

# Kent Academic Repository

## Full text document (pdf)

### Citation for published version

Mathisen, Erik (2013) Book Review, Gleanings of Freedom. Review of: Gleanings of Freedom: Free and Slave Labor along the Mason-Dixon Line, 1790-1860 by Grivno, Max. Slavery and Abolition, 34 (3). pp. 210-212. ISSN 0144-039X.

### DOI

<https://doi.org/10.1080/0144039X.2013.820399>

### Link to record in KAR

<https://kar.kent.ac.uk/73236/>

### Document Version

Author's Accepted Manuscript

#### Copyright & reuse

Content in the Kent Academic Repository is made available for research purposes. Unless otherwise stated all content is protected by copyright and in the absence of an open licence (eg Creative Commons), permissions for further reuse of content should be sought from the publisher, author or other copyright holder.

#### Versions of research

The version in the Kent Academic Repository may differ from the final published version.

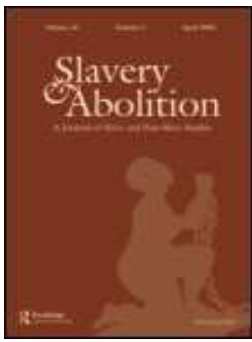
Users are advised to check <http://kar.kent.ac.uk> for the status of the paper. **Users should always cite the published version of record.**

#### Enquiries

For any further enquiries regarding the licence status of this document, please contact:

[researchsupport@kent.ac.uk](mailto:researchsupport@kent.ac.uk)

If you believe this document infringes copyright then please contact the KAR admin team with the take-down information provided at <http://kar.kent.ac.uk/contact.html>



# Slavery & Abolition

A Journal of Slave and Post-Slave Studies

ISSN: 0144-039X (Print) 1743-9523 (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/fsla20>

## Gleanings of Freedom: Free and Slave Labour along the Mason-Dixon Line, 1790–1860

Erik Mathisen

To cite this article: Erik Mathisen (2013) Gleanings of Freedom: Free and Slave Labour along the Mason-Dixon Line, 1790–1860, *Slavery & Abolition*, 34:3, 532-533, DOI: [10.1080/0144039X.2013.820399](https://doi.org/10.1080/0144039X.2013.820399)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0144039X.2013.820399>



Published online: 14 Aug 2013.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 42

Myers does not shy away from tackling the difficult, challenging and awkward questions related to black women's sexual liaisons with white men as a possible route to freedom, followed by security thereafter. Although not all such relationships were consensual, indeed many were coerced; black women were nonetheless highly pragmatic, recognizing that intimate affairs with white men could bring real benefits. Myers deserves much praise for her sensitive and nuanced appraisal of these relationships and their myriad forms in the face of women's available choices at the time. Black women were often able to derive considerable financial and social advantages for themselves and their children by establishing intimate relationships with white men.

This book is written with a great deal of flair – antebellum Charleston is vividly brought to life throughout, and there is enough narrative detail to inform general readers more unfamiliar with Charleston's history. Myers combines careful textual analysis with diligent quantitative research. The book is also unusually structured. Part One: 'Glimpsing Freedom' sets the tone in its consideration of pre-Civil War Charleston. Part Two: 'Building Freedom' follows on in a fairly conventional fashion by exploring the ways in which women were able to negotiate manumissions, find work and acquire property. But Part Three: 'Experiencing Freedom', somewhat surprisingly, switches to individual biographies of a handful of black women to illustrate the broader points made in the previous chapters. It is in this last section that Myers really displays her impressive abilities as a historical detective. This unusual overall format also works incredibly well, with the fascinating stories in Part Three really adding depth and texture to the overall work.

I would have liked to see more engagement with the notion of black women's 'agency' and the limitations of the term here, as at times she uses it too uncritically. Myers might also have probed in more depth the moves against Charleston's free people of colour in the 1850s. While poorer white labourers were undoubtedly behind some of the efforts to expel free blacks from the city, during this decade there were also broader moves to expel or enslave free people of colour across the whole of the South, in both urban and rural areas. Overall, though, *Forging Freedom* represents a significant addition to a growing body of scholarship on the contested meanings and experiences of the complex, malleable and fluid notions of freedom at a time when to be black and free was frequently, and increasingly, perceived as oxymoronic by white society.

