

WHY SOLOMON NORTHUP STILL MATTERS:
Reaction to a Story of Slavery in the Red River Valley

One morning in late March 1841, free man Solomon Northup set out on a twelve-year journey from his home in Saratoga Springs, New York. Northup had no idea that morning as he looked for work to support his family that he would not return to his familiar environs for more than a decade, even less could he have known that his journey would enter American history and help interpret American slavery in Louisiana's Red River Valley for generations of people. His account of his kidnapping and subsequent twelve years of bondage in Louisiana began affecting Americans' understanding of slavery shortly after his return to freedom in 1853. His book, *Twelve Years A Slave*, sold about 8,000 copies within a month of publication in July 1853 and about 30,000 copies before it went out of print in 1900.¹

Even though his book was out of print for almost 70 years after 1900, historians used his account of his ordeal to expand understanding of the South's peculiar institution. Release of a television version of his story in the 1980s brought it to a larger audience, and release of a blockbuster movie brought his interpretation of slavery to its largest audience yet in the 21st century. International release of the movie led people around the world to consider new questions or to reconsider old ones about American slavery.

¹ Ginger Jones, "Solomon Northup: Twelve Years a Slave, Forever a Witness," Solomon Northup Symposium, Louisiana State University at Alexandria, February 21-22, 2014, 6; David Fiske, Clifford W. Brown, Rachel Seligman, *Solomon Northup: The Complete Story of the Author of Twelve Years a Slave* (Santa Barbara, CA, 2013), 167-169. Reprint editions of *Twelve Years A Slave* by various publishers appeared in 1854, 1859, 1879, 1881, 1890, and 1900.

Harriet Beecher Stowe was the first major writer to recognize the importance of Northup's story when she answered critics who claimed that her famous novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was based on inaccurate depictions of slavery and was thus a sensationalized description of the institution designed to promote abolitionism. Her response in *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* was published in 1853, a few months before *Twelve Years A Slave*. She wrote that she intended for the new book to "bring this subject of slavery, as a moral and religious question, before the minds of all those who profess to be followers of Christ, in this country."²

She needed corroboration to support her depiction of slave traders who kidnapped innocent people and sold them into slavery for their own profit, and Solomon Northup's story truthfully illustrated that evil practice. "The case of Northrup (sic) tried in Washington, D. C., throws light on this fearful subject," she commented before summarizing the account published in the *New York Times* newspaper on January 19 and 20, 1853.³

Stowe also noted the "singular coincidence" that Northup's experience of slavery occurred "in the Red river (sic) country, that same region where the scene of Tom's captivity was laid," and that "[Northup's] account . . . his mode of life there, and some incidents which he describes, form a striking parallel to that history." Her lengthy quote from the *New York Times* article about Northup

² Harriet Beecher Stowe, *A Key To Uncle Tom's Cabin; Presenting The Original Facts And Documents Upon Which The Story Is Founded. Together With Corroborative Statements Verifying The Truth Of The Work* (Boston, 1853. Repr., St. Clair Shores, MI, 1970), iii.

³ *Ibid.*, 173-174.

includes his descriptions of his living and working conditions and how his final owner, Edwin Epps, treated his slaves, all of which help the modern reader understand the conditions of slavery in the Red River Valley.⁴

Ulrich B. Phillips, a historian who shaped American understanding of slavery for almost a half-century, albeit in a manner sympathetic to the slaveholders' perspective, was notoriously skeptical of slave narratives, but used *Twelve Years A Slave* as a source of information for his *American Negro Slavery* published in 1918, and for his *Life and Labor in the Old South* published in 1929. "Even though books of this class are generally of dubious value this one has a tone which engages confidence," he wrote in the latter book.⁵

Kenneth Stampp used *Twelve Years A Slave* as a source for *The Peculiar Institution* published in 1956. Even though Stampp was instrumental in debunking Phillips' interpretation of slavery as too positive toward the slaveholders' point of view, he agreed that Northup's book was a useful source for studying slavery, especially work schedules for enslaved persons.⁶

Stanley Elkins in his study *Slavery* published in 1959 maintained that historians could apply "whatever is dependable from the reminiscences and narratives of slaves themselves" to understanding the institution in modern times. He identified only two "dependable" sources among the slave narratives:

⁴ *Ibid.* 174.

⁵ Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, *American Negro Slavery: A Survey of the Supply, Employment and Control of Negro Labor as Determined by the Plantation Regime* (New York, 1918, Repr., Gloucester, MA, 1949), 444-445. Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, *Life and Labor in the Old South*, (Boston, 1929), 218-219.

