

## Review Essays | Ensayos de Reseña

### Slavery and abolition in the Caribbean and Brazil: Blood, fire, and freedom

*Book Review Essay by Evan C. Rothera*

- *Blood on the River: A Chronicle of Mutiny and Freedom on the Wild Coast*, by Marjoleine Kars, The New Press, 2020.
- *Island on Fire: The Revolt That Ended Slavery in the British Empire*, by Tom Zoellner, Harvard University Press, 2020.
- *In the Blood of Our Brothers: Abolitionism and the End of the Slave Trade in Spain's Atlantic Empire, 1800–1870*, by Jesús Sanjurjo, The University of Alabama Press, 2021.
- *The Sacred Cause: The Abolitionist Movement, Afro-Brazilian Mobilization, and Imperial Politics in Rio de Janeiro*, by Jeffrey D. Needell, Stanford University Press, 2020.

This review essay analyzes four books that explore slavery and abolition in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It begins with a momentous rebellion in the Dutch colony of Berbice. Unlike many other Atlantic world slave rebellions, this one lasted for nearly a year and, although it failed, it nevertheless came very close to toppling slavery in Berbice. The review then considers another failed rebellion, this time in Jamaica, that ultimately played an important role in undermining slavery throughout the British Empire. From these discussions of slave rebellions, the review essay then shifts to an account of the decades-long debate in Spain about the abolition of the slave trade and the impact of British pressure on Spanish policymakers. Finally, the essay concludes with an account of how slavery collapsed in Brazil, specifically the critical role played by Afro-Brazilians in this process. All four books surveyed in this review contribute to our understandings of slavery, abolition, and freedom in the Atlantic World during this period and make important arguments about the

relationship between metropole and colony as well as how the actions of enslaved people often drove debates about abolition.

### **Failed rebellions: Berbice and Jamaica**

In 1763, a slave rebellion erupted in the Dutch colony of Berbice. Unlike most Atlantic World slave rebellions, which were often suppressed within hours, days, or weeks, the rebels in Berbice “held off the Dutch for more than a year” (Kars, 2020, p. 2). Marjoleine Kars uses a broad array of sources, including hundreds of slave testimonies, letters exchanged between the rebel leaders and the Dutch governor, reports and correspondence from Dutch officials, and the Dutch governor’s journal to provide a fine-grained account of a slave rebellion in a remote corner of the eighteenth-century Atlantic World. The story of the Berbice rebellion, Kars argues, “attests to the state-supported violence required to make colonialism, slavery, and capitalism work for the Dutch on the Wild Coast and to the determination and resilience of African-descended people as they sought dignity, freedom, and self-governance” (p. 9).

Although Berbice was small and sparsely populated, slavery played a central role in Berbice’s development and, as in other European colonies in the Caribbean, slaves outnumbered Dutch settlers. Kars also notes that slavery shaped the relationship between the Dutch and Amerindians. The Dutch created strategic alliances with Amerindians, which, in turn, “helped turn Berbice into one vast prison” (p. 48). Berbice, she concludes, exemplified “empire on the cheap” (p. 51–52), something the Dutch learned to their dismay throughout the rebellion. Enslaved people in Berbice revolted on February 27, 1763. Colonists panicked. Dutch officials “had little appetite for resistance” (p. 62). Governor Simon Wolphert van Hoogenheim maintained a tenuous grip on Berbice but the Dutch faced long odds in defeating the rebels. Rebels, led initially by Coffij van Lelienburg, joined a long revolutionary tradition. Moreover, as in other revolutionary contexts, different opinions existed among enslaved people about the rebellion. Many slaves chose to remain noncommitted, although Kars is careful to note that slaves who refused to join the rebellion usually did so out of self-interest rather than loyalty to the Dutch.

Unsurprisingly, the Dutch called for assistance and authorities in other colonies responded. Had they not, Berbice “would have disappeared, sinking into the jungle like a tropical Atlantis” (p. 107). The Berbice Company appealed to the States General for help, but any reinforcements from the Netherlands would need months to cross the Atlantic. Consequently, Dutch officials in Berbice played for time. Rebels received unlikely assistance when the governor of Suriname deployed soldiers with the hope of keeping rebels out of his colony. This move backfired because the soldiers mutinied and contacted the rebels. The slave rebels, suspicious of the white rebels, initially killed two dozen of them. Still, “driven by fear, need, and a shared interest in defeating the Dutch, the mutineers and the rebels built bridges across the many divides that separat-

ed them” (p. 147). One fascinating aspect of this book is that it examines a largely forgotten rebellion as well as many other manifestations of rebellion.