Emily West  
University of Reading

© 2013, Emily West

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0144039X.2013.820402>

**Gleanings of Freedom: Free and Slave Labour along the Mason-Dixon Line, 1790–1860**, by Max Grivno, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 2011, xiii + 269 pp., \$50.00, ISBN 978-0-252-03652-1

For more than a decade, the study of slavery in the USA has undergone a quiet but thorough renovation. A new generation of scholars have moved away from the more entrenched ideological positions of an older literature, and dispensed with sweeping characterisations of the slave experience. The result has been an emergent literature of incredible richness, where geography, change over time and the relationship between the local and the international hold interpretive sway. In the hands of this younger generation, slavery looks like a more textured, more malleable institution; less a monolith than a system in a constant state of flux.

To be sure, those who count themselves among this new school of historical interpretation have not blazed an entirely new trail. Some of the best work by scholars such as Charles Dew, Barbara Fields and others, focused attention on the Upper South and showed just how malleable slavery could be, in the decades before the Civil War. By taking the same region as his focus of study, Max Grivno pays his due to this older work, while at the same time charting a very different course. The book rests on a set of important interventions. First, as the author makes plain in an

excellent introduction, that the transition from slavery to free labour in northern Maryland took place much earlier and more quickly than many earlier studies have allowed. By the 1790s, planters and farmers had adopted a variety of labour arrangements, using black slaves and white contracted labourers interchangeably. As Grivno argues, the piecemeal quality to this workforce was not without its detractors or its uncertainties, but it did prove a plastic arrangement which suited landowners and the region's economic fortunes. It was when the bottom dropped out of the international wheat market, and economic panic beginning in 1819 contracted credit across the country, that the problems of a half-slave, half-free work force came to the forefront.

The second intervention this book makes is in the field of labour history. By treating the experiences of black and white workers as a tangled whole, Grivno uncovers the logic behind Maryland's fitful transformation to free labour, better than any recent study in the field. As the author shows, planters and farmers did not replace one system of labour with another, so much as they attempted to 'bend the ostensibly antithetical systems of slavery and wage labor to the seasonal routines of diversified agriculture' (93). The result of this line of argument is a view of slavery which is dizzying in its variety: different from season to season, county to county, and even from one property to the next. Moreover, farmers and planters alike attempted to control their labour force in ways similar to how they controlled their slaves. An excellent third chapter takes a page from the social and cultural history of labour, to show how the desire to discipline workers and keep them sober, found landowners securing tools of legal and social control to keep their farm hands, free and slave, in line. For slaves, this included the promise of manumission, which was used as a tool to maintain a bid-dable slave population, in a region where slaveholder control was fast eroding by the 1830s and 1840s. Seen from this perspective, the threat of slaves being sold was a tool of control as much as it might have been an economic necessity for those landowners whose fortunes teetered on the edge. The point is not particularly new, but the level of depth which Grivno examines manumission and the internal slave trade in Maryland is of incredible value.

All told, this is a slim study which packs a punch. It is based upon painstaking research in a variety of state and local archives. The richness of the story being told does lead, at times, to some rather dense writing. In addition, the ambition of the book sets a very high bar. Though billed as a project which, at least in part, draws the experiences of free and slave labourers together, much of the project concerns itself with landowners, who attempted to steer their fortunes through an uncertain economic transformation. A final chapter, which uncovers the social world of workers, does not enjoy the same analytical coherence as earlier parts of the book, as the challenge of drawing a variety of threads together overwhelms the narrative arc of the study. These quibbles aside, the ambition at the heart of *Gleanings of Freedom* is impressive, and the book makes good on almost all of what it sets out to examine. It is a persuasive and powerful study of a rural labour system at a tender moment of transition. It should rightly enjoy pride of place alongside some of the best work recently published on slavery in the USA, and it is a study from which scholars in a broader field can learn a great deal.

Erik Mathisen

*University of Portsmouth*

© 2013, Erik Mathisen

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0144039X.2013.820399>

**Lucretia Mott's Heresy: Abolition and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America**, by Carol Faulkner, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011, 312 pp., US\$45 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-8122-4321-5

Carol Faulkner's *Lucretia Mott's Heresy: Abolition and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* offers the first biography of Mott published since 1980. Unlike the only two biographies of Mott published in the last sixty years (*Valiant Friend: The Life of Lucretia Mott* by Margaret Hope Bacon and