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Luis Martinez-Fernandez. *Fighting Slavery in the Caribbean: The Life and Times of a British Family in Nineteenth-Century Havana.* Armonk and New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1998. xiii + 200 pp. $60.95 (cloth); $23.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7656-0247-3.

Reviewed by Eric Anderson (University of Idaho)
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Fighting Slavery Reviewed

Of all aspects of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, one of the least researched is its illegal continuous in the nineteenth-century. Heretofore, this body of literature focuses on two themes: first, a numerical analysis of the numbers of slaves transported from Africa to the Americas; and second, an examination of the legal and political implications of the capture and adjudication of suspected slave traders. Luis Martinez-Fernandez's *Fighting Slavery: The Life and Times of a British Family in Nineteenth-Century Havana*, broadens the social history of the slave trade by telling the story of one British family's experiences while serving in the Havana Mixed Commission for the Suppression of the Slave Trade.

Martinez-Fernandez writes the book, in part, to "remind my colleagues and myself that our origins [as historians] are in story-telling, that good stories carry forward the wisdom of the ages, and that the society that supports our toil still expects at least a bit of that" (p. 3). To accomplish this goal, the author relies on the papers of a single British family–the Blackhouses, who are the center of his narrative. Martinez-Fernandez supplements his use of the Blackhouse papers with contemporary travel accounts, newspaper articles, and private correspondence. At times, *Fighting Slavery* reads much like a historical novel; nonetheless, the author assures readers that even though "some of what follows seems closer to the realm of fiction, it is not so" (p. 3).

The narrative gives readers a window into the society of nineteenth-century Cuba from a resident alien's view. All too often, historians forget the culture shock elite Europeans and U.S. citizens experienced when they visited nineteenth-century Havana.[1] *Fighting Slavery* provides a glimpse into how foreigners coped with Cuba's almost constant threat of tropical diseases; how an English Victorian woman reacted to Havana's forced seclusion because local custom did not allow "ladies" to walk the city's streets alone; and what efforts non-Catholics took to practice their faith while enduring the Cuban government's persecution against Protestants.

The first chapter of the book describes the Blackhouse family history and the circumstances surrounding George's (the Blackhouse patriarch) appointment to the Havana Mixed Commission for the Suppression of the Slave Trade. George Blackhouse began working as a clerk in the Foreign Office in 1838, soon after he graduated from Oxford. Longing for change, he applied for an appointment to the Consular Corps in 1851, and again in early 1852. Both times Blackhouse received negative responses to his application. Finally, in December 1852, George was invited to serve on the Havana Mixed Commission for the Suppression of the Slave Trade, which required him to judge cases against British and Spanish citizens accused of involvement in the illegal Cuban slave trade.

Blackhouse's timely appointment to the Mixed Commission put him on the front lines of England's effort to suppress the African slave trade. By early 1852, Cuba was the Americas' last bastion of the illicit Atlantic slave trade. After the War of 1812, only two places in the Americas imported a substantial number of slaves from Africa: Brazil and Cuba. For a number of reasons, Brazil's African slave trade had all but ended by 1852; Cuba's, however, continued into the late 1860s. An estimated 12,500 slaves arrived on Cuba's shores in 1853, a dramatic increase over the number of slaves brought to Cuba during the previous two decades. Moreover, even though the British Mixed Commissions' in Africa enjoyed considerable success in the late 1840s and early 1850s, the success of the Havana Mixed Commission was questionable. The Mixed Commission at Sierra Leone, for example, adjudicated 314 cases between 1845-1848; it condemned over ninety-five percent of the vessels involved in these cases.[2] The Havana commission, however, achieved no where near Sierra Leone's success; between 1840-1850,

only seven cases reached the Havana commission, and only three of those were found guilty. [3] An appointment to Havana's Mixed Commission was definitely going to be a challenge for the young George Blackhouse.

Fighting Slavery describes in detail the family's preparations for the move and their journey to Havana. As George met with diplomats who briefed him on his duties and responsibilities, George's wife, Grace, prepared the household for the trans-Atlantic relocation. The Blackhouses made their journey to Cuba on a British Naval Steamer where they all suffered from the effects of the rough Atlantic seas and the monotony of shipboard life. Martinez-Fernandez paints a vivid picture of the family's entrance into Havana's harbor and the Blackhouse family's reactions to their first experience with the bureaucracy of Cuban Customs.