Eventually the tide turned in favor of the Dutch. The Berbice Company made, in modern parlance, the argument that the colony was too big to fail and the States General sent a rescue mission. Moreover, the rebels splintered into factions. Dutch reinforcements did not have much success against the rebels until they outsourced the suppression of the rebellion to “indigenous soldiers, rebel slave catchers, [and] mixed-race interpreters” (p. 222). Amerindian warriors capitalized on colonial dependency and showed themselves superior to Dutch soldiers. Rebels who joined the Dutch and worked as slave catchers returned many people to slavery. These “crucial allies,” Kars contends, did the real work of ending the rebellion, although they “remain shadowy and faceless in the records” (p. 225). The final chapter of the book discusses the gruesome punishments rebels faced. The Berbice rebellion failed, although it “foreshadowed dynamics shared by later insurgencies” (p. 266) and the colony never recovered economically.

Samuel Sharpe’s rebellion in Jamaica, like the Berbice Rebellion, failed. However, unlike the Berbice Rebellion, which lasted nearly a year, Sharpe’s rebellion lasted five weeks. Still, Sharpe’s rebellion ultimately succeeded because it “proved to be the spark that ignited the movement to end British slavery less than two and a half years later” (Zoellner, 2020, p. 5). Tom Zoellner argues that Sharpe’s movement “was not predicated on anything more than seeking liberty for himself and his fellow enslaved people” (p. 5). Nevertheless, despite these limited aims, the rebellion sent a clear signal that slavery was no longer sustainable in the British Empire. Jamaica was a crucial part of the British Empire because of the island’s sugar producing capacity and Britain’s “full-blown sugar addiction” (p. 37). As with other slave societies, Jamaican planters lived in fear of slave rebellions. Sharpe began to cultivate collaborators who fanned out to different plantations and cultivated additional collaborators. Sharpe’s plans received a boost when Jamaican planters began to talk about seceding from Britain. This seemed to support rumors among slaves that the king planned on abolishing slavery. Such a phenomenon – seeing a distant royal figure as an ally against local planters – occurred in other slave societies as well and helps explain why slaves often flocked to royalist banners during revolutions.

Sharpe’s rebellion, like many other slave rebellions, remains shrouded in mystery. The first stage of the plan, which entailed slaves refusing to work, was absolutely Sharpe’s idea. Indeed, Sharpe had his fellow conspirators swear on the Bible that “they would not work after Christmas and that they would not give witness against their coconspirators” (p. 100). Here are two important differences with the Berbice Rebellion. One, Sharpe’s rebellion initially entailed a refusal to work rather than rising up and seizing plantations. Two, the Dutch in Berbice did not attempt to convert slaves to Christianity, but missionaries in Jamaica, particularly Baptists, had made inroads among slaves. Sharpe’s use of

the Bible was important as was the fact that many slaves heard a liberating message in the Bible (despite the efforts of masters and some missionaries to convince slaves they had a duty to serve masters).

Once the rebellion began, things quickly went sideways. Critically, “most of the rebelling slaves took Sharpe’s peaceful idealism seriously” (p. 115), but fires and violence soon erupted. White Jamaicans screeched for help. Like the Dutch in Berbice, however, they did not find much assistance at first. British regulars in the area were “not in top condition” (p. 119) and, moreover, were “on bad terms with the local militia” (p. 120). By the time British soldiers actually sailed for Montego Bay, fires had been raging for three nights. Sharpe attempted to forge an alliance with the Jamaica Maroons, but, ultimately, Maroons “joined British troops in helping flush out pockets of rebels” (p. 136). Maroons undermined Sharpe’s rebellion in the same way that Amerindians and some ex-rebels did in Berbice. Furthermore, just as the Dutch engaged in hideous reprisals, so, too, did the British militia and local authorities. A “wave of extrajudicial killings and summary executions” (p. 138) continued for weeks and Sharpe himself was captured and executed. This did not satiate planter vengeance and they began targeting the missionaries who they blamed for spreading the gospel of rebellion.

News of Sharpe’s rebellion fascinated Great Britain. Reformers and abolitionists determined to seize the moment. William Knibb, formerly a missionary on Jamaica, made a speaking tour of Great Britain arguing for abolition. Furthermore, the Reform Act heralded major changes in British politics. Indeed, in the first election to take place after the passage of the Reform Act, many new members of Parliament “had read the news about Samuel Sharpe’s revolt and taken the antislavery pledge” and prepared “for a push against forced labor in the West Indies” (p. 237). Interestingly, despite a much shorter rebellion than the rebellion in Berbice, Sharpe’s rebellion reverberated long after it ended and helped destroy slavery throughout the British Empire. One reason for this, no doubt, is the fact that antislavery and abolitionist sentiment had strengthened considerably throughout the Atlantic World, but particularly in Great Britain, in the six decades between the Berbice Rebellion and Sharpe’s rebellion.

