

**Zoellner, Tom. *Island on Fire: The Revolt That Ended Slavery in the British Empire*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022. 363 pages. Paperback, \$18.79.**

*Island on Fire* is a pulsating narrative of the events and resulting consequences of a five-week slave revolt in Jamaica in 1831-1832 that prompted the end of slavery in the British West Indies. The Christmas 1831 Rebellion, which started as a peaceful labor strike for wages for slave labor, quickly degenerated into a violent uprising. The lead character was an inspirational enslaved Baptist deacon, Samuel Sharpe. Sharpe declared that the objective of the protest was only to end the practice of forced labor and that life was not to be sacrificed, except in self-defense. Nonetheless, a harsh crackdown by the colonial militias, executing slaves who refused to work without pay, led to their defiance spiraling into a violent revolt. Zoellner believed that Sharpe's intention was anchored in nonviolent idealism, probably, inspired by Baptist salvation theology. That only fourteen English settlers were killed in the insurrection, compared to more than 1,000 enslaved Blacks, summarily executed on the spot, is evidence of Sharpe's nonviolent ideology. To this end, the author highly praised Sharpe as a forerunner of two twentieth century icons: Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. Furthermore, Zoellner's carefully documented account of the Rebellion brings into limelight, outside of Jamaica, another heroic slave revolt besides that of Toussaint Louverture in Haiti and Nat Turner, also in 1831, in Virginia.

The book, comprising thirteen chapters plus epilogue, can be compartmentalized into three parts. The first five chapters (A Suburb of Hell, Deacon Sharpe, King Sugar, The Door of No Return, and The Plot) laid the foundation in England and the settler colony of Jamaica. nineteenth-century England was marked by advances in technology, as well as an emerging middle class pushing for political representation. In Jamaica, vast amounts of money could be made from sugar that changed fortunes even for settlers from humble backgrounds. The mass

production and supply of sugar tried to meet its avid demand by English and European consumers. Zoellner vividly details the harsh cruelty English planters meted to Black slaves. Against the backdrop of the growing antislavery movement on both sides of the Atlantic, Zoellner discusses the impact of Protestant missionaries spearheaded by Quakers, Baptist, and Methodist preachers in England and Jamaica about the horrors of slavery. Protestant missionaries outrightly condemned the evils and injustices of slavery by preaching the natural equality of humans. In addition, Deacon Sharpe reportedly told slaves an astonishing and untrue news that King William IV, back in England, had set them free and that the slaveholders kept it a secret. The sinister plot was to kill all the black men, saving the women as their playthings and sparing the children to grow into a new generation of slaves. Hence, “if the black men did not stand up for themselves, and take their freedom, the whites would put them out at the muzzles of their guns, and shoot them like pigeons” (p.85). Sharpe’s statement inflamed passions. His charisma combined with his social privilege of literacy led his followers to believe his claims that the king had set them free but that slave masters were denying them their freedom. Sharpe led a nonviolent resistance that went amiss because of factors outside of his control.

The next four chapters (*Swear to Me*, *The Fires*, *One Common Ruin*, and *Launched into Eternity*) provides in-depth details of the events. As Zoellner explained it, the slaves, using guerrilla tactics, burnt trash houses in order to forestall sugar production. Thus the objective of the fires and destruction was to impede the economic rationale for slavery; thereby, rendering slaves irrelevant to their owners. When British troops and colonial militias put down the revolt after five weeks, 145 estate houses across seventy miles of territory in and around the Montego Bay area had gone up in flames. Given that resistance was ever present among the enslaved, English settlers in Jamaica lived in constant fear of a revolt. Notably, Sam Sharpe’s led revolt

was preceded by Tacky's Rebellion in 1760. Hence, the likelihood of slave revolt was etched on the psyche of slave owners. All of this unnerved Jamaican planters, who began talking openly of secession from Britain, with even a threat to join the United States. Zoellner's narrative reached a climax in this section, with the public execution of Deacon Sharpe in Montego Bay.

The last four chapters (Panic, Another Island, Freedom, and Aftermath) discuss the consequences of the revolt. The Christmas 1831 Rebellion can be likened to a gathering storm, in terms of the impending public outrage in Britain against the institution of slavery. While the Jamaican rebels lost their gutsy attempt to liberate themselves, their defiance generated a pivotal turn against slavery. As news of the slave revolt and harsh cruelties slaves were subjected to filtered into Britain, public opinion against slavery was galvanized against the horrors of slavery. The revolt did not succeed in improving conditions for Jamaican slaves, but it signaled a death knell for the brutal institution of slavery in the British Empire. The Jamaica Slave Revolt played a pivotal role, but a number of significant factors coalesced to hasten the abolition of slavery. These include violent reprisals against the enslaved, which strengthened the efforts of abolitionists in rousing public sentiment against slavery. The unflagging resolve of Protestant missionaries, coupled with the decline of the West Indian Interest in the British House of Commons, the "sugar abstinence" movement, and the unsuccessful fight in the Jamaica Assembly to return to the *status quo ante* accelerated the abolition of slavery. Zoellner also examined the so-called "apprenticeship" period sequel to the emancipation declaration on August 1, 1938.

In *Island on Fire*, Zoellner craftily revitalized Jamaican history to those unfamiliar with British colonialism in the Caribbean. Samuel Sharpe is a hero and historical figure in Jamaica. A portrait of Sharpe, commissioned by the Government of Jamaica in 1975, today graces the fifty

dollar currency note. Tom Zoellner deserves accolades for penning this book that reads more like a novel than a chronological and historiographical analysis. But what a well-researched, easy to read, and compelling history book it is!

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