



**Harvey Amani Whitfield.** *Biographical Dictionary of Enslaved Black People in the Maritimes*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2022. 304 pp. \$34.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-4875-4382-2.

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## **Reid-Maroney on Whitfield, 'Biographical Dictionary of Enslaved Black People in the Maritimes'**

In a 2016 essay, “Life beyond Biography: Black Lives and Biographical Research,” literary historian John Ernest noted the difficulty of finding sources for the writing of Black biography, pointing to the racist assumptions that had determined which lives mattered enough to be recorded—the afterlife of enslavement and white supremacy that lies waiting in the archive. Ernest urges historians not to fall back on the “helpless little phrase” that “little is known” about Black lives in the past. Concerning the horrors of enslavement, he writes, it would be better to recognize that “far too much is known” to be contained in the traditional form of a linear biography, which could never convey the complexities and disruption and violence that constrained Black lives.[1] H. Amani Whitfield’s *Biographical Dictionary of Enslaved Black People in the Maritimes* offers an extraordinary response to the challenges of Black biography that Ernest identifies. Whitfield’s work, the result of a deep immersion in the existing record, confronts and transcends the limitations of its disparate sources, using individual entries to collect and interpret biographical information about the lives of 1,465 people enslaved in the Maritimes in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

The foreword by Donald Wright places the work within the historiography of slavery studies in Canada, in part by introducing readers to an intellectual biography of Whitefield as a scholar. Sketching out the academic journey that led to the writing of *Blacks on the Border: The Black Refugees in British North America, 1815-1860* (2006) and *North to Bondage: Loyalist Slavery in the Maritimes* (2016), Wright offers an account of an academic life that established Whitfield as the leading scholar of slavery in the Maritimes. Reminding readers of the ways that Whitfield’s work on the past illuminates the present, Wright makes a compelling argument for Whitfield’s *Biographical Dictionary* as a “moral project” meant to counter the “indifference of history” to the long-forgotten individuals whose lives form the substance of the work (p. xiv).

In the introductory essay that follows, Whitfield situates the biographical entries in the context of the field that his publications have done so much to shape. As with his documentary collection, *Black Slavery in the Maritimes* (2018), the *Biographical Dictionary* highlights Whitfield’s unparalleled familiarity with the primary materials and reveals the surprising vibrance of fragment-

ary sources. In Whitfield's entries documenting what is known and asking questions about the rich histories of lives that lie beyond small traces on paper, we hear voices of the past, as well as the echoes of their oppression and resistance that still resonate in contemporary Canadian culture.

The *Biographical Dictionary* joins a growing body of scholarship that situates Black history in Canada within the context of the Atlantic world. The book contributes to the renaissance of biographical study as a framework for understanding transatlantic slavery on a human scale. Each alphabetical entry provides a narrative based on the sources at hand. For some, such as Amelia Byers (p. 32) or Lydia Jackson (p. 93), the existing record yields a detailed account not only of the circumstances of enslavement but of the tensions of active resistance against it, revealing the ways in which freedom was sought, purchased, taken, and sometimes secured. Whitfield interprets the evidence in the terms set out by historian Ira Berlin, whose work on American enslavement focused on the complexities of personal interaction and the possibilities for a fraught process of negotiation within the bounds of the institution. Of Amelia Beyers and her husband, Jack, who eventually secured their manumission but had to purchase the freedom of their own children, Whitfield writes that while Jack and Amelia "did not have the best cards to play ... they did have cards and could win a hand against their owners that might well result in freedom or the amelioration of certain conditions" (p. 33). Other entries detail physical descriptions of enslaved people used in advertisements for "runaways." As art historian Charmaine Nelson argues, such descriptions constitute an "unauthorized form of portraiture" that demonstrates the enslavers' power to categorize, define, and control.<sup>[2]</sup> Recontextualized in the *Biographical Dictionary*, however, such descriptions command our attention in a different way. It is not just that the entries help us to read archival sources against the grain; it is that the act of framing them as biography essentially creates a new archive, a

textual gallery of portraits that reclaims its subjects' interiority, agency, and personhood. By attending to lives known to us through the most attenuated of records, the work highlights the importance of recovering what Whitfield has elsewhere described as Black fragments in white archives. In this respect, the book addresses the methodologies of scholars such as Afua Cooper, Stephanie Smallwood, and Maria Fuentes who call on scholars to read the erasing of Black presence in historical records as its own form of evidence about the violence of enslavement.

The *Biographical Dictionary of Enslaved People in the Maritimes* will enliven other scholarship in the field, informing studies of social and political history in the region; studies of gender and enslavement, work, and resistance; and studies of family connection, migration, and movement. But the most striking scholarly achievement of the work lies not only in its gleaning of detail from existing sources, but in the choice of genre. A biographical dictionary is a literary form with a particular racial and gendered history, and while it is meant to carry weight and authority as a reference work, it ordinarily operates best when we turn to it with a name in hand. Whitfield reappropriates the genre. His entries, organized alphabetically by name, draw attention to what names can tell us about the social and political condition in which enslaved lives were lived. Names in the dictionary are often first names, often the only name by which enslaved individuals were known to their enslavers and to the creators of much of the archival record. Over four hundred of the entries are listed with names unknown. That so many people inhabit a biographical dictionary as "Unnamed" is an important research finding. It speaks to the disregard for humanity that made slavery possible, and to the power of simply breaking archival silence by pointing out what is not there, and why. Creating a prosopography in which the condition of being unnamed is part of the evidence is an act of scholarship that offers recovery and redress; Whitfield uses the authoritative voice

of a biographical dictionary as a scholarly intervention that writes 1,465 people back into the record, whether we know their names or not. In the process, the book centers the irreducible fact of racial slavery in Canada's history and reminds us, one carefully researched biographical entry at a time, that "far too much is known" about the institution to ignore it as a founding tenet of the British North American colonies that would become Canada.

#### Notes

[1]. John Ernest, "Life Beyond Biography: Black Lives and Biographical Research," *Common*

*Place* 17, no. 1 (Fall 2016), <http://common-place.online/article/life-beyond-biography/>.

[2]. Charmaine Nelson, "Servant, Seraglio, Savage, or 'Sarah': Examining the Visual Representation of Black Female Subjects in Canadian Art and Visual Culture," in *Women in the "Promised Land": Essays in African Canadian History*, ed. Nina Reid-Maroney, Boulou Ebanda de B'éri, and Wanda Thomas Bernard (Toronto: Women's Press, 2018), 49.

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