

Preface: Who Were the Subjects of Slave Emancipation?

David Scott

They hanged him on a clement morning, swung
between the falling sunlight and the women's
breathing, like a black apostrophe to pain.
All morning while the children hushed
their hopscotch joy and the cane kept growing
he hung there sweet and low.

At least that's how
they tell it. It was long ago
and what can we recall of a dead slave or two
except that when we punctuate our island tale
they swing like sighs across the brutal
sentences, and anger pauses
till they pass away.

Imagine here, in Dennis Scott's solemn poem "Epitaph,"¹ an elegy for the Baptist War of 1831–32 and for, in particular, its principal leader, the slave and Native Baptist deacon "Daddy" Sam Sharpe, hanged in Montego Bay on 23 May 1832 for his role in that definitive rebellion. Not even the most casual reader of Scott's lamentation will fail to note the dramatic tensions through which we are made to feel the abject, melancholic force of this scene of cruel,

1 Dennis Scott, "Epitaph," in *Uncle Time* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1973), 41. © 1973. Reprinted by permission of the University of Pittsburgh Press. Scott was one of the finest poets of his generation, and "Epitaph," undoubtedly, is one of his most profound poems.

repetitive death: a plaintive morning with no hint of clemency about the judicial weather; the slightly stiffening signifier of black suffering and white vengeance punctuating the grammatical space between the enslaved onlookers' heaving, fearful apprehension and the cane's mocking, profitable indifference. But significantly Scott's mournful poem is less about the grammar of black pain itself (however that might be measured) than about the moral syntax of affective *remembering*—the present tenses in which the permanent shadow of that undeletable outrage shapes the way *we* (the lineal and spiritual descendants of that hanged slave) approach the ambience of that past. So that when we write our island stories we are obliged to ask, Who were the subjects of slave emancipation? Who paid its price?

Henry Bleby, too, wrote a strongly elegiac account of Sam Sharpe in which that creole slave figures, in the moment of his hanging, as a singular subject of emancipation:

His execution excited a good deal of interest; and a number of spectators assembled to witness it. He marched to the spot where so many had been sacrificed to the demon of slavery, with a firm and even dignified step, clothed in a suit of new white clothes, made for him by some female members of the family of his owner, with all of whom he was a favourite, and who deeply regretted his untimely end. He seemed to be entirely unmoved by the near approach of death; addressed the assembled multitude at some length in a clear, unflinching voice. . . . In a few moments the executioner had done his work, and the noble-minded originator of this unhappy revolt had ceased to exist.²

In Sharpe, Bleby had found a black image of the sacrifice at Calvary. Bleby, remember, was a Wesleyan missionary stationed at Lucea, Hanover, at the time the Baptist War broke out. He believed he recognized in Sharpe not only someone fluently eloquent in the rhetorical arts of persuasion, and possessed of a literate and farsighted intelligence, but also a man whose indomitable will to freedom was inspired by an acute sense of the “degradation and the monstrous injustice of the system” rather than by any personal suffering, and who, in consequence, was irrepressibly “bent upon its overthrow.” Famously, Sharpe had framed a doomed plan. After Christmas, by refusing to work unless paid the slaves were to assert the freedom he had encouraged them to believe had already been granted to them. They were only to fight, he told Bleby, if their masters sought to compel them back to the fields. But alas, once he saw the first fires “he knew that his whole plan was rendered abortive; for now the ‘buckras’ would shoot and murder the people without mercy . . . and he gave up all hope of their obtaining freedom at that time.”³

Defeated though it might have been, the Baptist War in the western parishes of Jamaica was the last nail in the coffin of British colonial slavery.⁴ The political influence of the West Indian slave owners over colonial policy—weakening steadily since the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815, and precipitously since the return of the Whigs to power in 1830—was

2 Henry Bleby, *Death Struggles of Slavery* (London: Hamilton, Adams, 1853), 118.

3 *Ibid.*, 118, 113–14.

4 For a recent account, see Christer Petley, *Slaveholders in Jamaica: Colonial Society and Culture during the Era of Abolition* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2009).