Establishing themselves in Cuba proved to be a difficult task for the Blackhouses. The family found Havana to be nothing like their beloved London. The sights, smells, tastes, sounds, and climate of the city were truly alien to them. Eager to settle, the Blackhouses immediately began looking for a home. They chose to live in a neighborhood named El Cerro, which was home to most elite foreigners residing in Havana. Soon after moving, the Blackhouses hired servants to clean, cook, and care for their children. While George and Grace Blackhouse did not own slaves, they did often hire slaves as household servants. *Fighting Slavery* offers an interesting view of the seldom seen domestic sphere of an elite foreign household in Havana.

While serving as judge, George Blackhouse adjudicated only three cases relating to slave ships. These included cases tied to the capture of the vessels the *Arrogante Emilio*, the *Casualidad*, and the *Grey Eagle*. Notwithstanding Blackhouse's efforts to prove the vessels' culpability in the slave trade, the commission handed down innocent verdicts in all three cases. Nevertheless, Blackhouse's actions in those three cases offers an insightful look into the workings of the Havana Mixed Commission. Once a vessel was captured and charged with violating the prohibition against the slave trade, the vessel was taken to Havana where the commission's attorneys (one Spanish, the other English) argued the case to a two judge panel (one judge was British and the other Spanish). Once arguments were concluded, each judge gave their verdict. If the judges rendered different decisions, the case went to an arbitrator; the commission had two arbitrators (one Spanish the other British). The commission randomly selected which arbitrator would break the tie by drawing lots or casting dice. It was common knowledge that the Spanish judge and arbitrator consistently delivered innocent judgments. Likewise, the British judge and arbitrator regularly handed down guilty verdicts. Although *Fighting Slavery* lacks any real analysis of the Havana Mixed Commission's effectiveness or impact on the slave trade, it does explain the commission's process of deciding a case.

Martinez-Fernandez presents an important discussion of the *emancipado* system in Cuba. The *emancipado* plan was designed to take slaves from captured slave vessels, liberate them, then provide employment to them as indentured workers to ease their transitions into Cuban society. By virtue of the Mixed Commission's involvement in the condemnation of slave vessels, George Blackhouse was able to supervise the *emancipado* system. Here was where he did the most good. While serving as judge, he sped the release of several *emancipados* who were held long beyond their required time of indenture. Blackhouse's achievements with Cuban *emancipados* shows his attempts to act against slave interests without marginalizing too large a part of the Cuban society in which he resides.

The experiences of many nineteenth-century female Europeans in the "malecity" of Havana caused them to proclaim Cuba's capital unbearable. Grace Blackhouse's life in Havana aptly illustrates the city's inhospitality. During the mid-nineteenth century, Cuban custom forced elite white women into seclusion to prevent inappropriate sexual contact between black men and elite women. The custom was based on the idea that by sequestering white women, miscegenation (race-mixing) was less likely to occur. Havana's society (both male and female) supported the practice so absolutely that even when the wife of a prominent Spanish official sought to end the tradition in 1848 by walking the streets alone, no other elite woman joined her crusade. Women traveled through Havana's streets in carriages, rarely leaving the security these rigs provided. When shopping, merchants brought goods out to the street so female customers could examine and purchase the merchandise without having to dismount from their coach. Notwithstanding her unhappiness, Grace Blackhouse was able to overcome her experiences of isolation and homesickness through contact with other foreign women and long distance communication with family in England.

While Martinez-Fernandez focused his attention on Grace Blackhouse and elite white women, *Fighting Slavery* did discuss the freedom of mobility enjoyed by black women. Nineteenth-century Havana did allow women

not claiming the title of lady to walk the streets freely. Women of color walked about as they pleased, became entrepreneurs in local markets, and frequented places like cockpits, which were off limits to elite *Habaneras*. The fact that women of color enjoyed greater freedoms than elite white females revealed a paradoxical situation that fostered an adversarial relationship between women of different races and classes. For examples of this, Martinez-Fernandez points to several travel accounts where elite women reprimanded and scorned women of color for their "jaunty" and "almost snobbish pride" as they walked Havana's streets (p. 69). The tone of these criticisms illustrated elite female's jealousy at black's physical mobility, more revealing attire, and accessibility to all classes and races of men.

With George working only four hours a day (10 a.m.0 to 2 p.m.) and a large part of the household duties fulfilled by servants, leisure activities occupied a significant part of the Blackhouse's time. After moving to El Cerro, the Blackhouses joined an elite social group made up exclusively of British and German citizens. The clique shunned Spaniards and North Americans, believing persons of these nationalities to be inferior. Because of George Blackhouse's official position, he and his wife were drawn into the circle's extravagant and expensive social schedule. The couple's duties also included entertaining British Naval officers assigned to the anti-slave trading squadron. Havana offered the family much informal entertainment also. Shopping excursions, for example, allowed the Blackhouses to purchase imported British goods like beer, tea, and English-language publications. They also frequently patronized Havana's opera, theater, and restaurants. Even though the Blackhouses lived an opulent lifestyle in Cuba, Havana's leisure activities never replaced their love for London.