### **Great Britain, Spain, and the abolition of the slave trade**

As antislavery and abolitionist sentiment sharpened in Great Britain, British officials began to push other countries to abolish the slave trade and, later, slavery. In doing so, the British often invoked scenes from their own colonies to make the case. Henry Addington, for example, mentioned Sharpe’s rebellion – “the picture of the painful scenes which have lately passed in Jamaica, may well be held up to the Possessors of other Colonies, and to Spain in particular, as a warning of the danger to be apprehended from a disproportionate negro population” (Sanjurjo, 2021, p. 62) – to warn the Spanish government about the urgent need to abolish the slave trade. Jesús Sanjurjo examines British in-

fluence on Spanish debates and, more broadly, about differences of opinion within the Spanish Empire about slavery and the slave trade.

Agustín de Argüelles's proposal to abolish the slave trade, made at the Cortes of Cádiz in 1811, Sanjurjo argues, "was the result of a coordinated strategy with the British authorities and was key to the construction of early abolitionist discourses in Spain" (p. 5). British and French thinkers had an important influence on anti-slave trade and antislavery discourses in Spain, although Napoleon's invasion of the Iberian Peninsula soured many Spaniards on the French. Indeed, given the French invasion and Spain's subsequent alliance with Great Britain, many Spaniards began to see the British as a political example, as much as an ally. Problematically, however, in Spanish eyes, Spain often seemed to be the junior partner in this coalition. In the aftermath of Napoleon's defeat and Fernando VII's restoration to the throne, the British forced his government to "define a new official stance on the slave trade and to accommodate some aspects of an anti-slave trade rhetoric" (p. 22). The British maintained diplomatic pressure on Spain, just as they did on many other countries. However, as elsewhere, this produced both Anglophobia and skepticism. After all, many people saw something suspicious in Britain working to eliminate slavery and the slave trade after benefitting from both for centuries.

Although the British played an important role in shaping early abolitionist discourses in Spain, Sanjurjo cautions that these discourses tended to be fragile and, as the British became more aggressive, Anglophobia swelled in Spain. In response to British prodding, some Spaniards adopted a "necessary evil" defense of slavery (p. 59). Furthermore, between 1830 and 1833, roughly the same years as Sharpe's rebellion and the end of slavery in the British Empire, British diplomatic pressure increased. Furthermore, the British tone, already strident, became more hostile because British commissioners accumulated considerable evidence demonstrating collusion and sometimes direct involvement by Spanish authorities in the slave trade. The Spanish government sidestepped by encouraging colonial authorities to fulfill legal obligations. The Treaty of 1835, like previous agreements, proved ineffective. The British attitude of moral superiority "which gradually hardened into arrogance" (p. 70) did not help matters because it allowed Spaniards to portray themselves as victims of the British. All these factors worked together to actually strengthen the slave trade to Spanish colonies.

Just as antiabolitionists adopted new discourses, so did antislavery activists. This included a racist anti-slave trade discourse which became "the most successful strain of abolitionism to operate in Cuba during the 1840s" (p. 72). Sanjurjo notes the strengthening of internal anti-slave trade positions and contends that people began to see abolitionism as an unavoidable necessity. Spain's political actors had to "adapt to the new reality, reassess their position, and build a new narrative that could sustain it" (p. 116). In sum, fifty-five years after Argüelles's proposal, Spain "approved a comprehensive and effective law against the slave trade, which, crucially, it had no other option but to enforce"

(p. 119). British influence played a major role but Spanish authorities packaged the abolition of the slave trade as the best way to preserve slavery in Cuba. Less than two decades later, in 1886, Spain abolished slavery.

### **Brazil's path to the Golden law**

The Thirteenth Amendment in the United States and Spain's abolition of slavery in 1886 left slavery legal only in Brazil in the Americas. Jeffrey Needell examines slavery's demise in Brazil, a subject scholars have dealt with before, although, he contends, the Abolitionists movement's "essentially political nature – assumed by contemporaries but neglected more recently – has been poorly understood" (Needell, 2020, p. 1). Thus, *The Sacred Cause* analyzes the Abolitionist movement in Rio, specifically the movement's origins and eventual victory, but also popular political mobilization and Afro-Brazilian participation. Needell seeks to demonstrate how one understanding of the movement (as an urban, middle-class, white movement) is incorrect. The urban middle class was indeed critical to the success of the movement, but urban middle class support was largely from Afro-Brazilians, not white Brazilians.

