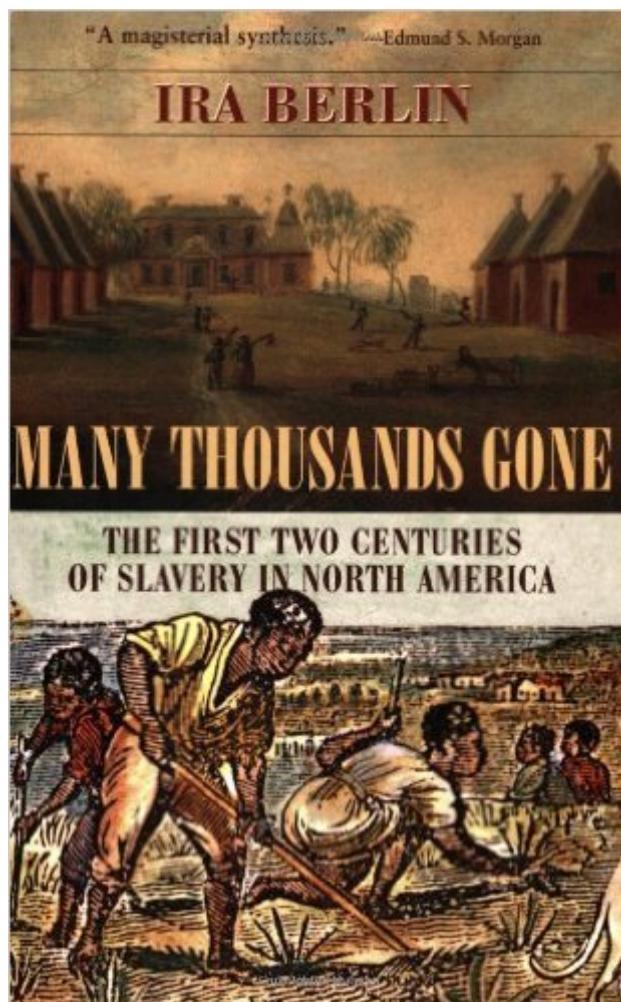


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Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries Of Slavery In North America



Synopsis

Today most Americans, black and white, identify slavery with cotton, the deep South, and the African-American church. But at the beginning of the nineteenth century, after almost two hundred years of African-American life in mainland North America, few slaves grew cotton, lived in the deep South, or embraced Christianity. *Many Thousands Gone* traces the evolution of black society from the first arrivals in the early seventeenth century through the Revolution. In telling their story, Ira Berlin, a leading historian of southern and African-American life, reintegrates slaves into the history of the American working class and into the tapestry of our nation. Laboring as field hands on tobacco and rice plantations, as skilled artisans in port cities, or soldiers along the frontier, generation after generation of African Americans struggled to create a world of their own in circumstances not of their own making. In a panoramic view that stretches from the North to the Chesapeake Bay and Carolina lowcountry to the Mississippi Valley, *Many Thousands Gone* reveals the diverse forms that slavery and freedom assumed before cotton was king. We witness the transformation that occurred as the first generations of creole slaves--who worked alongside their owners, free blacks, and indentured whites--gave way to the plantation generations, whose back-breaking labor was the sole engine of their society and whose physical and linguistic isolation sustained African traditions on American soil. As the nature of the slaves' labor changed with place and time, so did the relationship between slave and master, and between slave and society. In this fresh and vivid interpretation, Berlin demonstrates that the meaning of slavery and of race itself was continually renegotiated and redefined, as the nation lurched toward political and economic independence and grappled with the Enlightenment ideals that had inspired its birth.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Ira Berlin's MANY THOUSANDS GONE records the first two centuries of slavery in the present day United States AFTER European settlement. More thought-provoking and less dogmatic than Eugene Genovese's ROLL, JORDAN, ROLL, Berlin more fully makes the distinction between the various forms the system of slavery took in different regions and at different times in the period before Eli Whitney's Cotton Gin put new vigor into the old institution. The book is broken down into three main parts: Societies with Slaves (or the Charter Generation), Slave Societies (or the Plantation Generation) and the Revolutionary Generation (ending in approximately 1810 to 1820). Within each of these time frames, the book looks at the peculiar ways in which the institution of slavery developed in Virginia and the Upper South, South Carolina and the Lower South, the North and the Lower Mississippi Valley (Louisiana and Florida). Further, each such chapter focuses on the evolution of slavery in each region within each generation. The book compares indenture (and apprenticeships) with slavery and also describes how the influx of Africans from interior Africa swamped the Atlantic Creole populace, contributing to the idea of racial superiority (of whites) and the development of ideas about miscegenation as a polluter of racial purity. The charter generation and later "creolized" generations were more likely to be able to win or purchase freedom whereas each influx of non-creolized Africans contributed to the "Africanization" of the black populace and to harsher restrictions on slaves and other black & biracial persons. The book looks at de facto property-ownership among slaves and the development of the slave economy and its importance in the greater economy.

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