charles* the fifth, then King of *Spain*, determined to put an end to *Negro-Slavery*: giving positive orders, That all the Negro-Slaves in the *Spanish* dominions should be set free. And this was accordingly done by *Lagasca*, whom he sent and empowered to free them all, on condition of continuing to labour for their masters. But soon after *Lagasca* returned to *Spain*, Slavery returned and flourished as before. Afterwards other nations, as they acquired possessions in *America*, followed the examples of the *Spaniards*; and Slavery has taken deep root in most of our *American* colonies.

[1] See Mr. *Hargrave*'s Plea for *Somerset* the Negro.

II.

Such is the nature of Slavery: such the beginning of Negro-Slavery in *America*. But some may desire to know, what country it is, from which the Negroes are brought? What sort of men, of what temper and behaviour are they in their own country? And in what manner they are generally procured, carried to, and treated in *America*?

1. And first, What kind of country is that from whence they are brought? Is it so remarkably horrid, dreary and barren, that it is a kindness to deliver them out of it? I believe many have apprehended so: but it is an entire mistake, if we may give credit to those who have lived many years therein, and could have no motive to misrepresent it.

2. That part of *Africa* whence the Negroes are brought, commonly known by the name of *Guinea*, extends along the coast, in the whole, between three and four thousand miles. From the river *Senegal*, (seventeen degrees North of the line) to Cape *Sierra Leona*, it contains seven hundred miles. Thence it runs Eastward about fifteen hundred miles, including the *Grain-coast*, the *Ivory-coast*, the *Gold-coast*, and the *Slave-coast*, with the large kingdom of *Benin*. From thence it runs Southward, about twelve hundred miles, and contains the kingdoms of *Congo* and *Angola*.

3. Concerning the first, the *Senegal* coast, Mons. *Bene*, who lived there sixteen years, after describing its fruitfulness near the sea, says, "The farther you go from the sea, the more fruitful and well-improved is the country, abounding in pulse, Indian corn, and various fruits. Here are vast meadows, which feed large herds of

great and small cattle. And the villages which lie thick, shew the country is well peopled.” And again: “I was surprized, to see the land so well cultivated; scarce a spot lay unimproved: the low lands divided by small canals, were all sowed with rice: the higher grounds were planted with Indian corn, and peas of different sorts. Their beef is excellent; poultry plenty, and very cheap, as are all the necessaries of life.”

4. As to the *Grain* and *Ivory-coast*, we learn from eye-witnesses, that the soil is in general fertile, producing abundance of rice and roots. Indigo and cotton thrive without cultivation. Fish is in great plenty; the flocks and herds are numerous, and the trees loaden with fruit.

5. The *Gold-coast* and *Slave-coast*, all who have seen it agree, is exceeding fruitful and pleasant, producing vast quantities of rice and other grain, plenty of fruit and roots, palm-wine and oil, and fish in great abundance, with much tame and wild cattle. The very same account is given us of the soil and produce of the kingdoms of *Benin*, *Congo* and *Angola*. From which it appears, that *Guinea* in general, is far from a horrid, dreary, barren country, is one of the most fruitful, as well as the most pleasant countries in the known world. It is said indeed to be unhealthy. And so it is to strangers, but perfectly healthy to the native inhabitants.

6. Such is the country from which the Negroes are brought. We come next to enquire, What sort of men they are, of what temper and behaviour, not in our plantations, but in their native country. And here likewise the surest way is to take our account from eye and ear-witnesses. Now those who have lived in the *Senegal* country observe, it is inhabited by three nations, the *Jalofs*, *Fulis* and *Mandingos*. The king of the *Jalofs* has under him several

Ministers, who assist in the exercise of justice, the Chief Justice goes in circuit through all his dominions, to hear complaints and determine controversies. And the Viceroy goes with him, to inspect the behaviour of the *Alkadi*, or Governor of each village. The *Fulis* are governed by their chief men, who rule with much moderation. Few of them will drink any thing stronger than water, being strict *Mahometans*. The government is easy, because the people are of a quiet and good disposition; and so well instructed in what is right, that a man who wrongs another is the abomination of all.—They desire no more land than they use, which they cultivate with great care and industry: if any of them are known to be made Slaves by the white men; they all join to redeem them. They not only support all that are old, or blind, or lame among themselves: but have frequently supplied the necessities of the *Mandingos*, when they were distressed by famine.

