

## Slave Power: The Relationship between Slave and Slave Owner

A key question which historians have struggled to find a concrete answer to is why it was that transatlantic slavery, in the brutal forms in which it manifested itself, was able to last effectively for such a long time. There were, indeed, some challenges to the system, as discussed below; yet these were not always replicated in other parts of the Caribbean or Americas. Indeed, there was only one slave rebellion which was able to achieve the ultimate goal in the complete abolition of slavery. This project serves not as a definitive answer to this question but rather as a stimulus that will, hopefully, provide some discussion surrounding such an important issue.

From the beginning of their journey as slaves, the relationship between slave and owner was filled with fear on both sides. The fear of slaves, taken from their native Africa and taken to the unknown world of the Americas where they were often met with cruelty, is well-documented. It is the fear felt by slave owners that is perhaps lesser chronicled. This fear began during the trans-Atlantic crossing when it became apparent that slaves posed a very real threat to their owners. There were roughly five hundred revolts on ships crossing the middle passage, showing that even when shackled and manacled that the complicity of slaves could never be guaranteed.<sup>1</sup> This continued into life on plantations; the fact that whites were greatly outnumbered served only to exacerbate this fear that was felt. In Jamaica in 1730 there were sixteen slaves to every free white person on the island; in British Guiana the ratio was twenty slaves to every free white man.<sup>2</sup> It became very obvious, very quickly that slave owners were in a position of vulnerability, particularly as they would often be relatively isolated on the plantation with the nearest support being miles away.

This vulnerability that was, justifiably, felt by slave owners would often manifest itself not just in paranoia but also in overly violent reactions to any suspected encroachments on their power and authority. It became a matter of self-preservation for slave owners to mete out formal executions and brutalisation for even the most trivial of offences. Without the complicity of slaves, which would not have occurred without violence, it is highly unlikely that there would have been a slavery system at all, least of all one which lasted for such a long period of time. It became necessary then for slave owners to use this violence as a way of assuring and maintaining their own position. The irony that those who appear to possess ultimate power were reliant completely on those who they were in charge of cannot be missed.

As well as this general fear regarding slavery, the birth of new ideas during the Enlightenment is unlikely to have passed by many slave owners. The French Revolution of 1789 and the arrival of the ideas of the likes of Thomas Paine, not to mention the American War of Independence, would have both damaged the coffers but would also have seen the emergence of potentially damaging new ideas challenging the status quo and the very ideas underpinning slavery. The ideas of liberty and fraternity were being challenged both in Britain, in the calls for greater parliamentary democracy, but also in the colonies.<sup>3</sup> The slave owners and planters would have been highly fearful of the impact of these new ideas on slaves, as they themselves perceived them as inherently wrong.

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<sup>1</sup> James Walvin *Atlas of Slavery* (Pearson Education Limited, 2006) pp 115-119

<sup>2</sup> Niall Ferguson *Empire How Britain Made the Modern World* (Penguin Books 2004) p 79

<sup>3</sup> James Walvin 'The cause of a nation' in *Abolition Bicentenary BBC History Magazine* (March 2007) pp 11-14

Self preservation was not the only driver behind the maintenance of slavery and the brutality that lay behind it; economics also played a crucial role. The need to make money out of slavery seems to put slave owners and those who would benefit from the slave trade once again at the mercy of the complicity of slaves. From a British point of view, the slave trade and slavery had a massive role to play through subsidising and financing the Industrial Revolution and imperialist leanings. Slavery played a huge part in the development of British towns such as Bristol and Liverpool as centres of the slave trade, as well as the opening up of trading routes and markets across the British Empire.<sup>4</sup> The cheap labour that slavery provided helped to ensure that these developing markets were provided with inexpensive goods to be sold on at a high profit.

On a more personal level, those who stood to benefit the most out of slavery and, as such were most at the mercy of slave power, were the slave owners themselves. Their own personal income and all the power and prestige that came from that were reliant on their successes in the plantation. Thomas Clarkson, when describing the forces of good and bad involved in the abolition campaign, referred directly to the "impulse of avarice" as a driving force behind those who were pro-slavery.<sup>5</sup> A common assumption is that slavery was a declining economy and that by the time of abolition it was no longer economically viable to maintain an interest in slavery and so plantation owners were looking for alternative means. Recent research, however, shows that this was not the case; the West Indies, for example, had a greater number of imports and exports in 1821 than they had had fifty years previously. Business, then, was booming; this class of people across the Americas had gained and were continuing to gain substantial riches because of slavery. However this wealth necessitated the co-operation of slavery for it to continue. It was not only their lives that were at threat; their livelihoods and their status in society (both of which were highly prized at the time) were dependent on slave complicity.

The financial investment of slave owners should also be remembered; the cost of purchasing slaves was not cheap. In the southern states of the United States during the antebellum period, the costs of slaves were high; Professor Coclanis has estimated that their modern cost would be the equivalent of \$40-50,000.<sup>6</sup> Slaves then were not commodities; they were investments that needed to be protected in order to yield any kind of profit. Not only that, they were risky investments; success (and wealth) were by no means guaranteed.