Needell begins with Rio during the period 1822 – 1871. Rio was "the greatest port for the region and its African trade, as well as the city with the largest captive population in the Americas" (p. 11). Nonspecialists will appreciate Needell's in-depth explanation of the inner workings of the Brazilian government. The Free Womb Law seemed to promise the end of slavery, but, like some of the treaties Great Britain signed with Spain, went unenforced. Slaveholders continued to buy slaves because they were certain slaves were a safe investment. The rest of the book explores the emergence, persistence, and victory of the Abolitionist movement. The two major parties, Liberals and Conservatives, and the emperor, Dom Pedro II, neither foresaw nor embraced the Abolitionist movement. Because neither party demonstrated much enthusiasm about abolitionism, the struggle initially took place in the streets and Needell explores linkages between parliamentary abolition and the movement in the streets. In the early years of the movement, abolitionism "challenged the parliamentary establishment, but not to the point where the cabinet or its supporters were willing to accommodate an Abolitionist reform" (p. 93). The fact that the movement continued to be marginalized in parliament did not stop abolitionists. Instead, they "regrouped and continued their labors, making the emergence of a new political force evident" (p. 98). Abolitionists also abandoned ideas about gradualism and turned toward immediate abolition.

It was at this moment that the elites began to see the need to contain the movement. The Liberal Party's 1869 *Manifesto do Centro Liberal* outlined a series of radical reforms. Some Liberals seemed sympathetic toward the abolitionists. However, Liberals had also been in the political wilderness for a long time and some saw abolitionism as a means of ascending to power. Liberals also understood that they could please the emperor by containing the move-

ment. This was critical. Dom Pedro II wanted to manage the abolitionists by creating a cabinet that would pass some type of reform to mollify them. Popular mobilization made the emperor and others nervous, because of the level of support abolitionists commanded. Despite the massive crowds that turned out in the streets of Rio, abolitionists ultimately lost in the parliamentary maneuvering because they “faced a very capable opposition alliance of moderate Liberals and Conservatives fighting on its own terrain” (p. 141). The people in the streets found themselves stymied by the few in power. Also, it should be noted, popular mobilization may have hurt Abolitionists because their opponents created stories about threatening crowds. The emperor and reactionaries thus “moved forward together to engage and contain Abolitionism” (p. 157). Reaction seemingly won in 1885, with the passage of the Sexagenarian Law and the ascent of Baron Cotegipe and the Conservative Party to power.

Once in power, Cotegipe attempted to repress the abolitionist movement and subvert the Sexagenarian Law. This led to a more radical turn among Abolitionists. Although Conservatives had won a commanding majority in the Chamber of Deputies, Cotegipe’s government fell because it “no longer enjoyed strong or stable support, even among key Conservative chieftains” (184). Furthermore, “the ongoing success of Abolitionism in town and country, particularly Antônio Bento’s success in São Paulo, had a dramatic political effect” (184). In other words, Liberals failed to pass a reform, Conservatives won power and passed the Sexagenarian Law (which they tried to undermine), but the passage of this law did not satisfy Abolitionists. Again, Needell argues that “the popular Afro-Brazilian component in all of this was both evident and remarked upon” (p. 198). Abolitionists triumphed when the princess regent signed the Golden Law on May 13, 1888, which ended slavery in Brazil.

## **Conclusions**

When slavery ended in Brazil, many people celebrated, but others believed considerable work remained to be accomplished and that slavery’s end was only the beginning. This debate has continued into the present day, especially in discussions about reparations and slavery’s many pernicious legacies. One point all the books discussed in this review essay highlight, that is greatly worth remembering, is the role slaves and people of African descent played in abolition. Slaves in Berbice seized the colony and stymied the Dutch for a year. This did not end slavery in Berbice, but the colony never recovered economically. In Jamaica, Sharpe’s rebellion also failed but, in failing, helped bring down slavery across the British Empire. Sharpe’s rebellion also provided additional evidence for the British to employ, as they confronted other countries, like Spain, about the dangers of maintaining slavery. One of Needell’s central contributions is that he demonstrates the importance of Afro-Brazilian mobilization in the Abolitionist movement and how crowds of Afro-Brazilians in the streets of Rio, to say nothing of slaves who seized their own freedom and de-

stabilized slavery elsewhere in Brazil, played a critical role in ending slavery. Indeed, as the authors demonstrate, slave mobilizations often had an impact far beyond the places where they occurred. They could and did push elite actors into new courses of action. The rebellion in Berbice did not end slavery there, but the combination of Sharpe's rebellion, an aggressive abolitionist movement in Great Britain, and the Reform Bill worked together to kill slavery throughout the British Empire. Indirectly, these events had an impact on other countries, particularly Spain, as a result of British pressure. Without the crowds of Afro-Brazilians who took to the streets, the Brazilian Abolitionist movement would not have been able to notch victories in Parliament. In sum, abolition was not merely a gift extended by benevolent elites, it was something that had to be fought for and achieved, by many different groups of people throughout the world. All four books highlight important elements about slavery and abolition in a critical century and a half, from the Berbice Rebellion to Brazil's Golden Law.

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