

Little Things Matter

BY DONALD McCLOSKEY

Without Consent or Contract: The Rise and Fall of American Slavery
By Robert William Fogel, New York: W.W. Norton, 539 pages, \$22.50

75.

Robert Fogel, an economics professor at the University of Chicago and a towering figure in historical economics, has this to say about American slavery: It was not doomed. It had to be killed like a snake. The killing was a close thing: "Political forces, not economic ones, were the overriding factors in the destruction of slavery." The political forces depended on, of all things, religion. And the religion depended on individual people—old-fashioned, honest-to-goodness men and women—not on Progress or Capitalism or some other natural force shrieking aloud.

Fogel's book combines the best of economic history with the best of political and religious history. It gives the reader a short and lucid introduction to economics, demography, nutrition science, political science, British history,

American history, Southern history, intellectual history, and Protestant theology. It teaches all these from a deeply moral point of view, namely, that we are responsible for our freedom. The book is a stunner.

But a story goes with it.

Back in 1974 Fogel and Stanley Engerman were victims of an academic riot. Their clumsily titled but finely researched book *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery* said what most historians of the subject already knew by then—that slavery was not an economic drain on the South. And it said what the historians should have figured out on their own—that an owner would not damage a slave whose purchase price was two or three times the average workingman's yearly income.

The notion that slaves were capital

equipment offended some people in 1974, but not any professional historian. After all, that's how the slaveowners actually talked. A farmer does not buy a \$50,000 tractor unless he reckons it will earn him something. And he does not damage the tractor after he buys it. That was the essence of the Fogel and Engerman book. The wonder is that it made so many people so angry.

In 1974, though, we had just come through an angry decade. Some of the anger had happened on college campuses, you may recall, and the professors were by then hardened to political thuggery. In the style of Chicago Mayor Richard Daley's police force at the 1968 Democratic National Convention, the academics who encountered *Time on the Cross* broke ranks and commenced flailing at Fogel and Engerman with any clubs they could get their hands on. Historians such as Herbert Gutman and a collective of angry economists on the left produced book-length replies of surprising violence. Time on the cross? No kidding.

Now a decade and a half later Fogel has replied, and he has passed beyond the critics to unify the old history with the new. *Without Consent or Contract* is merely the lead book of a set of four; the other three contain technical papers written by Fogel, Engerman, and their numerous students and collaborators. (Fogel wrote this book mostly as a sideline. His main project these days is a massive history of mortality and nutrition since the 17th century.)

The first half of *Without Consent or Contract*, describing the rise of slavery as a triumph of materialism, is a 200-page book on its own. It is weighty with new learning since 1974 on the condition of slaves and of the South. A great social scientist here invites the reader into the workshop.

Fogel writes clearly, and despite all provocations he is even-tempered throughout (probably because he has all the scholarly ammunition and can afford to be generous to his critics). He has won the debate, demonstrating beyond scientific doubt what was merely plausible in 1974: that slaves were well treated (better than Northern factory

hands, for example), that slaves worked hard and well, that Southern agriculture was highly productive, that the South was



Born too soon: Isaac, a smith, was one of Thomas Jefferson's slaves; the woman below was a slave who served as a nurse to the Minor family of Virginia. Fogel argues that slavery ended for political reasons, not economic ones.



prosperous under slavery—in short, that the system was not about to come crashing down of its own weight without abolitionist pressure.

The second half looks closely at that abolitionist pressure. Fogel tells a story of individuals who mattered, from William Wilberforce, the early British abolitionist, to William Garrison, Lewis Tappan, Preston Brooks, and numberless others. Mass events also mattered, such as the slowing of immigration late in the 1850s that kept the Know-Nothings loyal to the Republicans. But these too were

often minor by the standard of movement history. Throughout the history of abolition, and especially in its last few years Fogel writes, "the overarching role of circumstances in ultimate victory need to be emphasized. There never was a moment between 1854 and 1860 in which the triumph of the antislavery coalition was assured."

Fogel is telling a common story: For want of a nail, the shoe was lost; for want of a shoe, the horse was lost; for want of a horse, the battle was lost; for want of the battle, the kingdom was lost, and all for the want of a horseshoe nail. These days professional historians usually avoid this type of history for two reasons.

For one thing, the horseshoe-nail world is not stable. As students of "chaos theory" have pointed out, simple but unstable models can generate astonishingly complicated patterns, in which horseshoe nails and butterfly wings can have big consequences. They do in battles and in the weather. Fogel is making just such a point about the fall of slavery. American politics in the late 1850s, he says, depended on individual human wills. The slightest perturbation could have yielded a different history.

The trouble is that any old perturbation will do. The telling of the story becomes problematic if little things matter because there are so damned many little things. For example, some individual unknown to history might have had the power to stop the burning of the hotel in May 1856 that led to John Brown's outrages, but this individual failed to arrive in the posse (maybe he had a bad cold and was in bed). If this person had arrived, history might have taken a different turn, but we shall never know. It is so much nicer if one can attribute the fall of American slavery to, say, the self-interest of the bourgeoisie or the triumph of modernization rather than the actions, or lack of action, of millions of faceless individuals.

And that's the other reason the horseshoe-nail history is unpopular. It puts the individual with a moral choice at the center of history, or at least at the center of the periods and problems for which the

nice linear models of big forces fail. It therefore enrages the left. The left wants individual generals and criminals and artists to be governed by social forces, the better for *apparatchiki* to govern them by formula. If the *apparatchiki* were so smart, of course, they would be rich; the economic objection to deterministic history does not occur to its proponents. Something is screwy with the notion that all history is predictable. Partly it may be, but there will be periods of individual creativity on which history will often turn.

Fogel's book makes us face up to the chaos without abandoning the gains from systematic modeling and measurement.

Little things may indeed matter, and did in the fall of American slavery. It seems a paradox. Left-leaning students of slavery, hostile to quantification, end by reducing history to a formula and making blacks the serfs of their past. A quantitative economist, who has learned that religion matters to American history, ends by emphasizing the complexities of politics and the saliency of moral freedom.

Donald McCloskey is John F. Murray Professor of Economics and History at the University of Iowa. His book If You're So Smart: The Narrative of Economic Expertise will be published by the University of Chicago Press in September.