The Blackhouses faced many difficulties as active Protestants in Cuba's Roman Catholic society. In Cuba at this time, Catholicism was the official religion of the state. This meant the government did not allow residents to practice any religion other than Catholicism. While George Blackhouse's status as a foreign official prevented him from taking the Catholicity Oath–an oath required of foreigners to pledge their allegiance to the Catholic church–the family, nevertheless, dealt with other forms of religious persecution. Because Cuba's government did not allow any non-Catholic clergy to practice on the island, the Blackhouses worshiped in alternate ways. Usually the family held private Protestant services in their home on Sundays. They read scripture, prayed, and listened to each other read published sermons. When a British warship was in port, however, the family could attend church on board the vessel. Though a non-ordained chaplain (usually the vessel's captain) performed the service, the chance to worship with other Protestants was welcomed.

Fighting Slavery points out that nineteenth-century Cuba was by most standards an unhealthy place. In 1852, the British Foreign Office reported that the number of yellow fever cases hit epidemic proportions; between 1850-1854, Havana suffered from a cholera epidemic in which some 30,000 people died (p. 120). Unacclimated foreigners suffered more than natives from the island's tropical diseases. The mortality rate for foreigners at this time was between 260 and 400 per 1000; conversely, the rate for Havana as a whole was 36 per 1000 (p. 121). Although the family's health was not always perfect, none of the Blackhouses fell victim to a fatal illness while in Cuba.

Notwithstanding the abolitionist position George Blackhouse's took on the Havana Mixed Commission, the Blackhouse's demonstrated racial prejudice while in Cuba. One episode involving their son Johnny Blackhouse (born in Havana in 1853) illustrates this. While Johnny was sick with an unknown illness, Grace Blackhouse was unable to nurse him; hence, to fill her place, the family hired several wet nurses, one of African descent. Not strong enough to take milk from the black woman's breast, the Blackhouse's doctor ordered Johnny fed via a spoon. Reluctant to have a black woman responsible for the care of their child, Grace, "sent off" the woman one day after she arrived (p. 129). Grace Blackhouse's experience with a black wet nurse exemplified the racism common among light-skinned British citizens who resided in a place with a substantial part of the population of African descent.

During George Blackhouse's tenure on the Mixed Commission, he was caught in the middle of an unexpected British policy shift in regards to the suppression of the slave trade. In 1853, Juan de la Pezuela arrived in Cuba with instructions to take power over the island as Cuba's new Captain-General. Within days, he implemented drastic measures designed to end the slave trade to Cuba. During his tenure, 11 slaving vessels were captured and 2,699 slaves liberated (p. 133). Pezuela's controversial policies, however, did not take long to alienate the most powerful elements of Cuban society. As a result, the Spanish government recalled him less than one year after he took office. Spain replaced Pezuela with a Captain-General conciliatory toward the slave trade. By relaxing the Cuban government's support for the suppression of the slave trade, Spain sought to do two things.

First, they wanted to silence plantation owners' cries for a US annexation of Cuba. Some plantation owners believed that should the United States annex the island, the new government would reopen the African slave trade to Cuba. By allowing more slave imports and cracking-down on the annexationists, the government silenced its critics. Second, the Spanish government wanted to undermine British power over the island by emphasizing England's abolitionist policy. Spain's plan seemed to work. Britain, not wanting to lose its economic beachhead in Cuba to the United States, relaxed its abolitionist pressure on the island. British policy became one where "Cuba with slaves under Spanish rule was preferable to a slave-based or free-labor Cuba under the United States" (p. 134).

One year after the family's arrival on the island, the Blackhouses suffered catastrophe. The exorbitant cost of entertaining and the luxurious lifestyle they lived caused the family to accumulate debts beyond their means. Things worsened until, in 1854, George requested loans from his family in England. To reduce household costs, Grace and the children moved back to London. Soon after Grace Blackhouse and her children returned to England, tragedy struck. In 1855, Grace received a message that two unknown assailants had murdered her husband in their Havana home. Two men broke into their house one evening and attacked George with a knife; he died later that night. The news of George's death deeply affected Grace. Though she did remarry, one doubts whether she ever recovered fully from the loss.

