



***Black Crown: Henry Christophe, the
Haitian Revolution and the
Caribbean's Forgotten Kingdom***

By Paul Clammer

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A jubilant crowd lined the streets to see a general made famous in their revolution place a crown on his head. The gilded carriage, drawn by eight white horses, swept past them to the cathedral for a coronation designed to impress upon all who witnessed it that a new, and formidable, dynasty was assuming power. Before long, crowned and regal, the royal family emerged onto the *Champ de mars* to salute the crowds before making their way to a lavish banquet to the strains of Napoleon's favourite march, André Grétry's melodic *Où peut-on être mieux qu'au sein de sa famille*.

It may have been Napoleon's preferred music, and the splendid carriage may have been emblazoned with the Napoleonic bee, but the man being anointed on that revolutionary day was not Napoleon. He was Henry Christophe, a former plantation slave who, on 2 June 1811, had himself crowned Henry I, King of Haiti.

The details of the coronation examined here are drawn from Paul Clammer's absorbing biography of Henry Christophe which charts his astonishing rise from slave to monarch. Quite how Christophe succeeded, if only briefly, to lay claim to Haiti is a remarkable drama and Clammer does great things with the raw material, easily surpassing Hubert Cole's earlier, but much less thoughtful, biography *Christophe: King of Haiti* (1967). Both were drawn to the subject, no doubt, by the fact that Christophe's story is one peppered with the involvement of such astonishing personas as Toussaint Louverture and Jean-Jacques Dessalines. Even Napoleon is a brooding presence, lurking just off-stage.

However, Christophe's story is also a tale centred on the Haitian Revolution, a vital series of events which destroyed the old order in the Atlantic world even as the protagonists fumbled to find a new one. Clammer points out (188) that Christophe dubbed himself the First Crowned Head of the New World, but this came only after Haiti had exhausted all other available options. By the time of the coronation, Haiti had suffered through two decades of turmoil in which it had gone from a slave colony to an independent republic, to an empire under Dessalines, then back to a republic under Generalissimo Christophe, before emerging as Henry I's kingdom, all against the backdrop of war and European, as well as increasingly American, attempts to reduce it to

a geopolitical plaything. Unfortunately, crowning himself did not permit Henry I to end this sad trajectory and his attempts, and ultimate failure, to confer peace and prosperity stand as a prologue to similar doomed attempts and a long and shabby history of bloodletting.

The biography of Christophe necessarily focuses on the lives of the great and the awful rather than on the lives of the downtrodden who have rightly earned the attention of recent social histories of the revolution. Even so, a biography is a useful way of navigating this complex world and, given that Christophe emerges as a relatively sympathetic figure, one can see why Clammer has preferred him, rather than choosing as his subject the thuggish Dessalines, who had crowned himself Emperor of Haiti a few years before Christophe was king. Christophe was born into slavery in Grenada but by the 1780s found himself in Saint Domingue (modern-day Haiti) working at the Couronne de France inn. He was still there when, during 1789, the revolution that shook the crowns of Europe also shook loose the bonds of France's slaves by declaring that "men are born and remain free and equal in rights." When the plantation owners and colonial elite attempted to maintain the impossible status quo and prevent the enslaved from enjoying any rights, the colony exploded into a multi-dimensional war which was part ideological, part racial and mostly desperate. New leaders began to emerge during that conflict, amongst them was Christophe who, after finding himself a general, led armies of slaves who, whilst free, were not yet liberated.

In most accounts it is Toussaint Louverture who rose through such chaos to greatness, but, as Clammer reminds us, he had Christophe acting as his most capable commander and Dessalines as his most ruthless. Louverture remained loyal to the French republic, but when Napoleon assumed control of France a great expedition was launched to tame Saint Domingue. Louverture was tricked into giving himself up, but determined resistance and Yellow Fever did away with Napoleon's invading soldiers. This enabled Christophe and Dessalines to establish the Caribbean's first black republic but here, as Clammer makes clear, victory was a prelude to deeper problems. None could agree on what liberty meant and what freedoms had been earned and so, after the hideous reign of Dessalines, Christophe would be beset by many rivals. This intensified after Christophe crowned himself and, indeed, the new king saw Haiti divided when Alexandre Pétion, supported by those army officers who thought the revolution was not yet complete, or had felt betrayed by Christophe and his absurd new aristocracy (seven dukes, 22 counts, 36 barons), established a competing republic in the south.

Christophe and Pétion were at odds over money and power, but both were also struggling with the issue of where such considerations intersected, namely the ownership of land. Haiti's economy was dependent on exporting commodities, especially coffee, and so the authorities needed former slaves to give up their dreams of owning small tracts of land so that they would be kept productive on restored plantations. The new authorities tried various degrees of coercion, and Christophe and his new aristocracy did eventually tie the workforce to the land, but this would not prove popular, nor much of a solution to the country's ills, even if it made the elite very rich indeed. Through such actions the promise of Christophe's rule dissipated and quickly gave way to bitter in-fighting of the sort to overshadow any other achievements. Clammer captures these frustrations as he sets Christophe in the broader context of an evolving power struggle, and does so from the Haitian perspective (something Hubert Cole's earlier biography failed to do).

All this makes for a valuable book. It tells the tale of an interesting man, in interesting times, but also, quite remarkably, manages to shift the gaze away from Toussaint Louverture, the doyen of Haitian studies, to characters like Christophe who actually succeeded in making Haiti independent. From the turbulence emerges a figure with Napoleonic pretensions, perhaps, but one whose rise and rule mirrors the story of the land that raised him. One in which slavery and struggle were interrupted by a bright burst of triumph, only to be followed by the return of grinding discontentment.

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