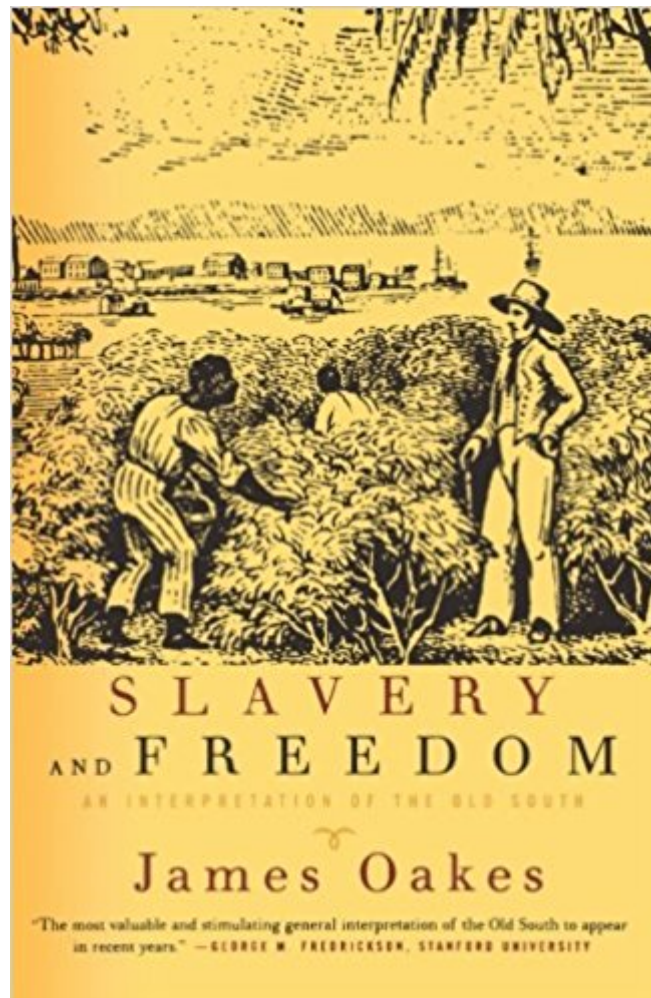




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# Slavery And Freedom: An Interpretation Of The Old South



## Synopsis

"The most valuable and stimulating general interpretation of the Old South to appear in recent years." —George M. Fredrickson This pathbreaking interpretation of the slaveholding South begins with the insight that slavery and freedom were not mutually exclusive but were intertwined in every dimension of life in the South. James Oakes traces the implications of this insight for relations between masters and slaves, slaveholders and non-slaveholders, and for the rise of a racist ideology.

## Book Information

Paperback: 268 pages

Publisher: W. W. Norton & Company; Highlighting edition (May 17, 1998)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0393317668

ISBN-13: 978-0393317664

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 0.7 x 8.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 14.9 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 5.0 out of 5 stars 4 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #43,779 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #18 in Books > History > World > Slavery & Emancipation #163 in Books > History > Americas > United States > Civil War #248 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Sociology > Race Relations > Discrimination & Racism

## Customer Reviews

In a rich, challenging set of interpretive essays, Oakes ( *The Ruling Race* ) views slavery in the Old South as a product of liberal capitalism, yet an institution wholly at odds with liberal concepts of freedom and society. He demonstrates how slavery hindered the growth of a class of independent small farmers; how the master-slave relationship affected the fabric of every other relationship in the South; how violence, sexual abuse, personal degradation and the breakup of families were basic components of the slave system. A historian at Northwestern University, Oakes shows that slave resistance during the Civil War fostered the Confederacy's internal collapse--a phenomenon slighted by most historians. The concluding chapter traces the postwar emergence of a new landlord-merchant class that wielded political power against landless Southerners, black and white. Oakes's rewarding synthesis strips away myths and misconceptions surrounding slavery and its aftermath. Copyright 1990 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Slavery and freedom must always be understood in context, and the appropriate context in the Old South was liberal capitalism, historian Oakes argues in five telescopic essays. Weaving an interpretive synthesis, he fixes on slavery's problematic relationships in a dynamic economy and polity moving with revolutionary power to define freedom with an ever-increasing universalism that the Old South selectively embraced and eschewed. Oakes's powerful little book surges with fresh rejoinders to much of the most important work on the nature of slavery, the South, and the American nation.--Highly recommended.- Thomas J. Davis, Univ. at Buffalo, N.Y. Copyright 1990 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Slavery and Freedom: An Interpretation of the Old South. By James Oakes. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990. Pp. xxii, 246. \$22.95.) In Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel, Mrs. Bird asks, "What could induce you to leave a good home, then, and run away, and go through such dangers? The woman [Eliza] looked up at Mrs. Bird, with a keen, scrutinizing glance... 'Ma'am,' she said, suddenly, 'have you ever lost a child?'" In this telling scene between Eliza and a northern woman who helps her, Stowe struck the moral cord in the hearts of many middle-class, religious families. The destruction of the slave family is one repeatedly analyzed by historians and typically placed among one of the most destructive affects of the peculiar institution. Recently, micro-analysis works such as, "The African-American Family" (1998) by Leslie Owens, have successfully divorced the individual from society, losing its linkage to the bigger picture. In James Oakes' second book, Slavery and Freedom, Oakes declares that the destruction of the slave family is ultimately a result of slaves being 'outsiders' from Southern society. Oakes, in a similar light to works such as the eminent historian Kenneth Stampp's Peculiar Institution, examines fundamental questions of Southern antebellum history, the structure of slavery, the relationship between slaves and their masters, as well as the politics of slavery. Oakes argues, "This is not a study of the origins of the Civil War so much as the "southern road" to it... These, then, are essays in interpretation, frankly exploratory and by intent suggestive rather than definitive." (xx) Oakes convincingly argues that since slavery is always defined as the complete denial of freedom within a society; freedom is "inescapably" tied to the way a society defines slavery. Drawing on lessons learned from other 'slave societies' such as ancient Greece and Rome, Oakes writes that the Old South's slavery touched every aspect of life in the south. "It dominated the social structure, drove the economy, and permeated the political system." (40) By the time of the American Revolution, the North and South were at the crossroads of exceptionalism; yet as Oakes writes, "New World slavery was itself the servant of the driving