Since Cuba's police never solved the case, Jose Martinez-Fernandez offers four possible explanations for the killing. One suggests that George was the victim of a robbery turned violent when he tried to resist. A second was that George's position as an activist on the Mixed Commission made him a target of a conspiracy by slave traders bent on removing him from the court; this explanation, however, appears weak. Even though many officials who worked to suppress the slave trade felt their lives in danger at one time or another, few came to any harm. George may also have been the victim of revenge by a disgruntled employee. George had problems with an assistant during his entire time in Havana. In fact, Blackhouse made several complaints about the employee to the Foreign Office. No evidence, however, ever connected this employee with the killing. The fourth and least plausible explanation for George's death was that he was the victim of a ritualistic murder by an Afro-Cuban cult. This theory had little merit because Blackhouse was well known and liked among the city's people of color. Martinez-Fernandez admits we may never know who killed George Blackhouse. Regardless, his speculations on the murder were interesting.

Fighting Slavery, ends much like a novel. The book offers a sense of closure for all of the characters involved. For Cuba, however, the specter of the slave trade would be with them for some time. The island continued to accept African slaves by the thousands for over a decade. Only when it became more profitable to import Chinese indentured workers than slaves did the flow of Africans cease.

Martinez-Fernandez paints a vivid picture of nineteenth-century Havana. He writes the book in a way that makes it a joy to read. What's more, since little research is published on the judges of the Havana Mixed Commission, *Fighting Slavery* provides a glimpse into how the Mixed Court worked. The chapters on women and Protestants in Havana are also invaluable. Any scholar wanting to read a history of upper-class foreigners in Cuba will find *Fighting Slavery* engrossing.

Ultimately, however, the book will disappoint readers looking to understand British efforts at "fighting slavery" in Cuba and the Havana Mixed Commission. Since the Blackhouses lived in Havana for less than four years, readers cannot consider their experiences definitive of the era. Martinez-Fernandez does do a good job of trying to explore the nuances of the period of the illegal Cuban slave trade (roughly 1817-1870). However, because the narrative is based on the short time the Blackhouses were in Cuba (1853-1855), *Fighting Slavery* does not tell the whole story of the illicit Cuban slave trade. Moreover, the Blackhouse's hiring of slaves hardly qualifies them as abolitionists. While in Havana, the family made few efforts to promote Cuban emancipation. Even though George Blackhouse did attempt to improve the plight of a few *emancipados*, his efforts should be seen as perfunctory at best. Furthermore, *Fighting Slavery* offers little discussion of the Havana Mixed Commission's adjudication of suspected slave vessels. Martinez-Fernandez dedicates only one-half a chapter discussing George's role in the commission. Other than the author's cursory background information on the Cuban slave trade, the book holds little material on the Mixed Commission or the impact of its presence.

Two points in the narrative need clarification. Martinez-Fernandez writes, "[n]ot until the 1860s, with a civil war [sic] raging in the United States, did Lincoln's government agree to cooperate with Great Britain in the struggle against the commerce in African chattel laborers" (p. 47). While it is true that the United States did

not allow the British the right to search US-flagged vessels until 1862, the statement is misleading. There was an 1842 agreement between the United States and Great Britain that allowed for joint patrolling missions. This treaty was the first time the British and the US "officially" cooperated in the suppression of the slave trade. Second, when discussing the cost of services in Cuba, *Fighting Slavery* often mixes units of pesos and dollars. This method of description confused this reader. Converting monetary units to one currency or another would improve the readability of the narrative.

On the whole, *Fighting Slavery* is a worthwhile book. Unfortunately, the book contained several editorial errors. Although minor mistakes–most are capitalization and punctuation inaccuracies–they do distract the reader. Another criticism of the book is the title; it does not aptly describe the book's subject matter. Little is said about fighting slavery. Nevertheless, we do learn about the life and times of a British family in nineteenth-century Havana. Martinez-Fernandez's view into nineteenth-century Cuba is fascinating; he offers a compelling and interesting social history of a British family residing in Havana. Historians will find *Fighting Slavery's* bibliography important for its wealth of nineteenth-century citations on life in Cuba. Scholars and students of Latin American history and members of the public at large will surely find *Fighting Slavery* valuable for understanding the experience of elite foreigners in nineteenth-century Havana.

Notes:

[1]. For examples see, Louis A. Perez Jr., *Slaves, Sugar, and Colonial Society: Travel Accounts of Cuba, 1801-1899* (Wilmington, De.: Scholarly Resources, 1992).

[2]. The African Slave Trade, 1850, HT 861, Box 4, New York Historical Society, New York, NY, p. 95.

[3]. Luis Martinez-Fernandez, "The Havana Anglo-Spanish Mixed Commission for the Suppression of the Slave trade and Cuba's *Emancipados*," *Slaveryand Abolition,* Vol. 16 No. 2 (August, 1995), p. 207.

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