7. The *Mandingos*, says Mons. *Brue*, are right *Mahometans*, drinking neither wine nor brandy. They are industrious and laborious, keeping their ground well cultivated, and breeding a good stock of cattle. Every town has a Governor, and he appoints the labour of the people. The men work the ground designed for corn; the women and girls, the rice-ground. He afterwards divides the corn and rice, among them: and decides all quarrels, if any arise. All the Mahometan Negroes constantly go to public prayers thrice a day: there being a Priest in every village, who regularly calls them together: and it is surprising to see the modesty, attention and reverence which they observe during their worship—These three nations practise several trades; they have Smiths, Sadlers, Potters and Weavers. And they are very ingenious at their several occupations. Their Smiths not only make all the instruments of iron, which they have occasion to use, but likewise

work many things neatly in gold and silver. It is chiefly the women and children who weave fine cotton cloth, which they dye blue and black.

8. It was of these parts of *Guinea*, that Mons. *Adanson*, Correspondent of the Royal Academy of Sciences at *Paris*, from 1749, to 1753, gives the following account, both as to the country and people, “Which way soever I turned my eyes, I beheld a perfect image of pure nature: an agreeable solitude, bounded on every side by a charming landscape; the rural situation of cottages, in the midst of trees; the ease and quietness of the Negroes, reclined under the shade of the spreading foliage, with the simplicity of their dress and manners: the whole revived in my mind the idea of our first parents, and I seemed to contemplate the world in its primitive state. They are, generally speaking, very good natured, sociable and obliging. I was not a little pleased with my first reception, and it fully convinced me, that there ought to be a considerable abatement made, in the accounts we have of the savage character of the *Africans*.” He adds, “It is amazing that an illiterate people should reason so pertinently concerning the heavenly bodies. There is no doubt, but that with proper instruments, they would become excellent astronomers.”

9. The inhabitants of the *Grain* and *Ivory-coast* are represented by those that deal with them, as sensible, courteous, and the fairest traders on the coasts of *Guinea*. They rarely drink to excess: if any do they are severely punished by the King’s order. They are seldom troubled with war: if a difference happen between two nations, they commonly end the dispute amicably.

10. The inhabitants of the *Gold* and *Slave-coast* likewise, when they are not artfully incensed against each other, live in great union

and friendship, being generally well tempered, civil, tractable, and ready to help any that need it. In particular, the natives of the kingdom of *Whidah*, are civil, kind, and obliging to strangers. And they are the most gentleman-like of all the Negroes, abounding in good manners toward each other. The inferiors pay the utmost respect to their superiors: so wives to their husbands, children to their parents. And they are remarkably industrious; all are constantly employed; the men in agriculture, the women in spinning and weaving cotton.

11. The *Gold* and *Slave-coasts* are divided into several districts, some governed by Kings, others by the principal men, who take care each of their own town or village, and prevent or appease tumults. They punish murder and adultery severely; very frequently with death. Theft and robbery are punished by a fine proportionable to the goods that were taken.—All the natives of this coast, though heathens, believe there is one God, the Author of them and all things. They appear likewise to have a confused apprehension of a future state. And accordingly every town and village has a place of public worship.—It is remarkable that they have no beggars among them; such is the care of the chief men, in every city and village, to provide some easy labour, even for the old and weak. Some are employed in blowing the Smith's bellows; others in pressing palm-oil; others in grinding of colours. If they are too weak even for this, they sell provisions in the market.

