Family Matters on a Jamaican Plantation

Daniel Livesay

When workers on the Cornwall estate came out to greet their absentee owner the day after New Year’s festivities in 1816, they brought with them an expansive understanding of the plantation’s particular history and composition. Many had likely been born in Africa, part of the last wave of captives legally imported into Jamaica, and had spent the previous decade familiarizing themselves with Cornwall’s social dynamics and sugar production routine. Most of the rest had undoubtedly grown up on the island and could sketch out the genealogies and relationships of the plantation’s workforce, as well as its recent financial successes and failures. All of them knew something about Matthew Gregory Lewis, the master who until that day had been often spoken of but not yet seen. Lewis, on the other hand, knew virtually nothing of Cornwall or its inhabitants. Instead, he looked out onto what he perceived as a mass of undifferentiated black faces. The plantation had previously been just a number on his account ledger, and its workers little more than abstractions in his mind. Now he could see Cornwall for what it was: a fabricated but nevertheless complex society.

Scholars of colonial slavery can often feel similarly to Lewis when confronted with the correspondence and financial records of planters who cared little about the individual experiences of those whose toil transformed the Atlantic economy. Typically, enslaved workers are simply names on an inventory, disconnected from their familial and social context. At best, they are rescued from obscurity only when enduring punishment for violating the codes of conduct of their masters. Despite our desire to recover lost voices, slavery scholars can still feel as though we are providing general assessments of a demographic bloc, rather than chronicling personal narratives. Yet, as Richard S. Dunn brilliantly demonstrates in his new book, A Tale of Two Plantations, with a great deal of care and attention historians can recover an enormous amount of information about those whose lives were spent in bondage. It gives readers a rare glimpse into the perspectives of those who worked the plantations, rather than simply those who profited from them.

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Less than an hour’s walk from Matthew Lewis’s Cornwall estate stood Mesopotamia, one of the two plantations in Dunn’s account. The other is Mount Airy on Virginia’s Northern Neck. In holding up these two estates for examination, Dunn risks traveling over some well-trod ground. Historians have long made comparisons between the Caribbean and the Chesapeake in order to underscore just how much slavery could vary by region. Certain axioms have emerged out of these investigations: Jamaica’s enslaved population suffered much greater mortality and retained stronger African influences; Virginia’s population was more reproductively successful and “creolized.” But these truisms have mostly come from large overviews of plantation data. Dunn provides one of the first in-depth analyses of how these overall trends looked on the ground for the families and individuals who experienced them. The tragedy of Jamaica’s particularly gruesome climate and work routine, for instance, is laid bare in Dunn’s detailed biographies of mothers losing children, adolescent lives cut short, and young adults succumbing to terrible disease and mistreatment. Likewise, he meticulously documents the horror of Virginia families being torn apart in the early years of the Republic. Indeed, Dunn’s account of life in the “Second Middle Passage” from the Eastern Seaboard to the Cotton Kingdom is a welcome and original addition. Through his subjects, he chronicles the relatively unexplored topic of whole plantations moving westward, rather than individuals sold piecemeal into the slave traders’ coffles. Needless to say, Dunn’s perspective is large, his detail rich, and his evidence substantial.

Among the book’s many important contributions, Dunn’s analysis of enslaved families in Jamaica is a tremendous step forward, not just for that island’s history but also for both slavery and family studies generally. In documenting 1,103 workers on the Mesopotamia estate from 1762 to 1833, Dunn provides a number of major insights. Perhaps most impressively, he gives a multigenerational perspective on how slavery changed during a crucial period in colonial Jamaican history. Scholars such as B. W. Higman and Michael Craton have documented some of the larger demographic characteristics of the island, but Dunn shows how one individual plantation contributed to, and was shaped by, those trends over a substantial period of time. He gives names and stories to the cycles of African importation and anemic reproduction that typified Jamaica’s long demographic struggle.

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With careful detail he narrates the lives of enslaved workers who married, took companions, lost multiple children, struggled to have children, gave birth to offspring fathered by white men, and in some exceptional cases raised sizable families. Aided by numerous tables in the appendixes that chart Mesopotamia’s demographic and genealogical trees, Dunn achieves the rare feat of making the plantation’s history read more like a collection of family stories than a business account. This was perhaps last accomplished by Trevor Burnard’s study of Thomas Thistlewood, but Dunn goes further by drawing out that close biographical investigation across multiple generations.4 This work will undoubtedly inspire scholars to jump more deeply into the archives in order to uncover how slavery was experienced at the familial level.

Dunn also succeeds at recovering the genealogies of highly fractured households. Mesopotamia’s kinship structures correlate well with what has long been argued about Jamaican plantations: multiple family structures abounded, including nuclear, solitary, and matrifocal units.5 But, once again, Dunn personifies this rather impersonal claim. In particular, he documents the life of Sarah Affir, an enslaved woman who had children with multiple black men as well as with a white bookkeeper. Using plantation inventories, Dunn incorporates the growth of Affir’s family into her biography of work on the estate. Likewise, those same inventories show a yearly divergence in labor and experiences for the children she bore by black men and those by a white man. Dunn is far too cautious, however, in his presentation of interracial relationships. Although he does ask, “How consensual were these black-white liaisons?” (168), it should be clear to him how few options existed for enslaved women on the island.