⁶ Kenneth Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South* (New York, 1956), 74-75.

Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years A Slave* and Kate Picard's *The Kidnapped and the Ransomed*, an account of the Peter Still case published in 1856.⁷

Joe Gray Taylor, a pioneer historian of slavery in Louisiana, understandably cited Northup's book as a major source in his study *Negro Slavery in Louisiana*, published in 1963. Information from *Twelve Years A Slave* helped Taylor describe the work rhythm of the plantation year, food supplies available to slaves, holiday observances, and spiritual services.⁸

Publication by Louisiana State University Press of a new edition of *Twelve Years A Slave* in 1968 edited by historians Sue Eakin and Joseph Logsdon allowed Northup to interpret slavery for modern audiences.⁹ Eakin's subsequent *Solomon Northup's Twelve Years A Slave: 1841-1853*, a version of the story for children first published in 1989 and reprinted in 1998, made his story available to interpret slavery to a younger audience for the first time.¹⁰

Historians continue to use Northup's book in the 21st century. Jesse Holland in his 2007 book *Black Men Built the Capitol* used Northup's detailed description of Washington as he saw it in 1841 to identify neighborhoods and describe conditions in some of the city's slave markets. He notes that Northup's account of his time in Washington provides one of the few personal

⁷ Stanley Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (Chicago, 1959), 4. Peter Still was also kidnapped into slavery and escaped. His case was even more convoluted than Northup's because he evidently struggled until he freed his wife and children.

⁸ Joe Gray Taylor, *Negro Slavery in Louisiana* (Baton Rouge, 1963), 65, 77, 108, 129-131, 187, 220.

⁹ Sue Eakin and Joseph Logsdon (eds.), *Twelve Years A Slave* (Baton Rouge, 1968); Eakin was a historian at Louisiana State University at Alexandria, while Logsdon taught at Louisiana State University in New Orleans, now the University of New Orleans. Kyle Peveto, "Years of obscurity: two Louisiana historians put *Twelve Years a Slave* in spotlight." <http://www.theadvocate.com/features/people/7293026-123/years-of-obscurity> (accessed October 29, 2013).

¹⁰ Sue Eakin, *Solomon Northup's Twelve Years A Slave: 1841-1853* (Repr., New Orleans, 1998).

descriptions of how slaves were treated while they awaited sale anywhere in the South. The Yellow House where Northup was held was one of the notorious slave markets owned by William H. Williams, but “what happened in most of the District’s slave pens remains undocumented.” Except, Solomon Northup provided a detailed and graphic description of that aspect of the slave trade that would otherwise be lost to history.¹¹

Northup’s story interpreted slavery for a large audience on film, both on television and in theaters. The television version, *Solomon Northup’s Odyssey*, aired on the Public Broadcasting System in December 1984, was rerun in February 1985, and was released on VHS format video that year with the title *Half Slave, Half Free*. DVD format release followed in 2005.¹²

The movie version of Solomon Northup’s story released during fall 2013 gave his interpretation of slavery to national and international audiences. The international release gave people in other countries a harrowing image of slavery in a portion of the American South and inspired new discussions of the American practice of slavery or of their own country’s role in the slave trade.

In addition to three Oscars, (Best Motion Picture of the Year, Best Performance by an Actress in a Supporting Role, and Best Writing, Adapted

¹¹ Jesse Holland, *Black Men Built the Capitol: Discovering African-American History in and Around Washington, D. C.* (Guilford, CT, 2007), 28-29. The site of the Yellow House is now the location of the Federal Aviation Administration building.

¹² <http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/21298solomon-northup-s-odyssey/overview> (accessed February 5, 2013).

Screenplay) the film received numerous major best film awards domestically and abroad.¹³

Across the northern border in Canada, Toronto provided the venue of the first major critical success of the movie including “Gasps, sobs, a smattering of walk-outs at particularly brutal moments, and finally, a prolonged standing ovation” according to one description of audience reaction. The Toronto festival’s coveted People’s Choice Award presaged the phenomenal award sweep the film received.¹⁴