12. The natives of the kingdom of *Benin* are a reasonable and good-natured people. They are sincere and inoffensive, and do no injustice either to one another or to strangers. They are eminently civil and courteous: if you make them a present, they endeavour to repay it double. And if they are trusted, till the ship returns the next year, they are sure honestly to pay the whole debt. Theft is

punished among them, although not with the same severity as murder. If a man and woman of any quality, are taken in adultery, they are certain to be put to death, and their bodies thrown on a dunghill, and left a prey to wild beasts. They are punctually just and honest in their dealings; and are also very charitable: the King and the great Lords taking care to employ all that are capable of any work. And those that are utterly helpless they keep for God's sake; so that here also are no beggars. The inhabitants of *Congo* and *Angola* are generally a quiet people. They discover a good understanding, and behave in a friendly manner to strangers, being of a mild temper and an affable carriage.—Upon the whole therefore the Negroes who inhabit the coast of *Africa*, from the river *Senegal* to the Southern bounds of *Angola*, are so far from being the stupid, senseless, brutish, lazy barbarians, the fierce, cruel, perfidious Savages they have been described, that on the contrary, they are represented by them who have no motive to flatter them, as remarkably sensible, considering the few advantages they have for improving their understanding: as industrious to the highest degree, perhaps more so than any other natives of so warm a climate: as fair, just and honest in all their dealings, unless where white men have taught them to be otherwise: and as far more mild, friendly and kind to strangers, than any of our forefathers were. Our forefathers! Where shall we find at this day, among the fair-faced natives of *Europe*, a nation generally practising the justice, mercy, and truth, which are found among these poor *Africans*? Suppose the preceding accounts are true, (which I see no reason or pretence to doubt of,) and we may leave *England* and *France*, to seek genuine honesty in *Benin*, *Congo*, or *Angola*.

III.

We have now seen what kind of country it is, from which the Negroes are brought: and what sort of men (even white men being the judges) they were in their own country. Enquire we, thirdly, In what manner are they generally procured, carried to, and treated in *America*.

1. *First*. In what manner are they procured? Part of them by fraud. Captains of ships from time to time, invited Negroes to come on board, and then carried them away. But far more have been procured by force. The Christians landing upon their coasts, seized as many as they found, men, women and children, and transported them to *America*. It was about 1551, that the *English* began trading to *Guinea*: at first, for gold and Elephant's teeth, but soon after, for men. In 1556, Sir *John Hawkins* sailed with two ships to Cape *Verd*, where he sent eighty men on shore to catch Negroes. But the natives flying, they fell farther down, and there set the men on shore, "to burn their towns and take the inhabitants." But they met with such resistance, that they had seven men killed, and took but ten Negroes. So they went still farther down, till having taken enough, they proceeded to the *West-Indies* and sold them.

2. It was some time before the *Europeans* found a more compendious way of procuring *African* Slaves, by prevailing upon them to make war upon each other, and to sell their prisoners. Till then they seldom had any wars: but were in general quiet and peaceable. But the white men first taught them drunkenness and avarice, and then hired them to sell one another. Nay, by this means, even their Kings are induced to sell their own subjects. So

Mr. *Moore* (Factor of the *African* Company in 1730) informs us, “When the King of *Barsalli* wants goods or brandy, he sends to the *English* Governor at *James’* Fort, who immediately sends a sloop. Against the time it arrives, he plunders some of his neighbours’ towns, selling the people for the goods he wants. At other times he falls upon one of his own towns, and makes bold to sell his own subjects.” So Mons. *Brue* says, “I wrote to the King” (not the same) “if he had a sufficient number of slaves I would treat with him. He seized three hundred of his own people, and sent word he was ready to deliver them for goods.” He adds, “Some of the natives are always ready” (when well paid) “to surprize and carry off their own countrymen. They come at night without noise, and if they find any lone cottage, surround it and carry off all the people.”—*Barbot*, (another French Factor) says, “Many of the Slaves sold by the Negroes are prisoners of war, or taken in the incursions they make into their enemy’s territories. Others are stolen. Abundance of little Blacks of both sexes, are stolen away by their neighbours, when found abroad on the road, or in the woods, or else in the corn-fields, at the time of year when their parents keep them there all day to scare away the devouring birds.” That their own parents sell them, is utterly false: Whites not Blacks, are without natural affection!

3. To set the manner wherein Negroes are procured in a yet stronger light, it will suffice to give an extract of two voyages to *Guinea* on this account. The first is taken verbatim from the original manuscript of the Surgeon’s Journal.

