Reviews of Books

Critical Forum


The Price of Slavery:
Dividing Families and Divisions of Race

Simon P. Newman

More than forty years after the publication of what remains the best study of the English planters who settled the Caribbean, Richard S. Dunn has completed his account of the enslaved. While Sugar and Slaves recounted “what these English sons of Adam did to the Garden of Eden islands they discovered,” A Tale of Two Plantations painstakingly recovers the individual lives and collective experiences of approximately two thousand enslaved people who endured the final three generations of slavery on two plantations, Mesopotamia in western Jamaica and Mount Airy in Virginia. Decades of research, tabulation of dry lists of human property, and painstaking reconstruction of lives and deaths has enabled Dunn to tell as complete a story of intergenerational enslavement as we have for British America, and with characteristic quiet authority Dunn lays bare the horrors of this labor system.

Dunn’s greatest achievement lies in his recounting of the lives of individuals, enabling readers to comprehend the humanity of the enslaved. Countless hours of work are distilled into the reconstruction of the individual and dynastic stories of one family on each plantation, and Dunn places a woman at the heart of each of these accounts. First is Sarah Affir and her Mesopotamia family, followed by Winney Grimshaw and her

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Mount Airy (and Alabama) family. Dunn reconstructs how the enslaved in the Caribbean and North America experienced birth, life, labor, and death, how they conformed and resisted, and how the planters who owned them affected their lives and families in numerous and profound ways. Rarely have we seen such detailed case studies in which familiar themes become so real and so human.

Affy, later known as Sarah Affir after she became a member of the Moravian church, was born at Mesopotamia in 1767. Her father was almost certainly one of the plantation’s black slaves, while her mother was probably Amelia, the black head servant in the main house. As a child Sarah worked with other children in the grass gang and then for five years she worked with her mother in the main house. But the best domestic jobs were given by whites to mixed-race people, and Sarah could not long escape the fieldwork that half of the male and most of the female enslaved suffered.

Sugar production and human reproduction wrecked Sarah’s body. By the age of about twenty she was working in the first gang, and for the next decade of her life she undertook some of the most strenuous plantation labor. During this time Sarah bore five of her six children, usually spending her first trimester as a member of the first gang, therefore undertaking the most arduous work on a sugar plantation. Sarah’s four black children followed her into fieldwork, while her two mixed-race children enjoyed the benefits of their mixed-race parentage. Harsh labor, multiple births, and almost constant pregnancy and child rearing meant that after twelve years of good health Sarah was, at the age of thirty-one, described as weak, and for the remainder of her life she would never again be described as healthy.

The racial hierarchy of enslaved labor emerges as one of Dunn’s key themes in his analysis of Mesopotamia, and he interprets the lives and experiences of Sarah and her descendants as evidence of the ways in which racial hierarchy defined Jamaican plantation slavery. Sarah’s children Robert and Ann were very likely fathered by the Scottish bookkeeper Andrew McAlpin. In their youth both worked in domestic service, although while Ann continued in this work Robert was then trained as a cooper and worked as a skilled artisan for most of his adult life. Like all other mixed-race enslaved people at Mesopotamia, Robert and Ann and their children never had to plant, tend, or harvest sugar cane. White Jamaicans assumed that racially mixed parentage made for superior slaves who were more adept at skilled labor, and white fathers sometimes secured advantageous positions for their enslaved offspring. The result was a hugely significant variation in labor and life within Sarah Affir’s enslaved family, mirrored in other families across the plantation.

However, Dunn presents privileged mixed-race slaves as anything but happy with their lot. As a young teenager, Robert fought with and inadvertently killed a slightly older fellow slave named Tamerlane. Twenty years later Robert attacked Peter, the head distiller, with such severity that he
once again contributed to a fellow slave’s premature death. Both of these unfortunates were black, and Dunn interprets the conflicts between them and Robert in racial terms. Tamerlane, Dunn notes, may have feared that Robert’s mixed-race heritage would enable him to usurp Tamerlane’s position as an apprentice cooper. At the same time, despite preferential work assignments “Robert reacted to his condition with acute frustration and blind rage” (98). Other white men manumitted their children, but Robert’s father was unable or unwilling to do this, and Dunn sees Robert as frustratingly trapped between the promise of not just a better life but freedom on the one hand and the hopelessness of plantation slavery on the other hand.