All of the above have referred to the fact that the survival of the white slave owner in the Americas was dependent on the support of the black slaves. It needs then to be addressed what threat slaves could actually pose; what could they feasibly do which would jeopardise the lives and livelihood of their owners and risk the loss of that initial investment. On a basic level, there was non-compliance and resistance. This could involve simply minimal co-operation, always treading the fine line between that and open insubordination. Go-slows, feigned incomprehension and foot-dragging were all methods that slaves could use to potentially damage the precious incomes of their owners. Even by clinging on, secretly, to the cultures and traditions of their African ancestry, slaves were able to resist the demands of their white owners who wanted to control them through the removal and

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<sup>4</sup> Christopher Leslie Brown 'A question of identity' in Abolition Bicentenary BBC History Magazine (March 2007) pp 5- 8

<sup>5</sup> Edward Reynolds Stand the Storm A History of the Atlantic Slave Trade ( Elephant Paperbacks 1993) pp 74-79

<sup>6</sup> Professor Coclanis lecture

eradication of past cultures; even down to the changing of slave's names.<sup>7</sup> The discovery of slaves retaining their own culture, a culture to which slave owners could not access nor engage, created a great deal of fear- namely of the unknown.

Maroons, or runaway slaves, also posed a threat to the power of slave owners. On an economic level, this would be because of the loss of investment to a slave owner; this would be felt all the more keenly if the fugitive was a skilled worker such as a carpenter as the potential income would have been much higher. Maroons also posed a threat as in the case of Jamaica when a group of runaway slaves set about attempting to emancipate as many slaves as they could find, waging a war on the plantation economy. In 1728, the twenty-six slaves purchased by George Manning was reduced to just four in less than a year, because of the work of the Maroons. The threat posed to the power and wealth of British interests is obvious. Perhaps the most well known method of resistance was open rebellion. The use of rebellion as a method of resisting slave owners should not be underestimated. Slaves would be well-aware of the potential risks of rebellion; if it failed, the consequences were dire. That is not to say, however, that slaves did not try to rebel; in Jamaica alone, from the time of British acquisition through to the abolition of slavery, there were around twenty-eight rebellions.

The only successful slave rebellion, in that it achieved its final aim in the overthrow of slavery, was that in St. Domingue in 1791. The consequences of this rebellion were widespread; both in the short but also the longer term. One of the elements that would have been most alarming to all slave-owning countries was the fact that, by the 1750s, St Domingue was the most prosperous of Caribbean islands with a wealth of exports from sugar to indigo and cotton. The rebellion would have served as a deeply-felt reminder to all those with an economic interest in slavery of the potential risks involved.

The rebellion would also have tapped into the second concern of all those with an interest in slavery; the massacre of two thousand whites would have made it clear just how perilous their situation was. Even with the French and British armies being used to put down the rebellion, it was still ultimately successful, leaving those who were in any way cut-off on their plantations even more isolated than before. The increased security on all neighbouring islands as a result of this is a clear demonstration of the power that slaves possessed. This increased security can be seen in the actions taken by the Lieutenant Governor of Jamaica at the time, Lord Balcarres, who was still clearly threatened by the Maroons on the island, as he ordered the expulsion of 600 of them to Sierra Leone. The potential power that slaves possessed becomes very obvious when looking at the responses of those not even directly affected.

This fear, as a result of the Haitian rebellion, would have been felt all the more as it became apparent that the rebellion was an inspiration for many more, albeit unsuccessful, rebellions. The Bussa rebellion of 1816 was one such rebellion. This was when four hundred slaves from plantations across Barbados, united together in a rebellion to attempt to bring about the ending of slavery. The rebellion lasted four days before ultimately failing but it served as a demonstration once again of the

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<sup>7</sup> James Walvin *The Trader, The Owner, The Slave* (Vintage 2007) pp 107-133

potential power that slaves could possess.<sup>8</sup> The fact that the rebellion was comprised of slaves from different estates across the island would have compounded the fear felt.

Another rebellion, inspired by that of Haiti was the Denmark Vesey planned revolt of 1822. Vesey was an African American who had bought his own freedom but who still harboured anger towards slavery and slave holders. He was able to use his freedom to organise a community in the area of Charleston to launch a revolt. The revolt planned to include over nine thousand slaves and would have had devastating results if it had gone ahead. However the plot was betrayed before it could go ahead and Vesey, alongside forty-six others were condemned to death. The panic that was created as a result of this plot, even though it did not go beyond the planning stages, shows the extent of fear that was felt towards slaves from slave owners.<sup>9</sup>

The slave rebellions discussed above had serious implications for slavery both in the long and in the short term. In the long term they did play a key role in assisting the final abolition of the slave trade as it became clear to slave owners that slavery was a difficult process to maintain and that indentured labour was far more preferable<sup>10</sup>. In the shorter term, however, it did also play a significant role and that was the one which would have been felt by the majority of slaves on a first hand basis. Slave owners soon realised that mistreated slaves were more likely to rebel and so cause problems to them, in both the physical and economic sense. Therefore, these rebellions induced slave owners and masters to improve the treatment and conditions that their slaves faced so as to try and prevent discontent reaching the tipping points expressed above. There were, of course, exceptions to this but for the vast majority they did change; if not for humanitarian motivations but perhaps more for pragmatic and economic reasons.

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/education/bussa.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.africawithin.com/bios/denmark\\_vesey.htm](http://www.africawithin.com/bios/denmark_vesey.htm)

<sup>10</sup> David Robertson, Denmark Vesey (Vintage 1999)