

An American Trilogy: Death, Slavery, and Dominion on the Banks of the Cape Fear River
By Steven M. Wise
Da Capo Press, Philadelphia, PA, 2009. 289 pages, \$26.00.

Reviewed by Henry Cohen

Henry Cohen is a lawyer with the Congressional Research Service, Library of Congress, and is the book review editor of *The Federal Lawyer*. The opinions expressed in this review are solely his own.

You have just dined, and however scrupulously the slaughterhouse is concealed in the graceful distance of miles, there is complicity. – Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Fate.”

One could hardly guess from the title of this book that at its heart is a powerful exposé of the pork industry, focusing on the horrors of hog farming in America today. The heart of this book, unfortunately, beats within a skeleton that is weak and disjointed, but no matter – the heart keeps the book very much alive.

The only allusion to the main subject of the book in its title or subtitle is the word “dominion,” as in the statement in *Genesis* that man shall have dominion over every living thing that moves upon the earth. Some religious believers use this statement to justify the use and abuse of animals by humans. But first I’ll explain the rest of the title, which lays out the skeleton of the book.

Steven M. Wise is an animal rights lawyer and the author of three previous books, two on animal rights and one on the end of slavery in England. Wise learned that a large hog-breeding factory (the word “farm” would not be appropriate) in Bladen County, NC, was on a site once inhabited by Native Americans and later by African-Americans. The Native Americans became victims of genocide, the African-Americans were enslaved, and the hogs are viewed as part of man’s dominion. The treatment of all three groups – Native Americans, slaves, and factory-farmed animals – constitutes an American trilogy of horror: hence the title of this book. Sensibly, Wise does not attempt to compare the evils inflicted upon these three groups, but, if you think it inappropriate even to mention the maltreatment of hogs in the same sentence as the maltreatment of Native Americans and African-Americans, then you haven’t read this book. What you will learn from it about hog farming will shock you.

Now, what is significant in the fact that Native Americans, slaves, and a hog factory all occupied the same site in North Carolina? Not much, in my view. Although linking the three may have seemed a good idea, Wise should have abandoned the notion when he saw how much better the heart of the book about the pork industry (chapters 5 through 9) was than the rest of the book. The rest of the book is interesting in parts, but it is a mishmash, covering, among other things, the history of Bladen County, including its slave and Indian populations; Indian attitudes toward animals (they killed animals, but respected them and believed that the animals gave themselves willingly to be killed and, in any case, would be resurrected – attitudes that, to some,

are superior to the white man's callousness, but, to me, still leave the animals dead); the history of the English translations of the Bible; historical Christian attitudes toward slavery (some Christians justified enslaving black people as the Curse of Ham); the spread of disease from the Old World to the New, and the view of Cotton Mather and others that God was killing off "those pernicious creatures" – Indians – to benefit the English; the breaking up of slave families when members of such families were sold; and disputes within today's fundamentalist Christian community over the environment, as some of the younger members of that community have come to believe that a Christian can be pro-environment. A theme that runs through these non-hog chapters of the book is that *Genesis* has been a disaster for Native Americans, black slaves, and animals. But Wise does not consider the extent to which *Genesis* has caused these disasters, or has merely been used to justify them. (Admittedly, citing *Genesis* to justify an evil can cause more of the evil.) In any case, some of these sundry subjects make for dull reading, but, when Wise begins his exposé of the pork industry, *An American Trilogy* becomes impossible to put down. The exposé begins with a chapter titled "Wilbur."

Wilbur is a pig, and Wise traces Wilbur's genealogy, conception, birth, and life, from nursing, through castration without anesthesia, teeth clipping, tail cutting, ear notching (nine notches on each ear for identification purposes), weaning before he is old enough to be weaned, being jammed in a pen for six months with just three square feet of space, and, finally, at the end of those six months, his bloody slaughter. The pigs raised in these factories are not named, of course, and I do not believe that Wise knew of a particular pig named Wilbur (other than the Wilbur of E.B. White's *Charlotte's Web*, who, unlike Wise's Wilbur, was saved from being slaughtered). Rather, Wise apparently created Wilbur as an exemplar of the more than 100 million pigs raised and slaughtered in the United States every year. There is nothing dishonest in Wise's creating Wilbur, however, because each of the more than 100 million pigs raised and slaughtered in the United States every year is an individual who could have a name. Pigs are at least as intelligent as dogs, and, despite their being treated as if they are unfeeling and interchangeable parts in an assembly line, each pig has a unique personality, according to people who know them.

Did I refer to Wilbur's "conception" in the previous paragraph? Yes, Wise tells us about Wilbur's parents and how they might have conceived him. Sows gestate for just under three months, and, on factory farms, they live in seven-foot-by-two-foot metal "gestation crates" while pregnant. Wilbur's mother could scarcely move in the crate, because she weighed more than 400 pounds and stretched the length of the crate. When Wilbur was born, she had given birth eight times in the previous three and a half years, which means that she spent almost two of those years in a gestation crate. After each time she gave birth, she was not given freedom to move, but was transferred to a "farrowing crate" to nurse her piglets; it too was only seven feet long, but, to make room for the piglets, it was five feet wide instead of two. Unfortunately, by the eighth time she gave birth, Wilbur's mother's PPSY (the number of pigs produced per sow per litter each year) had decreased, so she had to be killed and replaced by a more profitable sow. I will spare you Wise's description of how she was killed.

Wilbur's mother was impregnated by artificial insemination, because that procedure is a more efficient means to ensure pregnancy than is the natural procedure. That means that 700-

pound boars must be masturbated and their semen collected; every ten days is ideal. Wise quotes animal science professor Temple Grandin:

Each boar has his own little perversion the man had to do to get the boar turned on so he could collect the semen. Some of them were just things like the boar wanted to have his dandruff scratched while they were collecting him. ... The other things the man had to do were a lot more intimate. He might have to hold the boar's penis in exactly the right way that the boar liked, and he had to masturbate some of them in exactly the right way. There was one boar ... who wanted to have his butt hole played with. ...

Throughout *An American Trilogy*, Wise nicely mixes the horrors he reports with lighter passages such as this, as well as with interesting descriptions of his own research efforts. The pork industry is not eager to allow visitors (particularly animal rights lawyers) to witness their practices. Farm animals are not protected by the federal Animal Welfare Act or by state anti-cruelty laws, and Wise describes frustrated workers repeatedly beating and kicking animals, as well as smashing the heads of tiny piglets onto a cement floor (this is on tape).

Things are getting worse. Wise writes, "In the eight years following 1991, the number of hogs in North Carolina surged from 2.7 million to 10 million, [and] the number of factory hog farms jumped" Having been a vegetarian for more than 30 years (since soon after reading Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation* when it was published in 1975), I have nearly given up hope in our species, and have come to feel that all I can do is to heed Ralph Waldo Emerson's admonition with which I opened this review, and not be complicit. If Emerson were writing today, of course, he'd have to mention factory farms as well as slaughterhouses, because factory farms inflict a lifetime of torture on farm animals, and not merely an agonizing death. But I think that you get the idea.