

‘Miserable, desolate and discouraging’: is this an accurate description of slave life?



Montage of images showing Africans being sold into slavery, adverts for slave auctions and the pursuit of runaway slaves in Barbados.

Source 1. Account of a slave auction. Taken from William Wilberforce, *A Letter on the Abolition of the Slave Trade, addressed to the freeholders and other inhabitants of Yorkshire*, London, 1807.

And, first, comes in that most degrading
spectacle of a negro sale.

Instances of
degrada-
tion.

Mr. Edwards himself acknowledges with
frankness and liberality, that "there is some-
thing extremely shocking to a humane and
cultivated

A negro
sale.

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cultivated mind, in the idea of beholding a numerous body of our unfortunate fellow creatures in captivity and exile, exposed naked to public view, and sold like a herd of cattle." * But the account given of one of those sales by a late traveller, in his highly instructive and interesting work,† will convey a more precise idea of the scene:—"The poor Africans, says he, who were to be sold, were exposed naked, in a large empty building like an open barn. Those who came with intention to purchase, minutely inspected them; handled them, made them jump, and stamp with their feet, and throw out their arms and their legs; turned them about; looked into their mouths; and, according to the usual rules of traffic with respect to cattle, examined them, and made them shew themselves in a variety of ways, to try if they were sound and healthy. All this was distressful and humiliating; but a wound still more severe was inflicted on the feelings, by some of the purchasers selecting only such as their

judgment led them to prefer, regardless of the bonds of nature and affection."

"The husband was taken from the wife, children separated from their parents, and the lover torn from his mistress."

"In one part of the building was seen a wife clinging to her husband. Here was a sister hanging upon the neck of her brother. There stood two brothers enfolded in each others arms, mutually bewailing their threatened separation. In other parts were friends, relatives, and companions, praying to be sold to the same master, using signs to signify that they would be content with slavery, might they but toil together."

Source 2. Account of slave life by Mr Thomas. Taken from *Abridgement of the Minutes of Evidence taken before a Committee considering the Slave Trade*, 1789.

W. INDIES.—N. AMERICA. THOMAS.

Negroes in Nevis appear in the field about 6 o'clock, work till about 9, when they breakfast; at $\frac{1}{4}$ before 10 to resume their work, which is continued to 12, they are then discharged till 2, in this interval, out of crop, the major part of the gang are expected to bring a small bundle of grafs, during crop: the cattle fed with sliced cane-tops. At 2 o'clock they enter the field again, and work till 6, and about 7, if out of crop, a few bundles of grafs are again thrown. Once a week allowance given out to the head of each family, either at 12 at noon, or about 7 at night.

Women with child

temptations.

The food usually distributed among the negroes consisted of rice, coarse flour, rye-meal, dried peas and beans, American corn, and also of salt provision, viz. herrings, shad and other salt fish; they had also the Island provision, viz. potatoes, yams, Indian corn, bananas, plantanes and cassada; but these three last articles were the produce of their own provision ground, their private property. The quantity of provision allowed was mostly from 7 to 9 pints a week for each negro, of any of the above articles, and the same number of herrings or shads, or a proportional quantity of salt fish; the above quantity was given on many estates to every child as soon as weaned. This food, in his judgment, proper for the negroes, and though a bare sufficiency for their support, the weekly allowance is not wholly depended on, the industrious having many advantages from their provision ground, the produce of which furnishes them with considerable sums; as well as raising hogs, goats and various species of poultry. Negroes near towns derive advantage from selling grass and fuel to the inhabitants. Hence they have food amply sufficient for their support, insomuch that many of them purchase fine cloaths, and frequently die possessed of what may be called large sums of money to them.

Seldens

Source 3. Evidence of Mr Francis regarding the treatment of slaves. Taken from *The Debate on a Motion for the Abolition of the Slave Trade*, 1791.

He instanced an overseer, who, having thrown a Negro into a
copper of boiling cane-juice, for a trifling offence, was punished
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merely by the loss of his place, and by being obliged to pay the
value of the Slave. He stated another instance of a girl, of
fourteen, who was dreadfully whipt for coming too late to her
work in the morning—fell down motionless after it, and was
then dragged along the ground, by the legs, to an hospital,
where she died. The murderer, though tried, was acquitted
by a jury of his peers, from the idea, that it was impossible a
Master should destroy his own property. That this was a no-
torious fact, mentioned in the Jamaica Gazette, which had
even happened, *since* the question of Abolition had been
started.

Source 4. Description of an atypical slaveowner. Taken from Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa as written by himself*, London, 1789.

And indeed I soon found that he fully deserved the good character which Captain Doran had given me of him; for he possessed a most amiable disposition and temper, and was very charitable and humane. If any of his slaves behaved amiss he did not beat or use them ill, but parted with them. This made them afraid of disobliging him; and as he treated his slaves better than any other man on the island, so he was better and more faithfully served by

by them in return. By his kind treatment I did at last endeavour to compose myself; and with fortitude, though moneyless, determined to face whatever fate had decreed for me. Mr. King soon asked me what I could do; and at the same time said he did not mean to treat me as a common slave. I told him I knew something of seamanship, and could shave and dress hair pretty well; and I could refine wines, which I had learned on ship-board, where I had often done it; and that I could write, and understood arithmetic tolerably well as far as the Rule of Three. He then asked me if I knew any thing of gauging; and, on my answering that I did not, he said one of his clerks should teach me to gauge.