

*Shaping The New World: African Slavery in the Americas, 1500-1888*. Eric Nellis. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013. ISBN: 9781442605558

Undertaking a study of African slavery presents a substantial challenge. Beyond the obvious difficulties inherent in bringing in the voices of a subaltern population that often lacked access to literacy, historians must situate their research within a voluminous historiography. The number of books on slavery in the antebellum American South alone presents an intimidating challenge. In recent years, several historians have attempted to synthesize the literature of African slavery into readable works that offer a global perspective. Examples include Kenneth O. Morgan's *A Short History of Transatlantic Slavery* and Laird Bergad's *The Comparative Histories of Slavery in Brazil, Cuba, and the United States*.

Eric Nellis' *Shaping The New World: African Slavery in the Americas, 1500-1888* takes a similar approach to Morgan and Bergad. As the third volume in the Canadian Historical Association and the University of Toronto Press's International Themes and Issues series, *Shaping The New World* is written for a broad audience and offers a concise overview of slavery rather than a comprehensive examination. Nellis' chiefly focuses on the development of slavery as an institution in the Americas which he contends "defined the national character of every former slave society in the Americas."

In the opening chapters, Nellis explains the evolving meanings of slavery and race, as well as developments in Europe, Africa, and the Americas which led to the transatlantic slave trade. Several tables which depict the growth of the transatlantic trade and a map of the West African coastline are particularly useful. Nellis follows the chronological patterns of settlement and growth in the Americas and addresses colonial Latin America and the Caribbean before

turning to slavery in North America. Later chapters focus on enslaved families, culture, the end of the institution in the Americas, and its lasting consequences. This approach sets up several useful cross-cultural comparisons.

The most fruitful comparison is the distinction between legal codes governing slavery in British North America and Latin America. Despite the fact that these codes were “usually abridged, edited, ignored, or enforced according to local practices or needs,” Nellis argues that codes in the United States offered fewer opportunities for manumission relative to the system in Latin American. The result was a bifurcated United States in which “being black meant being in bondage.” In contrast, Latin American societies (particularly Brazil) were always more open and contained numerous race-based classes. Nellis also finds substantial continuity across the Americas. He contends that regardless of region, slaves were almost always African, fixed in permanent bondage, and resisted their bondage in some form or fashion.

*Shaping The New World* is a well-written work that adeptly addresses a wide range of pertinent issues in the development of African slavery in the Americas. Nellis does an excellent job of explaining the field’s important historiographical debates in an accessible fashion. His explanation of Stanley Elkins’ “damage thesis” and its rejection that opens the chapter on slave families and cultures is particularly good. Recent scholarship is also incorporated throughout the text. *Shaping The New World* will be useful for instructors of Atlantic and world history that need a broad overview of African slavery in the Americas. Students will also appreciate *Shaping The New World’s* accessible nature and the inclusion of more than a dozen maps and tables.

Given the brevity of the text, there are a number of questions Nellis does not touch on. Nellis spends relatively little time discussing slave culture, the inner lives of the enslaved, and the development of labor systems such as the antebellum American South’s gang system. His

choices are understandable, but readers seeking a deeper examination of these issues should consult the lengthier works listed in the select bibliography.

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