Tom Zoellner, *Island on Fire: The Revolt That Ended Slavery in the British Empire*.

Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2020. 363 pp. (Cloth US\$ 29.95)

The two most famous quotations from the 1831–32 Christmas uprising of enslaved people that roiled the sugar producing heartland of northwest plantation Jamaica are Samuel Sharpe's jailhouse reflections recorded by the Baptist missionary Henry Bleby on the verge of his execution—"I would rather die on yonder gallows than live in slavery"—and the words of Baptist deacon James Cunningham, who declared with admirable succinctness before his hanging that "Liberty is sweet." Cunningham's words ring truer than Sharpe's, which are redolent of nineteenth-century sentimentalism. Cunningham's testimony is direct and telling. As Tom Zoellner writes in this rollicking history, designed more for a popular than an academic audience, Cunningham declined to answer a question about the ultimate object of the rebellion. His interviewer recorded that he scoffed and said he "thinks it is sufficiently shown by their destroying their master's property and houses and taking so much care of their own. What other object should they have than taking the country for themselves?"

Cunningham's explanation of the causes of the uprising foreshadow the conclusions in the best account of any enslaved rebellion, that made by Emilia Viotti Da Costa in *Crowns of Glory* (1994), where she argues that "rebellion was the product of many contradictory historical forces," or that it arose from "voices in the air." As Richard Sheridan argues in "The Jamaican Slave Insurrection of 1776 and the American Revolution" (*The Journal of Negro History*, 1975) about the 1776 Hanover slave conspiracy in Jamaica, "slaves needed no borrowed ideology and motivation but only favourable circumstances to rise against their oppressors."

Zoellner's analysis is focused on Sharpe. He argues that Sharpe was the driving force behind the rebellion, following customary interpretations, many drawn from Bleby and also from Richard Barrett, who as the most powerful and probably the richest man on the island would today be surprised that it is Sharpe, not he, who is a national hero of Jamaica. Zoellner is handicapped by his sources—Sharpe remains as shadowy a figure now as he was in 1832—but he accepts that it was Sharpe who set things in motion, falsely believing that freedom had been announced in Britain but was being denied to enslaved people. He intended an orderly strike more than a rebellion. The difficulty is that Sharpe lost control of events early on, meaning that attacks on property became the focus of attention by the enslaved, with fires lit everywhere to destroy plantations.

These arsonists, fighting for their freedom, are the people who come out most vividly in *The Island on Fire*. The book comes alive when describing the

enslaved people who used violence to try to overturn White rule and who were brutally murdered and executed as a result, in an orgy of White blood-letting. What might have been emphasized more is that it was this violence that had the most important results of the uprising, showing to British people opposed to slavery how, yet again, White Jamaicans acted with reprehensible savagery when threatened. And what is missing from this account is the detailed study of the particular contexts of Jamaica in 1832 that gave the “favourable circumstances” for revolt that Sheridan noted for Hanover Parish in 1776 and which Vincent Brown has outlined recently for the slave revolt of 1760 in *Tacky’s Revolt* (2020). Too much attention is paid to conditions of slavery in the mid-eighteenth century, when most enslaved people were African and non-Christian and before metropolitan-enforced policies of amelioration compelled planters to change their habits. Slavery in Jamaica in 1832 was not the same as in 1760, but Zoellner describes it as unchanging.

My other concern about Zoellner’s account is that he accepts too easily the idea that the rebellion was a disaster for White Jamaicans. Certainly, their extreme violence backfired. As Zoellner rightly notes, it propelled ideas of immediate abolition forward. But White Jamaicans also benefited from the emancipation process. They got massive financial compensation and four years’ free labor from slaves. One historical lesson, not learned by American slaveowners in 1861, was that negotiation rather than resistance worked better in keeping White control. Violence did not work for masters, since it showed them as tyrants. And it made people like Sharpe Christian martyrs—a powerful image that British evangelicals and contemporary Jamaicans could use to their advantage. The violence that Whites employed against Blacks in 1831–32 showed that Cunningham was right: no one needed to ask the question of why enslaved people rebelled, as their ill treatment made it obvious.

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