

JOSIAH Henson, born to slaves in Maryland in 1789, was himself a slave until he escaped to Canada in 1841. In 1849 he published a book about his life.

This work attracted the attention of Mrs. Harriet Beecher Stowe, to whom he gave further particulars of his experiences. Thus Mrs. Stowe was provided with her principal character and ample material for *Uncle Tom's Cabin* which appeared in 1840.

Mr. Henson became a Baptist preacher and travelled widely, visiting England several times. In 1877 he published *Uncle Tom's Story of His Life*, which I have just been reading alongside a copy of the Anti Slavery Reporter 1987.

MY REACTION on reading the first was of shame that men could perpetrate such cruelty on their fellows, but relief that such conditions do not prevail today; but after reading the second book I am completely disillusioned.

Slavery is by no means dead. It thrives in many parts of the world in many forms.

From its own investigations and from reliable reports from other organisations the Society has produced a Devil's catalogue of human misery.

In INDIA, bonded labourers are believed to number five millions. The trap is sprung like this: the employer, usually a landowner but not always, provides an advance on wages and then sees to it that those wages are never more than sufficient to pay the exorbitant interest.

Extreme poverty and demands from landlords of higher castes force some parents to sell their daughters into prostitution. And in Delhi alone the unofficial total of beggars is 50,000.

In BRAZIL, hundreds of men, women and children are similarly trapped in debt bondage. In Bahia State, children as young as nine pick cotton with their

Shed a tear for today's slaves

By ROBERT MILLER

parents under the surveillance of armed guards. Thirty-six million children live in the streets nationally; 80,000 full time prostitutes scrape a living in Recife, the biggest town in the north-east.

A hundred children are abandoned in Rio de Janeiro every month. In Sao Paulo 1,200 gangs of child criminals possess 10,000 firearms.

In PARAGUAY the remnants of a forest dwelling tribe are continually being hunted down with firearms and dogs, to provide household slaves. This custom has another purpose: that the forests may be declared "clean" – cleared of its aborigines, before being leased for wood pulp to a multinational company.

"Gypsy children working in organised gangs for latterday Fagins can earn £500 or more a day stealing from passengers on the Paris Metro. They came originally from Yugoslavia, which is home to the largest community of Europe's 700,000 or so gypsies, and in the main have been sold by their parents." Gypsy Artful Dodgers are also very active in Italy, Germany, and Switzerland.

In MALAYSIA, THAILAND, SRI-LANKA, the story goes on, with young boys and girls being exploited in ways which, for the present purposes, may best be left to the imagination.

"Are there fewer slaves in the

world today than during the time of Wilberforce and the anti-slavery movement?" asks Julian Burger.

"Are we less barbarous societies after 40 years of law-making and admonition on human rights by the United Nations?" After quoting a rogues' gallery of despots who have plagued the world since the War, he says:

"Political, social and economic processes which are creating greater misery rather than better living conditions, have been set in motion.

"The situation of the most vulnerable groups in society – refugees, the stateless, indigenous peoples and child workers – is becoming more not less desperate. Our greed to possess as much as we can today is resulting in a careless destruction of the earth's resources.

"The forests are being felled, the oceans polluted, and big waste-lands of desert are being created. The famine in Sahelian Africa is the most dramatic, rather than the only, tragic example of these man-made disasters."

MOST, if not all, of these man-made disasters result from the way land is used or misused.

Slaves are people stolen from their land, or whose land is stolen from them. Of course there will always be people who will sell their souls and bodies for greed, whether they control land or not, but they should claim little of our sympathy.

If we have tears of pity to shed, we should reserve them for the millions who have nothing to offer for subsistence but a lifetime of cheap and hard labour.

Their only desire is to live, and if in desperation they commit acts which shock and appal, the more fortunate of us are in no position to sling stones. Moral principles cannot be expected to survive for long in empty stomachs.