One Canadian family’s education about American slavery from the film was personal. Kenora, Ontario resident Laurie Morris remarked about her great-great-great-great-grandfather Samuel Bass’ essential role in freeing Solomon Northup that “For the Canadian side of things, it shows we’re good people. I just imagine being down there and being the only Canadian with an opinion like that.” Another descendant, Rae Moulton Todd, acknowledged that aspect of her family member, remarking that “It’s kind of exciting.” Bass’s newfound fame led to some family research, however, which revealed that he had left behind his wife and four daughters without provision as he traveled

¹³ These awards include Golden Globes, USA-Best Motion Picture-Drama, British Academy of Film and Television-Best Film, American Film Institute-Movie of the Year, Black Reel Awards-Outstanding Motion Picture, Boston Society of Film Critics-Best Film, Broadcast Film Critics Association-Best Picture, Chicago Film Critics Association-Best Picture, Dallas-Fort Worth Film Critics Association-Best Picture, Florida Film Critics Circle-Best Film, Image Awards-Outstanding Motion Picture, Kansas City Film Critics Circle-Best Film, Las Vegas Film Critics Society-Best Picture, London Critics Circle-Film of the Year, Online Film Critics Society-Best Picture, Phoenix Film Critics Society-Best Picture, San Francisco Film Critics Circle-Best Picture, Satellite Awards-Best Motion Picture, Southeastern Film Critics Association-Best Picture, Toronto International Film Festival-People’s Choice Award, Vancouver Film Critics Circle-Best Film, Washington DC Area Film Critics Association-Best Film.

¹⁴ <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2013/sep/07/12-years-a-slave-toronto-premier> (accessed April 10, 2015).

throughout the United States. That revelation led to Ms. Todd adding that in her opinion, “He really was a big jerk.”¹⁵

Britons used the movie to spur recognition of their country’s historical role in the slave trade, promote activism against modern slavery, or in one case, panned it as a weak effort that failed to reach its audience.

Aiden McQuade, Director of the group Anti-Slavery International based in London, used the movie’s release to remind the world that her organization has worked to end slavery since 1839, two years before Northup’s ordeal began. Agreeing with the film’s depiction of the antebellum south as “the archipelago of concentration camps that it was,” she focused on Anti-Slavery International’s role assisting American abolitionists spread their message during the 1840s and 1850s and its work with the American government during the 1860s. She noted International Labor Organization estimates that at least 21 million people are still held in slavery around the world, and excoriated her own government for not protecting people suspected of being trafficked into Britain, primarily as domestic workers. Finally, she hoped that release of the movie version of Northup’s story would inspire “governments, businesses, unions, other non-governmental organizations and individuals to do more than simply wring their hands at past atrocities and instead renew their commitment to effective action that will eradicate contemporary slavery once and for all.”¹⁶

¹⁵ http://www.thestar.com/entertainment/movies/2013/11/15/12_years_a_slave_has-canadian_connection accessed April 21, 2015.

¹⁶ http://www.antislavery.org/english/press_and_news/news_and__press-releases (accessed April 10, 2015).

Her admonition bore results. Benjamin Palmer, a United Kingdom Youth Ambassador for the organization One was among 150 advocates across Europe who lobbied members of the European Parliament to address the problem of extreme poverty. He noted that Solomon Northup's story serves as an inspiration for people to act against injustice by observing that Northup was able to escape his life of slavery only because Samuel Bass was willing to take a risk on his behalf by mailing his plea to friends in New York who initiated his emancipation. "He didn't just get emotional and angry about Solomon's position," he noted, "he did something" and pled for the movie's fans to work for social justice in the modern world.¹⁷

Even though *Sunday Times* writer Cosmo Landesman observed that anti-slavery organizations had experienced little benefit from the movie's release-- "Following (movie director Steve) McQueen's BAFTA appearance, Anti-Slavery International had 516 hits on its website, just 146 more than its monthly average of 370,"--Palmer urged moviegoers to "Get angry and emotional at the injustices that exist today and then let them motivate you to action."¹⁸

Meanwhile, Jamie Doward, writing in the British newspaper *The Guardian*, hoped that *Twelve Years A Slave* would inspire British efforts to focus on the country's history in the Atlantic slave trade. He cited the subsequent British film *Belle* as hope that Britons would continue to focus on the issues of slavery in the aftermath of *Twelve Years A Slave*. The British film

¹⁷ <http://www.one.org/international/blog/one-thing-that-most-people-missed-after-watching-12-Years-a-Slave> (accessed April 10, 2015).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

tells the story of Dido Elizabeth Belle, daughter of an enslaved woman in the Caribbean who was transported to England where she came under the protection of the Lord Chief Justice, who ruled in 1772 that an owner could not carry a slave out of Britain by force, a ruling that contributed significantly to the abolition of slavery there. Historian Miranda Kaufmann hoped that *Belle* “will have as big a splash in Britain as *12 [sic] Years a Slave*.” The movie along with the recently-published book *Slavery and the British Country House*, the online project “Legacies of British Slave-ownership” sponsored by University College London, and the “Making Freedom” exhibition sponsored by the Royal Geographic Society, along with the success of McQueen’s movie “are refocusing attention in Britain on the story of individual slaves, a much better way to illustrate the impact of slavery than simply citing statistics,”¹⁹ she added.

