

*Epic Journeys of Freedom: Runaway Slaves of the American Revolution and Their Global Quest for Liberty.* By CASSANDRA PYBUS. Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 2006. 303 pages. \$26.95 (cloth).

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Looking back over his career, Gary B. Nash counted among his “greatest satisfactions” the privilege to have participated in the movement to “construct a more democratically conceived American history.” A history, he reminded readers in *The Forgotten Fifth*, whose goal it was not to “destabilize” or fragment existing narratives but “rather to bring attention to those forgotten Americans who have inarguably been part of constructing our society and our nation.”<sup>1</sup> Chief among those forgotten Americans moved to the center stage of history in the past several generations have been African slaves. The work of recovering the slave experience—its origins, contours, and development—numbers among the most important accomplishments of American historical study in the past century.

Of particular importance has been the effort to recover slaves’ persistent struggles for freedom and equality. For slaves, as Herbert Aptheker, Benjamin Quarles, Sylvia Frey, and others have shown, it presented an opportunity to attain these rights, whether or not some whites were willing to grant them, through uprisings, enlistments, testimonials, legislative petitions, and court cases. For whites, as Ira Berlin reminds us in his foreword to *Epic Journeys of Freedom*, the revolutionary era gave rise to a paradox of rhetorical commitment to universal equality and a practice of limiting privileges to a small part of the population. For Cassandra Pybus the revolutionary era presents an opportunity of a different sort; that is, the chance to recover some of the specific experiences of individual slaves as they “struggled tenaciously to make the rhetoric of liberty a reality in their own lives” (xvii). In her new work, Pybus constructs a series of intricately drawn “‘Biographies’ of flight” (xi) that encapsulate the lives of more than thirty men and women as they fled their homes to join the British in the hopes of forging new lives abroad. These stories are woven together into a single narrative that brings fleeing slaves from Virginia and the Carolinas to New York, Nova Scotia, and London and eventually to distant colonies in Sierra Leone in West Africa and New South Wales in Australia.

The vignettes themselves are diverse and include the story of George Washington’s slave Harry, who fled Virginia to become a corporal in the Black Pioneers, a division of the Royal Artillery Company, before departing for Nova Scotia and eventually making his way to Sierra Leone with his family. Caesar, a slave of unknown origins who likely defected to the British, made his way to England before being sentenced to a lifetime of penal servitude in New South Wales for the crime of theft. Mary Perth fled Virginia with her daughter to Lord Dunmore before embarking on a journey that took her to Nova Scotia, Sierra Leone, England, and then back to Sierra Leone. Along the way she married twice, opened, closed, and reopened a boardinghouse, and began keeping house for the governor of Sierra Leone.

These and other biographies allow Pybus to make several contributions to African American history. First, her work deepens our understanding of the global context of the African American experience. Though Pybus is not the first to examine the fate of black loyalists as they departed America for different parts of the globe, she is among the first to blend many of their stories into a single narrative that has the effect of highlighting the expansive and international nature of the black loyalist experience. From the Atlantic world to the Pacific Rim, some of the subjects of Pybus’s narrative come across as highly mobile agents of their own destinies, capable of adapting

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<sup>1</sup> Gary B. Nash, *The Forgotten Fifth: African Americans in the Age of Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 2006), vii.

transoceanic ideas such as evangelical Christianity or republicanism to new environments and, as the story of Perth attests, crossing and recrossing oceans in search of better opportunities. Other runaways, however, were not so accomplished. Not all who fled to the British in search of opportunities attained them, Pybus reminds readers, since the global struggle for freedom soon gave way to a global backlash against free and enslaved African peoples. An oppressive labor regime characterized the lives of many black residents of New South Wales, and poverty, political oppression, and broken promises tempered the experiences of black settlers in Sierra Leone. Civil strife became a regular occurrence in both places, and by 1800 Caesar was executed as the leader of a gang of runaway convicts and Harry Washington found himself the exiled leader of a group of disgruntled settlers seeking independence from the Sierra Leone Company.

The author's second contribution arises from her determination to personalize the story of slavery or, as she explains, to "show people in the process of entering their own stories and creating their own destiny" (xvii). Pybus acknowledges the previous work of historians such as Aptheker and Frey, which has brought to light the existence of a mass uprising of thousands of runaway slaves during the Revolution but asserts that hers is a more strident history from the bottom up that puts names and faces to the "Ötens of thousands' that characterize a good deal of the historical discussion of black runaways during the Revolution" (xvii).

The point is well taken. Undoubtedly, Pybus succeeds in convincing the reader that individual runaways led lives that were important in their own right, though her biographies of flight would have been more compelling had she more fully accounted for the intertwined cultural and personal bonds linking blacks and whites across slavery, however unequally. In other words slave owners and others possessed their own biographies that by necessity acted on, influenced, impeded, and even encouraged individual runaways on their journeys. That the author relegates the master class to the background of these individual stories is understandable; there is nothing particularly new or salutary in the stories of insincere Founding Fathers or imperious company officials, after all. And yet the reader is left wanting more information about the role played in the outcomes of these global journeys by masters, royal officers, family members, and others, including Ann—the white wife of John Thompson, a black loyalist who served in the Royal Navy before departing with his interracial family for Sierra Leone—and Zachary Macaulay, a Sierra Leone company official who departed West Africa with Perth and twenty-five African children for England. Bringing some of these stories into *Epic Journeys of Freedom* would not only have confirmed the symbiotic nature of the master-slave relationship, and hence more fully reveal the complex nature of the African American experience during the revolutionary age, but it might also have moved us one step closer to making good on Nash's claim for a truly comprehensive and democratic narrative of American history.