These genealogies create a personal history of what Vincent Brown has argued was the ubiquity and culture of death in Jamaica.6 Early in the book, Dunn lists several elderly slaves at Mesopotamia in the mid-eighteenth century who represented not a counterexample of colonial salubrity but instead a monument to the rare survivors who escaped the devastating effects of Jamaica’s sugar regime. Further into the study, he describes a number of women who had no children or who lost offspring within months of their birth. He writes alongside these numbers an account of the individual shipments of Africans routinely brought in to repair this reproductive deficiency and just how damaging they were to the organization and reorganization of enslaved families.

4 Trevor Burnard, Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire: Thomas Thistlewood and His Slaves in the Anglo-Jamaican World (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2004).
Finally, Dunn gives an extraordinary analysis of a thoroughly under-studied aspect of Jamaica's history: early evangelical efforts within the island's enslaved community. Previously, scholars have shown the effects of such missions in the lead-up to emancipation, as observers and officials came to see Christianization as a crucial step in preparing Jamaicans for freedom. But very little has emerged on the eighteenth century. In one of the most exciting recent studies of Jamaica, Dunn devotes a large chapter to the Moravian mission at Mesopotamia, which lasted seventy-eight turbulent years. Nearly a third of the estate joined the Moravian fold, and the missionaries had a tremendous impact on how those converts related to one another and to their masters. In one case, the Moravians oversaw a familial dispute when two of their married converts took new partners; in another, they married an enslaved woman of color named Jane Ritchie to a free man of color in 1830, though they later worried that the ceremony had made Ritchie insolent in her dealings with both the mission and the estate. This chapter adds vibrancy to an already distinctive tableau of Jamaican slavery and shows just how much can be learned about enslaved colonial life.

The novelty of this Moravian material provides refreshing insight into a topic so dependent upon the mundane notations of account registers. Yet it also hints tantalizingly at some of the wider contexts and diverse sources that fail to make it into Dunn’s analysis. So much is gained by such a close focus on Mesopotamia and its inhabitants, but something is also lost when the plantation’s boundaries feel, as they sometimes do here, as if they were impenetrable. Just as Jamaica was not a castle in the Caribbean, so too were its plantations not islands within an island. To his deep credit, Dunn stays steadfastly committed to his evidence, and he works aggressively not to make assumptions about his actors’ intentions or thought processes. However, so much work has been done in recent decades to show how connected the Caribbean’s enslaved populations were, and how cognizant they were of the political movements of the time, that it seems far too conservative not to attribute some of the actions of Mesopotamia’s workers to their understanding of the Atlantic world’s circulating currents of change. The most obvious omission in A Tale of Two Plantations is the Haitian Revolution, which is mentioned only once. Considering the degree to which that event inspired bound laborers throughout the Western Hemisphere, terrified their owners, and forever altered perceptions of the viability of slavery, it would have been useful to see Dunn read his sources in light of how the revolution worked its way into the daily negotiations of Mesopotamia after 1791. After all, thousands of Dominguan refugees made the quick, hundred-mile trek to Jamaica, and island officials would thereafter blame the revolution for every perceived instance of rebellion up to emancipation.

Some wider contextual points would have also greatly benefited Dunn’s portrayal of slave life and enslaved families in this period. With such a hyper-focus on a single plantation, Jamaica nearly comes across as a place
where almost nothing changes, beyond the vacillating statistics of Africans arriving and sugar casks departing. But a great deal did change, transforming how slaves lived. To use a particular example, the previously mentioned Jane Ritchie may have soured toward her enslavement due, as Dunn claims, to her 1830 marriage. But, as a light-skinned woman of color, she likely was also inspired by the passing of a bill that same year that gave free people of color full civil rights, which was the outcome of more than a decade and a half of fervent protest by mixed-race Jamaicans. Because he limits his scope primarily to Mesopotamia’s records, Dunn misses some of these wider political developments.

To use a bigger example, Dunn spends a few pages describing Tacky’s Revolt, a series of enslaved uprisings in 1760 that were some of the Americas’ largest slave rebellions prior to the Haitian Revolution. But Dunn portrays the revolt primarily as a brief moment of terror among the plantocracy. In fact, the revolt not only terrorized white Jamaicans but also motivated them to make significant changes to their legal code. The House of Assembly passed new laws in an attempt to control slaves more effectively, as well as a bill with the goal of discouraging interracial sex and limiting the growth of mixed-race families. Those laws did indeed affect slave life and led to substantial changes within certain enslaved households.

Dunn could have also utilized information from more diffuse sources, such as abolition pamphlet literature. Not only did abolitionists push for an end to the slave trade, they also advocated for drastic changes in slave marriage and family formation, some of which the Jamaican assembly adopted. Dunn is unquestionably aware of these background issues, and he truly may not have seen their impact in the daily correspondence and records at Mesopotamia. But silences are notorious in the archive of colonial slavery, and without factoring in these larger movements, he risks denying his subjects the narrow but important political agency they undoubtedly held.

If Dunn buries some wider contexts in his account, he has done so to unearth a much larger volume of material that brings us closer to understanding how enslaved people looked upon their worlds. No book can discuss everything. And Dunn has contributed so much during such a distinguished career to enrich our knowledge of slavery in the Americas. This is a monograph forty years in the making, and it will continue to inspire and inform for at least that long. It can feel perfunctory to review a book by stating that it is essential reading, but if A Tale of Two Plantations does not meet that standard, then nothing does.