The same article cited Solomon Northup’s importance in the suit asking for an official apology, cancelation of debts, and assistance for cultural and educational institutions that the law firm of human rights lawyer Leigh Day filed against Britain, France, and the Netherlands for their role in the trans-Atlantic slave trade on behalf of fourteen Caribbean nations (known as the “CARICOM”). “The power of CARICOM nations, both within the UN and in the wider political world, combined with developments like *12 [sic] Years a Slave*,” Day commented, “is striking just at the right moment,”²⁰ hoping that the movie’s popular culture impact would strengthen the legal case.

¹⁹ <http://www.theguardian.com.world/2014/jan/12/belle-film-british-slave-trade> (accessed April 10, 2015).

²⁰ *Ibid.*

British historian Dr. Emily West of the University of Reading observed a flaw in the movie's interpretation of nineteenth century American life. While the film depicted the horrors of slavery extremely well, illustrated the social class divisions in the antebellum South, the restrictions on a slave's life, living conditions, and movements, it overemphasized the tolerance and integration of Northern society at the time. She noted that "Northern black people were everyday victims of white racism and discrimination, and in the free states of the North, black people were typically the 'last hired and first fired.'" The oversight, she added, is a fault of the filmmakers because Northup accurately noted the "obstacle of color" that he experienced in his home state in his book.²¹

Editorialist David Edwards reflected the positive British reaction to the film when he praised McQueen for his skill, writing that while "no work of art can be perfect," McQueen "(drove) home the horrors of racism not with a clunking mallet but with the persistent tap, tap, tap of casual, everyday cruelty," while movie critic Vincent Cooper contributed a rare negative reaction from the British Isles. Writing in *The Commentator*, Cooper noted that the theater was half-empty when he attended a showing and called the film "over-hyped . . . highly melodramatic, episodic, at times porno-sadistic" with "little

²¹ <http://www.history.extra.com/feature/historian-movies-12-years-a-slave-reviewed> (accessed April 10, 2015).

sense of emotional, psychological or narrative cohesion.” In the ultimate insult to a film, he wrote that “after half-an-hour the film became boring.”²²

Irish commenters recognized that *Twelve Years A Slave* exposed the inhumanity of slavery in the 19th century United States, but that it insulated the modern moviegoer from realities of contemporary life. “The film invited audiences to feel outrage against an aspect of history, then to savour the warmth that comes from the triumph of decency in the final reel,” the *Irish Times* commented, but the film contained “no prompt to face the fact of slavery remaining a reality for tens of millions of people today.” Irish writers shared with some of their counterparts in Britain a hope that the film would spark interest among individuals to become anti-slavery activists.²³

The International Labour Organization evidently harbored the same hope and used a subtle reference to the movie in its 2014 report on child slavery around the world. The report was entitled *At 12 years, a slave . . . children in forced labour*.²⁴ The organization evidently hoped to capture readers’ attention with the popular culture reference, then expose the horrors borne by children held in bondage.

Reaction to the film in Italy focused more on advertising than on the story or the quality of the film itself. Users lit up Italian social media with

²² <http://www.mirror.co.uk/tv/tv-reviews/12-years-a-slave-review-steve-3005190> (accessed April 17, 2015); http://www.thecommentator.com/article/4619/12_years_a_slave-two-and-a-half-hours-of-boredom (accessed April 17, 2015).

²³ <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/a-year-on-from-12-years-a-slave-slavery-continues>. (Accessed June 23, 2015).

