BY WALTER L. WILLIAMS

The "Sambo" Deception: The Experience of John McElroy in Andersonville Prison

EVER SINCE Stanley Elkins accepted the reality of the "Sambo" personality complex among black slaves in the American South, based upon an analogy of psychological destruction among concentration camp inmates, historians have debated the validity of this personality model.[1] Recent studies have attempted to use slave narratives to demonstrate that the Sambo personality was simply a role-playing technique to deceive and pacify whites.[2]

The difficulty with the slave narratives, as sources for understanding the slave personality, is to assess how typical their authors actually were. The writers of the narratives had more diverse backgrounds than did the average field hand, whether in terms of "hired out" wage labor, skilled artisanship, or religious leadership. Moreover, it may be argued that the basic fact that they had the fortitude to escape from slavery marked them as a distinct personality type, or at least as individuals not humbled by the master-slave relationship.

The problem for historians, then, is to look for other types of sources that would demonstrate role-changes among field slaves who did not escape. Because even Elkins recognized the major changes that occurred in the slave personality soon after emancipation, these sources would have to be direct observations of slavery while it was in existence. Thus, for this and other reasons the Works Progress Administration interviews during the 1930s with former slaves would not qualify as acceptable sources.

Unfortunately, this requirement severely limits the possible number of individuals who could have observed such role changes. Any white person who visited in the slave states would be automatically included in the group to which a Sambo role would be enacted, and even those rare visitors with strong anti-slavery and egalitarian ideals would seldom be in a position to gain the confidence of slaves enough to observe any personality changes when out of the presence of other whites.

However, an exception to this generalization would be those whites who were also in "bondage" among black slaves: that is, white prisoners of war taken deep into the South during the Civil War. Unlike most

[1] Stanley Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (Chicago, 1959); Ann J. Lane, *The Debate over Slavery: Stanley Elkins and his Critics* (Urbana, 1971).

[2] The literature on this subject is large and growing, but the best works include John Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York, 1972); George P. Rawick, *From Sundown to Sunup: the Making of the Black Community* (Westport, Conn., 1972), Charles H. Nichols, *Many Thousand Gone: the Ex-Slaves' Account of their Bondage and Freedom* (New York, 1963); Stanley Feldstein, ed., *Once a Slave: the Slaves' View of Slavery* (New York, 1971); and Gilbert Osofsky, ed., *Puttin' on Ole Massa* (New York, 1969).

Union soldiers, who only saw the last days of slavery as it was falling apart upon their invasion, those troops who were captured by the Confederacy observed the slave system in full operation. They were different from previous Northerners who had visited among slaves because their shackles and powerlessness were direct evidence to blacks that these whites were not part of the authority structure. There also seems to have been a realization among slaves that these prisoners had been fighting for a cause that was linked to their own freedom.

John McElroy was one of these white Union soldiers who, by reason of his capture, was outside the power structure normally occupied by whites. McElroy had been born in northern Kentucky in 1846, but grew up in St. Louis and Chicago. In March, 1863, he enlisted in the Sixteenth Illinois Cavalry, and was advanced to the rank of sergeant-major by the end of the year. On the third day of January, 1864, his camp was surprised and McElroy was taken prisoner by Confederate troops in Jonesville, Virginia, near the Cumberland Gap. Within two months he had been shipped to Andersonville Prison, in south Georgia.[3] It was here, about the last week of February, 1864, that McElroy had such an exceptional opportunity to observe Deep South slavery in operation. This observation so impressed McElroy that he emphasized it in his memoirs that he compiled in the late 1870s. He wrote:

"The stockade was not quite finished at the time of our arrival — a gap of several hundred feet appearing at the southwest corner. A gang of about two hundred Negroes were at work felling trees, hewing logs, and placing them upright in the trenches. We had an opportunity — soon to disappear forever — of studying the workings of the 'peculiar institution' in its very home. The Negroes were of the lowest field-hand class, strong, dull, ox-like, but each having in our eyes an admixture of cunning and secretiveness that their masters pretended was not in them. Their demeanor toward us illustrated this. We were the objects of the most supreme interest to them, but when near us and in the presence of a white Rebel, this interest took the shape of stupid, open-eyed, open-mouthed wonder, something akin to the look on the face of the rustic lout, gazing for the first time upon a locomotive or a steam threshing machine. But if chance threw one of them near us when he thought himself unobserved by the Rebels, the blank, vacant face lighted up with an entirely different expression. He was no longer the credulous yokel who believed the Yankees were only slightly modified devils, ready at any instant to return to their original horn-and-tail condition and snatch him away to the bluest kind of perdition; he knew, apparently quite as well as his master, that they were in some

[3] John McElroy, *Andersonville: A Story of Rebel Military Prisons* (Toledo, 1879). Biographical information comes from the Introduction to a recent edition edited by Philip Van Doren Stern (Greenwich, 1962). McElroy was exchanged near the end of the war and lived to the ripe age of eighty-three. He became best known as the editor of the Washington *National Tribune*.

way his friends and allies, and he lost no opportunity in communicating his appreciation of that fact and offering his services in any possible way. And these offers were sincere. It is the testimony of every Union prisoner in the South that he was never betrayed by or disappointed in a field Negro but could always approach any one of them with perfect confidence in his extending all the aid in his power whether as a guide to escape, as sentinel to signal danger, or a purveyor of food. These services were frequently attended with the greatest personal risk, but they were nonetheless readily undertaken. This applies only to the field hands; the house servants were treacherous and wholly unrealiable. Very many of our men who managed to get away from the prisons were recaptured through their betrayal by house servants, but none were retaken where a field hand could prevent it."[4]

McElroy's testimony indicates that field slaves of the deep South, while still under the effective control of the slave system, dropped the Sambo role when out of the presence of the master class. Such a conscious reaction, true of field slaves as well as escapees, demonstrates that the Sambo personality was indeed a deception.

---

[4] *Ibid.*, Chapter 4.