“SESTRO, Dec. 29, 1724. No trade to-day, though many traders came on board. They informed us, that the people are gone to war within land, and will bring prisoners enough in two or three days; in hopes of which we stay.

“The 30th. No trade yet: but our traders came on board to-day, and informed us the people had burnt four towns: so that to-morrow we expect slaves off.

“The 31st, Fair weather; but no trading yet. We see each night towns burning. But we hear many of the *Sestro* men are killed by the inland Negroes: so that we fear this war will be unsuccessful.

“The second of January. Last night we saw a prodigious fire break out about eleven o’clock, and this morning see the town of *Sestro* burnt down to the ground.” (It contained some hundred houses.) “So that we find their enemies are too hard for them at present, and consequently our trade spoiled here. Therefore about seven o’clock we weighed anchor, to proceed lower down.”

4. The second Extract taken from the Journal of a Surgeon, who went from *New-York* on the same trade, is as follows. “The Commander of the vessel sent to acquaint the King, that he wanted a cargo of slaves. The King promised to furnish him, and in order to it, set out, designing to surprize some town, and make all the people prisoners. Some time after, the King sent him word, he had not yet met with the desired success: having attempted to break up two towns, but having been twice repulsed: but that he still hoped to procure the number of Slaves. In this design he persisted, till he met his enemies in the field. A battle was fought, which lasted three days. And the engagement was so bloody, that four thousand five hundred men were slain upon the spot.”——Such is the manner wherein the Negroes are procured! Thus the Christians preach the Gospel to the Heathens!

5. Thus they are *procured*. But in what numbers and in what manner are they carried to *America*?——Mr. *Anderson* in his

history of Trade and Commerce, observes, “*England* supplies her *American Colonies* with Negro-slaves, amounting in number to about a hundred thousand every year.” That is, so many are taken on board our ships; but at least ten thousand of them die in the voyage: about a fourth part more die at the different Islands, in what is called the Seasoning. So that at an average, in the passage and seasoning together, thirty thousand die: that is, properly are murdered. O earth, O sea, cover not thou their blood!

6. When they are brought down to the shore in order to be sold, our Surgeons thoroughly examine them, and that quite naked, women and men, without any distinction: those that are approved are set on one side. In the mean time a burning iron, with the arms or name of the Company, lies in the fire, with which they are marked on the breast. Before they are put into the ships, their masters strip them of all they have on their backs: so that they come on board stark naked, women as well as men. It is common for several hundred of them to be put on board one vessel: where they are stowed together in as little room as it is possible for them to be crowded. It is easy to suppose what a condition they must soon be in, between heat, thirst and stench of various kinds. So that it is no wonder, so many should die in the passage; but rather that any survive it.

7. When the vessels arrive at their destined port, the Negroes are again exposed naked, to the eyes of all that flock together, and the examination of their purchasers; then they are separated to the plantations of their several masters, to see each other no more. Here you may see mothers hanging over their daughters, bedewing their naked breasts with tears, and daughters clinging to their parents, till the whipper soon obliges them to part. And what can be more wretched than the condition they then enter upon?

Banished from their country, from their friends and relations for ever, from every comfort of life, they are reduced to a state scarce any way preferable to that of beasts of burden. In general a few roots, not of the nicest kind, usually yams or potatoes, are their food, and two rags, that neither screen them from the heat of the day, nor the cold of the night their covering. Their sleep is very short, their labour continual, and frequently above their strength; so that death sets many of them at liberty, before they have lived out half their days. The time they work in the *West-Indies*, is from day-break to noon, and from two o'clock till dark: during which time they are attended by overseers, who, if they think them dilatory, or think any thing not so well done as it should be, whip them most unmercifully, so that you may see their bodies long after whealed and scarred usually from the shoulders to the waist. And before they are suffered to go to their quarters, they have commonly something to do, as collecting herbage for the horses, or gathering fuel for the boilers. So that it is often past twelve before they can get home. Hence if their food is not prepared, they are some times called to labour again, before they can satisfy their hunger. And no excuse will avail. If they are not in the field immediately, they must expect to feel the lash. Did the Creator intend that the noblest creatures in the visible world, should live such a life as this! “Are *these* thy glorious works, Parent of Good?”