force of capitalism." (52) As Oakes writes, "American masters were the first in history whose power depended on commercial relations with a capitalist world that was ultimately more powerful than all the slave societies put together." (53) A cogent idea, Oakes lauds the fugitive slaves for forcing change in America and ultimately bringing freedom to four million enthralled peoples. He writes that the reality of fugitives brought the Northern 'liberty laws' face-to-face with the Constitution's protection of property. Slave resistance, in the form of runaways, according to Oakes, is ultimately what helped divide the nation toward war and emancipation. Oakes writes, "Many citizens who were perfectly prepared to defend the masters' right to own slaves were increasingly unprepared to let the slaveholders exercise their privileges as masters at the expense of northern liberties and safeguard." (173) In relations between slaveholders and nonslaveholders, Oakes writes, that the planter class often offered minor concessions in order to solidify the yeomen's support for slavery- a view echoed a decade later by historian Sean Wilentz. However, Oakes contends that it is not these concessions but rather racism that is the ultimate unifier of support for slavery. "Racism thus had the one advantage that all dominant ideologies must have to be effective: it meant such different things to different people that it could bring together those for whom no other terms of agreement were available." (131) While, Oakes discusses the important racism served in unifying the South, he makes no attempt to trace the divergence of white supremacy in the North which would only grow stronger as the North looked to keep slavery where it already existed as a way to oppress blacks- slave and free. Southerners, on the other hand, looked to spread slavery through the territories as a way to maintain their own unique form of white supremacy. Another critique of Oakes' work comes in the form of his perpetuating of the American 'yeoman' farmer myth. As the eminent Jeffersonian scholar, Joyce Appleby demonstrates in her article, "Commercial Farming and the 'Agrarian Myth' in the Early Republic," historians have placed an over emphasis on the "romantic myth of the rural self-sufficient" farmer. Oakes resists continuing this trend by writing, "Whereas slaveholders produced first for the market and tried in addition to cultivate subsistence crops, yeomen farmers produced first for their own subsistence and tried in addition to cultivate marketable commodities." (107) However, by labeling nonslaveholders of the Old South as yeoman, it derives the very connotation Oakes is trying to avoid. Nevertheless, *Slavery and Freedom* is a seminal synthesis of scholarship, where Oakes brilliantly blends the major works into a coherent, highly readable study of slavery. Showing deep reflection, Oakes adds new interpretations as well as new questions to a century-old debate that has raged within academia. Through the use of new and obscure sources Oakes' work is thought provoking and significantly helps further one's understanding of slavery's relationship to freedom, and will doubtlessly be a reference for students of the peculiar institution for

years to come.

After reading Oakes' *The Ruling Race* (which I highly recommend), I decided to give this book a try. This book is just what the title says, an interpretation of the Old South. Specifically, Oakes looks at slavery and how it affected the antebellum South politically, socially, and economically. He also spends the last chapter discussing the differences between the South before the Civil War and after Reconstruction, disagreeing with historians who have stated that sharecropping was just like slavery and politics was exactly the same. In most of Oakes' arguments, he is very persuasive. Oakes brings a lot of new ideas to the table, but all of them are based upon meticulous research so he deserves kudos for that. The only negative about the book is that it can be scholarly and academic, which means, at times, it does not read like a page turner, but at other times it really does read easy and flows well. Oakes' writing style helps, though. Overall, while this is certainly not a definitive look at the antebellum South (and Oakes says as much in the preface), it can serve as an excellent intro or open even the most seasoned Southern historian's eyes to some new possibilities. Well worth the time.

Great book, loaded content. Very informative.

I was really impressed with the unbelievable wealth of knowledge Professor Oakes brings to light in this book. I recommend it be used in high schools throughout the country. Everyone should have access to this information. I knew him from Northwestern University. Thanks Dr. Oakes.

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