Dunn sees a similar pattern of frustration in Ann’s daughter Jane, whose father was the white doctor who ministered to the plantation’s slaves. From childhood on Jane worked in domestic service, initially under her mother, Ann, as head housekeeper. Jane received permission to marry a free mixed-race man named Peter Knight, after which she was ordered to serve in the household of new Moravian missionaries. But Jane was clearly unhappy in this position, and the missionaries regarded her as unruly. When they complained about Jane, she made a calculated and successful defense of her actions to her Mesopotamia masters. Dunn interprets Jane’s actions as those of a woman who regarded herself as far more white than black and married to a free man, and he argues that such attitudes meant that she would not “tolerate having to fawn on and toady to her [Moravian] master and mistress” (102).

Dunn’s interpretation of the beliefs and motivations of Robert and Jane, and even his account of at least some of their actions, is “conjectural” (480 n. 34). His comprehensive understanding and detailed analysis of the Mesopotamia inventories have enabled him to discern patterns in the listings of the names, ages, occupations, and conditions of the plantation’s enslaved. He is surely right that mixed-race slaves may have adopted and internalized the racial hierarchies fostered by their white masters, and he provides plentiful evidence of whites’ preferential treatment of mixed-race people. But Dunn is less convincing in privileging white ideas of racial hierarchy as a cause of Robert’s and Jane’s beliefs and actions. Perhaps such an interpretation is rooted too deeply in the world Dunn illuminated so brilliantly in *Sugar and Slaves*, his social history of the seventeenth-century white adventurers and the ways in which they fashioned and then institutionalized racial plantation slavery. Dunn did not hide his horror at “what these English sons of Adam did,” and he has never been an apologist for the slavocracy. In *A Tale of Two Plantations*, Dunn has focused on the enslaved, yet he finds the beliefs, attitudes, and practices of white masters to have been so powerful and so pervasive that they were internalized by enslaved mixed-race people.

This may have been the case, but we cannot be certain, and the surviving plantation records and lists on which Dunn depends reveal very little
of the mental worlds of the enslaved. Surely there are many other possible interpretations of Robert’s and Jane’s actions, including ones that do not depend on the internalization and acceptance of white ideas about racial hierarchy. As a child Robert was nursed through a serious case of yaws by African-born Lydia, and both Robert and Jane chose sexual partners who had more African ancestry than they did. In Robert’s case he had children with two black field hands. All of these were black women like his mother and sisters, and perhaps we should not assume that he felt different from and superior to the plantation’s black slaves in ways that so profoundly shaped his anger and actions. Robert was clearly quick to violent anger, but can we be sure that this was the result of “acute frustration and blind rage” (98) born of his mulatto identity? To assume this is to accept not just the physical mastery of white owners and overseers but also the power of their developing ideology of racial hierarchy in the hearts of the enslaved. It may give whites a victory that they did not so easily attain.

Similarly, Jane’s opposition to the Moravians she was sent to serve might not have been rooted in the notion that “she had more white than black blood and had just married a manumitted mulatto” (102). And can we be confident that “she probably disdained her black fellow chapel attendants” (102)? There is no direct evidence to suggest that either Jane or Robert felt disdain for black slaves, and perhaps we should more readily assume that there were strong bonds between Sarah Affir and her son Robert and her granddaughter Jane, to say nothing of the strong ties between Robert and Jane and other family members and indeed their chosen sexual partners. Plantation records, by definition, are unlikely to tell us much about the bonds between a black parent and a mixed-race child, or between a mixed-race woman and her black grandmother, cousins, aunts, and uncles. Beyond family, both Robert and Jane lived and worked with both black and mulatto enslaved people, and shared experiences and commonalities may have been just as significant as the differences that planters perceived to exist between them.

Racial hierarchies appear far less significant in Dunn’s account of life, family, and labor on the Mount Airy plantation. Perhaps what is most striking about Dunn’s reconstruction of this Virginia family is the frequency with which members were torn apart, in both casual and malevolent ways. For all that, the lives of individual Virginia slaves were often longer and healthier than those in the Caribbean, but families and communities were just as fragile. With characteristic understatement Dunn notes that John Tayloe III and William Henry Tayloe had a “major personal impact” (107) on the enslaved Grimshaw family and by implication on many of the enslaved families these planters owned.