²⁴ http://www.terredeshommes.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06140610_Child-labor?at-12-years-a-slave. (Accessed June 23, 2015).

scorching complaints about movie theater lobby posters promoting the film featuring large pictures of white actors Brad Pitt and Michael Fassbender who play supporting roles while containing only small (if any) pictures of Chiwetel Ejiofor who portrays Northup, who is, after all, the star of the story. BIM Distribuzione, the Italian distributor for the film, apologized and replaced the offending posters with one featuring the black star.²⁵ Summit Entertainment, the international distributor of the film, maintained that the original posters were unauthorized and quickly recalled them.²⁶ Northup's story in this instance was sidelined by contemporary sensitivity that perhaps it helped create, but that reduced its effectiveness in bringing a story of American slavery to Italian movie screens.

French reaction to *Twelve Years A Slave* was understandably subdued considering the amnesia about slavery in its Caribbean island colony of Haiti and of slavery in general that some writers such as Alyssa Goldstein Sepinwall ascribe to its culture. Perhaps Northup's story did not reach its potential audience to interpret slavery, but the film was nominated in the Best Foreign Film Category for the French Cesar Award. It lost to the Canadian film *Mommy*, a movie without the historical importance of *Twelve Years A Slave*.²⁷

Sweden might not seem to be a country that has a slave past for which to atone, but Northup's story led some Swedes to question that innocence.

²⁵ <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/the-hot-button/italian-distributor-pulls-12-years-a-slave-posters> (accessed April 10, 2015).

²⁶ <http://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2013/12/12-years-a-slave-italian-poster-recall>. (Accessed June 23, 2015).

²⁷ <http://h-france.net/fffh/maybe-missed/happy-as-a-slave-the-toussaint-louverture-miniseries> (accessed April 21, 2015); <http://deadline.com/2015/01/cesar-award-nominations> (accessed April 13, 2015).

Swedish reaction included commentary by Desiree Wariaro, an editor at *Media Diversified*, who wrote that the film underscored the observation that Sweden has no monuments commemorating the lives lost to Sweden's role in the slave trade and that "nobody writes about how the country I live in produced the iron that shackled the sixty million or more kidnapped bodies that made our surroundings possible." Swedish citizens, she maintained, "cower under the whip of a racial paradigm" and that the movie does not portray "blackness in a way I remotely know or recognize . . ." ²⁸

Across the globe in a country that had no legacy of African slavery, Japanese reviewers recognized the film as an unflinching survey of a horrific part of American history. Kaori Shoji, writing in *The Japan Times*, described it as "an outright, unapologetic indictment of the heinous crimes committed against blacks in the Deep South prior to the American Civil War." Its reality made it "often too painful to sit through" in his opinion, but it drove home an important lesson—not just the horror of Northup's twelve-year ordeal, but "that for legions of people, slavery lasted their entire lives, and for generations." ²⁹

An anonymous reviewer in *Time Out Tokyo* agreed, noting that the movie "has absolutely no interest in reconciliation, in forgiveness, in making slavery [into] history," but instead aimed to create "an honest believable experience: in culture and context, place and people, soil and skin . . . the final scenes . . . are

²⁸ <http://www.newstatesman.com/culture/2013/12/watching-12-years-a-slave-blindingly-white-capital-city> (accessed June 22, 2015).

²⁹ Kaori Shoji, "12 Years a Slave," <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2014/03/06/films/film-reviews/12-years-a-slave> accessed September 4, 2015.

as angry, as memorable, as overwhelming as anything modern cinema has to offer.”³⁰

Japanese reaction to the film’s message reflects reaction in other areas as well. Residents of many countries either learned about American slavery or had their stereotypes reconfirmed, but many of them extended the message to their own countries, asking the question “Did we have a role in the slave trade, and, if so, have we recognized it?”

Solomon Northup dropped from public attention by the mid-1860s, and his fate is not known. His biographers maintain that he likely worked in the Underground Railroad, but that organization operated in secrecy, so his presence cannot be positively determined.³¹

Solomon Northup’s importance in a historical context is that he continues to tell an important story about slavery from a rare perspective. Antebellum slave owners continue to illustrate their experience of slavery through the letters, records, and diaries they left behind. Few slaves were able to do that because of high illiteracy rates resulting from their owners’ preferences. Solomon Northup was one of the very small number of people who could tell a story of slavery from the underside. His voice still explains the realities of slavery in Louisiana’s Red River Valley; he still speaks for others caught in the same chains of bondage that held him prisoner in Louisiana who could not speak for themselves. Solomon Northup still matters.

³⁰ “12 Years a Slave” <http://www.timeout.jp/en/tokyo/8582/12-Years-a-Slave>, accessed September 4, 2015.

³¹ Fiske, Brown, and Seligman, *Solomon Northup*, 145-153.