

Book Review

Complicity: How the North Promoted, Prolonged, and Profited from Slavery. By Anne Farrow, Joel Lang, and Jenifer Frank. Foreword by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham. (New York: Ballantine Books, an imprint of The Random House Publishing Group, a division of Random House, Inc., 2006). 269 pp. incl. index. Illustrated.

STOP THE PRESSES! THE NORTH PROFITED FROM SLAVERY! And Yankees had a reason to preserve, protect and defend the “peculiar institution!”

Well, *duh*. The fact that New England ports (primarily Boston) were the primary export marts for the produce of the bondsman economy of British North America south of the Chesapeake is a fundamental fact drilled into every student in every Intro U. S. History to 1865 class in America. Mention the phrase “triangular trade” to any reasonably well-catechized high school student, and the words “slaves,” “molasses,” “rum,” “guns” and “gold” will come back at you.

New England was the entrepreneurial heart of the non-fur-bearing sector of British mercantilism; local manufactures were craftsman based, for the most part (domestic goods could be produced by slaves, but wares worthy of export required the skilled hand of a journeyman, or better, a master). Furthermore, New England was barely self-sufficient in food, and had little else to offer in the way of agriculture; if the Middle Atlantic colonies were to fulfill their role in a mercantilist economy, by sending grain and other foodstuffs (as well as the great American staples of tobacco and cotton) to the mother country, that agricultural burden would fall on those colonies where involuntary servitude was the predominant form of labor. That New England merchants should profit from the bound labor of slaves, and thus have a vested interest in promoting and prolonging slavery, becomes apparent upon cursory investigation of the subject.

Having dished on this utterly fascinating book by Farrow *et al.*, I will proceed to sing its praises. The authors, members of the staff of *The Hartford Courant*, are all experienced New England journalists. *Complicity* began as a series of articles that Farrow, Lang and Frank wrote, in various combinations, for *Northeast*, the Sunday magazine of *The Courant*, between 2001 and 2005. The success of their analysis in the weekly magazine led to expansion of their project, and finally to publication of the present remarkable work.

The problem of slavery as an interregional institution lurks in the background of the entire corpus of historical literature that deals with the United States’ efforts, through the first eighty-odd years of the Republic, to come to terms with the way we structured and utilized the capital resource of labor. As the beginning of this review indicated, it should not be any great surprise to the student of American history that the mercantile North had as much to gain from the “peculiar institution” as did the agrarian South. Farrow, Lang and Frank’s great achievement is to quantify both the dimensions of the North’s reliance on slavery, and to define and explicate the mechanisms by which Northern factors, merchants and financiers “promoted, prolonged and profited from slavery.”

The whole range of villainy which one encounters in the pages of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, or Melton McLaurin’s *Celia, a Slave* are all displayed in the cases that Farrow *et al.* analyze. The material gauds with which the merchants who profited from slavery bedecked themselves are held up to show the contrast beyond the horrors of bond labor and the comforts of those who profited therefrom. To cite only one example, the authors include, as an interlude at the end of the chapter on “First Fortunes,” an essay on Nathaniel

Russell, a Rhode Islander who became one of the leading mercantile lights of Charleston, South Carolina. The discussion of Russell focuses on the grand home he built in Charleston with his slave-produced wealth; the Nathaniel Russell House, in the style of Robert Adam, is notable for its “flying” cantilevered staircase, which the authors assert is “one of the most remarkable in America.”

As one who appreciates architectural nicety, I’m struck by the beauty of the staircase, and moved in spirit by the beauty of the Russell House’s interior and furnishings. But I am also struck by the concrete realization that this beautiful expression of the decorative arts was built as the fruit, and by the sweat, of sweated labor. Farrow, Lang and Frank’s definition of how slavery was as much a phenomenon of Northern commerce as of Southern, is a great addition to the literature of America’s struggle toward self-identity. It is a necessary step toward defining an aspect of the history of the early American republic that everyone knows, but perhaps not everybody understands.

That said, I have to wonder about a book that purports to tell “how the North promoted, prolonged, and profited from slavery” can go through its entire presentation without once mentioning the word “Doughface.” These Northern men of affairs who harbored sympathy for the Southern arguments in favor of slavery played a significant (in some cases, a determining role) in formulating the Federal government’s attitude toward slavery. President Franklin Pierce was the most prominent Doughface, but other prominent Northerners, in Congress and in state government, as well as private citizens, fell under the “Doughface” rubric. Their stories would have immeasurably enhanced this analysis of Northern complicity in preserving, and profiting from, the blight of America’s “peculiar institution.”

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