Harry Jackson, a coachman, and Winney Jackson, a chambermaid, were among John Tayloe III’s favorite household slaves. They spent half the year serving their master’s family at Mount Airy and the other half of
the year serving the Tayloes in their Washington, D.C., town house, the Octagon. As a consequence, the Jacksons’ three children, Betsy, Esther, and Henry, spent their childhood years at Mount Airy and apart from their parents for half of each year. In 1817 Harry and Winney and their son Henry (a stable boy and apprentice to his father) began living year-round in Washington, until 1824 when Harry returned to Mount Airy. Winney remained in Washington and quite possibly never again spent time with her husband or daughters.

Winney Jackson’s daughter Esther became a skilled spinner and married an enslaved carpenter named Bill Grimshaw. As Esther knew from her childhood, skilled labor afforded no greater protection, and she must have been all too aware of the fragility of the family she raised and the vulnerability of their children. In 1829, after less than a decade of marriage, William Henry Tayloe separated Bill and Esther, and from that point forward they were unable to consistently live together as a couple. Their second child, Winney Grimshaw, eventually followed her mother into textile production, and when she was about eighteen she married Jacob Carrington, a worker at the plantation’s grist mill.

Everything changed when Bill Grimshaw reacted to a flogging by running away. He was perhaps the only Mount Airy slave between 1808 and 1860 to elope successfully. Tayloe sought to ensure that other slaves would not follow Bill’s example by punishing those who were closest to hand. One line in the plantation inventory book speaks volumes: “Sent this family away for misconduct of the parents” (117). Tayloe was unable to sell Esther, whom he probably suspected of aiding and then concealing Bill’s escape, and so he kept her at one of the family’s Virginia plantations while he set out to separate her permanently from all but one of her children. Two daughters were sold to other planters, while fourteen-year-old James and nineteen-year-old Winney (together with her infant son) were sent to the Tayloes’ Oakland plantation in Alabama. The family was sundered, with a father now free in Canada, one child working in Washington, two others sold to other Virginia planters, and two banished to the cotton fields of Alabama. Only Esther and her eight-year-old son Henry remained. Winney Grimshaw had value as a skilled textile worker, but she was banished to field labor in Alabama at the whim of a planter determined to exact vengeance and to prevent further elopements. Dunn succeeds brilliantly in demonstrating that the enslaved in both Jamaica and Virginia were equally vulnerable, and it is the terrible power of planters over individuals and families that resonates with the reader. As Dunn makes clear, many other Mount Airy families were separated in similar ways, usually for economic reasons.

Over the following years, Winney Grimshaw had several mixed-race children, to the evident consternation of William Henry Tayloe. We cannot know the circumstances surrounding these pregnancies and births, but Winney’s family history may have come into play. Only nineteen years old
when she was banished to Alabama, Winney had only a younger brother with her and no older family members to support, advise, and protect her as best they could. For generations her family had experienced enforced separation, of which her long trek from Virginia to Alabama was but one example. If she exercised a degree of choice in forming relationships with and bearing children to white men, perhaps Winney hoped for a degree of stability and protection for her family. If so, the hope was a futile one: Tayloe took Winney’s four-year-old son John away from her, presenting the child to his widowed niece as a New Year’s Day gift. While mixed-race identity enabled some of the Caribbean enslaved to secure protection and privilege, albeit uncertain, this was not the case in Virginia and Alabama.

In *Sugar and Slaves* Dunn lamented that “to see how the blacks themselves reacted to their treatment by . . . planters is scarcely possible, given the nature of the surviving evidence.”² How wrong he was, and in *A Tale of Two Plantations* Dunn has crafted a comprehensive study of intergenerational slavery in Jamaica and Virginia in which the enslaved come alive. Exploring black lives, black agency, and even black resistance, Dunn’s greatest achievement is his remarkable utilization of white people’s plantation records to reconstruct the relative helplessness of individual enslaved people and their families in the face of planter whims and fancies. Dunn’s outrage at the world wrought by these white sons of Adam is as powerful today as it was almost half a century ago, but now he has enormously expanded our understanding of how the enslaved experienced and reacted to their bondage.

² Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves*, xvi.