only further compromised by the extremity of the violence with which they responded to the insurrection. It roused and galvanized antislavery feeling against them. And certainly William Knibb's tour of Britain in the summer of 1832 (just as the Great Reform Act received royal assent), the publication of his pamphlet detailing the late events in Jamaica, and especially his appearance before the House of Commons Select Committee on the Extinction of Slavery, did much to quicken the parliamentary resolve to put an immediate end to slavery.⁵ *Still*, and perhaps not surprisingly, the economic interests and political rights of the slaveholders would trump the moral principles of the abolitionists, not to speak of the substance of the slaves' freedom. For when colonial secretary Edward Stanley presented his final draft of the imperial government's emancipation scheme that passed into law on 28 August 1833, he went a considerable distance toward mollifying the anxieties and accommodating the demands of the aggrieved slaveholders; indeed, he went a far way toward making *them*, rather than the slaves themselves, the *real* subjects of slave emancipation. Not only did the slaveholders secure a period of "apprenticeship" during which the former slaves would be compelled to work for their former masters, and not only did they secure the right to approve the letter of the emancipation bill in their own colonial legislatures—but also, and most remarkably, they secured the concession of an award of "Twenty Millions of Pounds Sterling" as the price of their political cooperation with the imperial scheme, as well as the formal *legal* acknowledgment that what they stood to lose by the abolition of slavery was a *right* in property. Thus the "Act for the Abolition of Slavery throughout the British Colonies; for promoting the Industry of the manumitted Slaves; and for compensating the Persons hitherto entitled to the Services of such Slaves" made it abundantly clear that however unjust or abominable or evil the institution of slavery, however horrific its practices of violence and violation, however galling it appeared that one human being should have such arbitrary power over another, its abolition nevertheless could not be conceived to abrogate the first principle of property, namely, that undue deprivation or confiscation necessarily triggered compensation, especially when that very principle had been encouraged and sheltered for so long by the imperial state itself.⁶

In his recent book, *The Price of Emancipation* (insightfully discussed later in this issue), Nicholas Draper takes up precisely this matter of the "Twenty Millions of Pounds Sterling" paid out to the slave owners in compensation after the abolition of slavery.⁷ Now, Draper's self-conscious interest is in the formation and transformation of British metropolitan elites, not those hanged West Indian slaves who fought for freedom.⁸ So it is important to note that the now familiar

5 William Knibb, *Facts and Documents Concerned with the Late Insurrection in Jamaica and the Violations of Civil and Religious Liberty Arising Out of It* (London: Holdsworth and Ball, and Wightman, 1832).

6 For the abolition act, see www.pdavis.nl/Legis_07.htm (accessed 13 December 2011).

7 Nicholas Draper, *The Price of Emancipation: Slave-Ownership, Compensation, and British Society at the End of Slavery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). For a sense of the larger Legacies of British Slave-Ownership project at University College London, of which Draper's book is now one aspect, see www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs.

8 On the impact of the compensation in the colonies, see Kathleen Mary Butler, *The Economics of Emancipation: Jamaica and Barbados, 1823–1843* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

“new imperial history” paradigm in which “metropole and colony” are to appear in the same frame is the historiographical strategy by which the *former*, not the latter, is illuminated. Draper’s aim is to gain some perspective on the extent of British complicity in slavery at the time the institution was abolished in the British Empire, the various means through which Britons came to own slaves at this late period in the institution’s history, and how at the ideological height of antislavery such slave owners were represented and represented themselves. To explore this he draws on the records of the Slave Compensation Commission, the body that between 1834 and 1845 managed and administered the distribution of the 20 million pounds sterling. In Draper’s view, this much underused resource shows that, contrary to the prevailing view (that no British wealth came from “immoral” economic activity), slave ownership was widespread. “The payment of compensation,” he writes, “was central to the final dismantling of the slave system, and when that slave compensation was offered to slave-owners in the 1830s there was, in effect, a feeding frenzy amongst sections of the British elites over the compensation money, a frenzy that drew thousands of Britons into asserting their ownership of the enslaved once the state attached a specific and immediate monetary value to the claims of ownership.”⁹

Important for readers of *Small Axe* will be Draper’s explicit location of his book in relation to two interconnected debates. The first turns on the questions raised by Eric Williams in *Capitalism and Slavery* concerning the relationship between slavery and Britain’s Industrial Revolution. Memorably, Williams argued that Britain’s industrial transformation was dependent on the spectacular wealth generated out of the slave economies in the eighteenth century, and, moreover, that the abolition of the slave trade and later of slavery itself was a consequence not of the ideological work of antislavery humanitarians but of the rational calculation of a decline in the profitability of slave-grown sugar. Sympathetic to but not uncritical of Williams, Draper seeks to assess these questions on the basis of the records of the Slave Compensation Commission. The second debate concerns reparations for slavery in the United States, the Caribbean, and Britain. Here Draper issues a deliberate note of caution against the assumption of a *collective* white (British or American) responsibility for slavery. In his view, a more carefully discriminating approach is called for, one that seeks to locate with more historical precision the lineaments of *individual* accountability for slavery. There is much, I think, to provoke us here. For agree or not with the details of Draper’s arguments, both the Williams debate and the reparations debate will be challenged by his timely intervention.

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9 Draper, *The Price of Emancipation*, 4. For one account of the making of slave-generated family wealth, see Simon Smith, *Slavery, Family, and Gentry Capitalism in the British Atlantic: The World of the Lascelles, 1648–1834* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).