8. As to the punishment inflicted on them, says Sir *Hans Sloan*, “they frequently geld them, or chop off half a foot: after they are whipped till they are raw all over. Some put pepper and salt upon them: some drop melted wax upon their skin. Others cut off their ears, and constrain them to broil and eat them. For Rebellion,” (that is, asserting their native Liberty, which they have as much right to as to the air they breathe) “they fasten them down to the

ground with crooked sticks on every limb, and then applying fire by degrees, to the feet and hands, they burn them gradually upward to the head.”

9. But will not the laws made in the plantations, prevent or redress all cruelty and oppression? We will take but a few of those laws for a specimen, and then let any man judge.

In order to rivet the chain of slavery, the law of *Virginia* ordains, “That no slave shall be set free, upon any pretence whatever, except for some meritorious services, to be adjudged and allowed by the *Governor and Council*: and that where any slave shall be set free by his owner, otherwise than is herein directed, the Churchwardens of the parish wherein such negro shall reside for the space of one month are hereby authorized and required, to *take up and sell* the said negro, by *public outcry*.”

10. Will not these Law-givers take effectual care, to prevent cruelty and oppression?

The law of *Jamaica* ordains, “Every slave that shall run away, and continue absent from his master twelve months, shall be *deemed rebellious*.” And by another law, fifty pounds are allowed, to those who kill or bring in alive a *rebellious* slave. So their law treats these poor men with as little ceremony and consideration, as if they were merely brute beasts! But the innocent blood which is shed in consequence of such a detestable law, must call for vengeance on the murderous abettors and actors of such deliberate wickedness.

11. But the law of *Barbadoes* exceeds even this, “If any negro under punishment, by his master, or his order, for running away, or any other crime or misdemeanor, shall suffer *in life or member, no person whatsoever shall be liable to any fine therefore*. But if any

man, of wantonness, or only of bloody-mindedness or cruel intention, *wilfully kill* a negro of his own” (Now observe the severe punishment!) “He shall pay into the public treasury fifteen pounds sterling! And not be liable to any other punishment or forfeiture for the same!”

Nearly allied to this is that law of *Virginia*: “After proclamation is issued against slaves that run away, it is lawful for any person whatsoever to kill and destroy such slaves, by such ways and means as he shall think fit.”

We have seen already some of the ways and means which have been *thought fit* on such occasions. And many more might be mentioned. One Gentleman, when I was abroad, *thought fit* to roast his slave alive! But if the most natural act of “running away” from intolerable tyranny, deserves such relentless severity, what punishment have these *Law-makers* to expect hereafter, on account of their own enormous offences?

IV.

1. This is the plain, unaggravated matter of fact. Such is the manner wherein our *African* slaves are procured: such the manner wherein they are removed from their native land, and wherein they are treated in our plantations. I would now enquire, whether these things can be defended, on the principles of even heathen honesty? Whether they can be reconciled (setting the Bible out of the question) with any degree of either justice or mercy?

2. The grand plea is, "They are authorized by law." But can law, Human Law, change the nature of things? Can it turn darkness into light, or evil into good? By no means. Notwithstanding ten thousand laws, right is right, and wrong is wrong still. There must still remain an essential difference between justice and injustice, cruelty and mercy. So that I still ask, who can reconcile this treatment of the negroes, first and last, with either mercy or justice?

Where is the justice of inflicting the severest evils, on those that have done us no wrong? Of depriving those that never injured us in word or deed, of every comfort of life? Of tearing them from their native country, and depriving them of liberty itself? To which an *Angolan*, has the same natural right as an *Englishman*, and on which he sets as high a value? Yea, where is the justice of taking away the lives of innocent, inoffensive men? Murdering thousands of them in their own land, by the hands of their own countrymen: many thousands, year after year, on shipboard, and then casting them like dung into the sea! And tens of thousands in that cruel slavery, to which they are so unjustly reduced?

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