

A Tale of Two Plantations: Slave Life and Labor in Jamaica and Virginia

Eric Burin

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Review

Burin, Eric

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Dunn, Richard S. *A Tale of Two Plantations: Slave Life and Labor in Jamaica and Virginia*. Harvard University Press, \$39.95 ISBN 9780674735361

Slavery in Comparative Perspective

In *A Tale of Two Plantations*, Richard S. Dunn examines in minute detail two plantations, Mesopotamia in Jamaica and Mount Airy in Virginia. Dunn's study is based largely on annual slave inventories, documents that allow him to reconstruct the lives of hundreds of enslaved people at both sites. Dunn concludes that slavery was terrible in both places, but different demographic trajectories made it horrific in distinct ways.

A close examination of the sugar-growing operation at Mesopotamia from the early 1760s through the early 1830s reveals that death was omnipresent. Dunn argues that the brutal labor regime, barbaric corporal punishments that included forcing slaves to eat each other's feces, semi-starvation, and a highly insalubrious environment contributed to the bondspersons' high mortality rates. In addition, Dunn provocatively suggests that despair—"psychological castration," in Dunn's words—also sapped slaves' will to live (p. 158). Whatever the reason, negative growth rates affected all aspects of the Mesopotamia enterprise. For starters, it helped convince the plantation's successive owners—members of the Barham family—to remain in England and rely on overseers and attorneys to run their Jamaican holdings. The Barhams' white employees coped with Mesopotamia's population implosion by obtaining slaves from Africa (at least until 1792, when Joseph Barham II decided to no longer participate in the Atlantic slave trade) and purchasing slaves from other Jamaican plantations. The white managers also contributed to the number of slaves at Mesopotamia by frequently fornicating with the plantation's bondswomen. The resultant offspring often became Mesopotamia's domestics and craftsmen, the latter of which tended to cooperate with white authorities during periods of slave unrest, a strategy that Dunn believes made sense, given

the seemingly overwhelming power that slaveholders exercised over the island. Yet there were even more powerful individuals in England—antislavery crusaders, to be exact—and in 1832 they secured passage of a gradual emancipation law (though slaveholders managed to extract a sizable compensation package for an institution that for decades had struggled to stave off a demographic collapse).

Whereas natural population decreases were the preeminent feature at Mesopotamia, natural population increases were the driving engine at Mount Airy, which was owned by members of the Tayloe family. The constant growth in the number of slaves presented the Tayloes with many attractive business options. For example, in the early 1790s, John Tayloe III sold over 100 slaves and used the proceeds to buy additional lands, knowing that his remaining slave force would soon reproduce itself. Indeed, in addition to their multiple land holdings in the Northern Neck of Virginia, the Tayloes employed slave labor at their residence in the District of Columbia, their ironwork operations in the Blue Ridge Mountains, and, from the 1830s onward, their cotton-growing plantations in Alabama. The Tayloes were remarkably dexterous in shifting around their slave laborers as circumstances demanded, an economic efficiency that wreaked havoc on the slaves' familial lives. In like fashion, the ability to transfer or sell slaves without negative financial consequences provided the Tayloes with a potent disciplinary weapon, as in the case wherein William Tayloe sold to different parties the wife and children of a bondsman who ran away. In short, the Tayloe slaves were always being torn from loved ones.

Mount Airy differed from Mesopotamia in other ways. The Tayloes' slaves had more diverse occupational experiences than their counterparts at Mesopotamia. The number of artisans, semi-skilled workers, and domestics was much larger at Mount Airy, and even the field hands tended to engage in a wider array of tasks than the sugar-growing slaves at Mesopotamia. This occupational diversity was diminished, however, when the Tayloes began their cotton-growing enterprise in Alabama in the 1830s. Calling the forced migration of bondspersons from the Upper South to the Lower South "the most important development to take place during the entire history of antebellum slavery" (p. 272), Dunn shows how the Tayloes sent successive gangs of their Virginia slaves to Alabama, where the bondspersons were compelled to clear the fields, plant and tend the cotton, and harvest the crop. Dunn acknowledges the misery wrought by the interstate transfers, but he also suggests that some of the Mount Airy slaves may have wanted to go to Alabama because they would be reunited

with those who had been sent previously. For them, argues Dunn, the move may have represented “a hopeful new adventure” (p. 283).

If the Tayloes’ Virginia slaves truly wanted to see their Alabama friends and family, the Civil War provided opportunities for them to do so. Fearful that his Virginia bondspersons would see the tumult of war as a chance to escape, in December, 1861, Henry Tayloe shepherded forty-eight slaves to his family’s Alabama plantations. By the time he returned to Virginia, six of the Mount Airy bondspersons had fled. Interestingly, several of these runaways, as well as a few other Tayloe slaves that managed to abscond during the war, were craftsmen, meaning that these skilled workers capitalized on opportunities that were not afforded to their more wary Mesopotamia counterparts. His fears of slave restlessness realized, Tayloe sent another fifty bondspersons to Alabama in spring 1862. By 1863, then, the Tayloes had only sixty-six slaves at Mount Airy, compared to nearly 400 in Alabama. Yet when Vicksburg fell to Union forces in July 1863, Alabama was open to attack. At least thirteen of the Tayloes’ slaves were forced to build fortifications around Selma, which Union forces overran on April 2, 1865, whereupon they moved on to Montgomery, occupying that city on April 9. The same day, Robert E. Lee surrendered in Virginia. The war was over, as was slavery.

The liberty that the Tayloe freedpersons experienced differed from that of their Mesopotamia counterparts. When slavery ended in Jamaica, many of Mesopotamia’s former bondspersons migrated to unoccupied lands and established peasant communities where they enjoyed economic independence and social autonomy. By contrast, the Tayloe ex-slaves had to settle for sharecropping on their former owners’ holdings. For both groups, however, the fight for political equality was a long struggle. The rights initially enjoyed by the Tayloe ex-slaves during Reconstruction were soon taken away. Likewise, Jamaican freedpersons were not recognized as citizens until the mid-twentieth century. In the United States and Jamaica the demise of terrible, if distinctive, forms of slavery hardly ended the travails of the oppressed.

Eric Burin is Professor of History at the University of North Dakota. He is the author of Slavery and the Peculiar Solution: A History of the American Colonization Society (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2005).