

Master Slave Husband Wife, by Ilyon Woo

Reviewed by Cindy Kennedy

In *Master Slave Husband Wife*, historian Ilyon Woo tells the remarkable story of an enslaved couple's audacious quest for freedom. Ellen and William Craft's perilous journey for self-emancipation began in December 1848 and would cover five thousand miles.

Ellen, born to Maria, an enslaved woman, and James Smith, her plantation master, had inherited her white father's fair complexion. When Ellen was 11, Smith gave her as a wedding present to his white daughter Eliza for her marriage to Robert Collins, a wealthy entrepreneur in Macon, Georgia. Ellen served as lady's maid and seamstress to "her half-sister-now-enslaver."

Before William turned 16, his entire family had been separated and individually sold off. A skilled cabinetmaker, William was allowed by his master to earn meager wages doing carpentry work in Macon. Enslaved by different plantation owners, Ellen and William formed an attachment. Having witnessed too many enslaved families ripped apart, they were determined to escape bondage before they had children.

The week before Christmas 1848, the couple concocted a bold, yet risky, scheme. Ellen would disguise herself as "Mr. Johnson," an ailing young white man, traveling with William as her manservant. Using her skills as seamstress, Ellen fashioned an outfit of slim pants, white shirt, long vest, and flowing cape, topped off by a tall hat covering her cropped hair. She wore green-tinted spectacles and put her arm in a sling.

Escaping in plain sight, as "master and slave," the couple used the cash William had saved. They first would board a train from Macon to Savannah, then a steamboat to Charleston, and, hopefully, onto freedom in the north.

Reaching the free states of New England, however, was no guarantee of safety. To appease southern states and preserve the Union, Congress passed the "Compromise of 1850," reinstating the Fugitive Slave Act, which granted slave masters the right to pursue their runaways anywhere.

Back in Georgia, Robert Collins sent two slavecatchers to Boston to recapture Ellen. Collins, however, underestimated the resolve of Bostonian abolitionists. Unitarian minister Theodore Parker was among those who protected Ellen and William Craft. A century later, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. would intone Reverend Parker's inspiring words: "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."

Beautifully written and thoroughly researched, *Master Slave Husband Wife* was included in *The New York Times'* 2023 Five Best Non-fiction Books list. "At heart," its author notes, *Master Slave Husband Wife* "is an American love story—an enduring relationship between a man and a woman, a couple and a country."