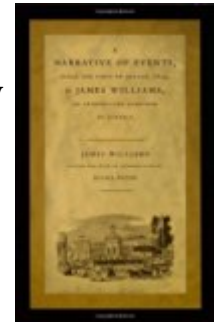




Diana Paton, ed.. *A Narrative of Events, since the First of August, 1834, by James Williams, an Apprenticed Labourer in Jamaica.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2001. lv + 129 pp. \$69.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8223-2658-8.



Reviewed by Karen S. Dhanda

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In *A Narrative of Events*, Paton has produced a fine analysis positioned within the timely and fashionable debate about the "Production of Knowledge." The book consists of three sections. The first is her lengthy and indispensable introduction in which she sketches in the plots, characters, and settings that situate the reader. She also presents her methodology and analytical findings and interpretations. The second is a reproduction of the narrative of Williams, a former slave serving as an apprenticed laborer working on a pimento plantation in St. Ann parish in Jamaica in 1834. In the narrative, Williams recounts the events that led up to his seven floggings and four periods of imprisonment in the house of corrections, and he also writes about the ordeals of others. For example, he narrates that he was punished for improperly cleaning the pimento crop, for not turning out sheep early enough in the morning, for not working hard enough, and for running away for seven weeks.

The third section is an account of an official commission of inquiry held in Jamaica to investigate the truthfulness of the narrative that infuri-

ated the Jamaican white elite and reflected negatively on the penal system and the stipendiary magistrates who were authorized to replace the planters in punishing former slaves for labor infractions. Paton correctly argues that the juxtaposing of the two archival pieces has an analytical value because it offers a multivocal account of the apprenticeship system. It also gives authenticity to Williams's telling of events, which were verified, for the most part, during the inquiry. Each section includes well-annotated endnotes. The book concludes with some thirty-four pages of additional documents and a bibliography.

Paton writes that a reading of the narrative must attend to the broader conditions of its production. She claims that although the Williams account is one of a few first-hand accounts of the searing indictment of the apprenticeship system in Jamaica, the narrative represents much more. And much more she offers in her interpretation. The book is of particular value because it moves beyond theory. This is a solid analysis of how knowledge is produced; and it deconstructs how this particular narrative was a mix of truth and

manipulation and the creation of multiple agents, white and black locked in an unequal distribution of power. The work is also valuable because it demonstrates that geographical knowledge of Jamaica and the West Indies influenced the nature of the knowledge that was produced. Within a broader frame, it demonstrates that the practices through which we produce knowledge, understandings, and "truth," in general, must be rigorously scrutinized. Paton conceives this narrative as part of the broad African diasporic tradition of the slave narrative. She claims that it fits in with slave narratives because there is a tension to represent individuality and also a need to represent the oppression suffered by every slave. Paton also writes that the narrative confronts many of the problems of form and context that critics have emphasized in the standard slave narrative. The political context in which Williams wrote, however, required a structure different than that of a standard slave narrative. There cannot be master against slave because there is no master. Instead the stipendiary magistrate replaces the master. Instead of the relationship between slave and master, there is the relationship between apprentice and state representative.

The book claims that no "authentic" slave narrative uncontaminated by white concerns exists. *A Narrative of Events*, too, was contaminated by white concerns; however, it was also the creation of former slaves. The narrative was produced by white missionaries, white abolitionists, white writers, black preachers, former slaves locked in the house of corrections, and by a marvelous storyteller. James Williams, a black man, was singled out because of his articulateness and a prodigious memory. Although constructed within an unequal alliance of power, the voice of black agency is heard. Paton writes that this shows the essential contribution of Caribbean former slaves to the anti-apprenticeship campaign. Of substantial value, it recognizes that black Jamaicans were agents in the production of knowledge.

Paton presents numerous ways in which the narrative was manipulated. First, it was conceived as a project by British-based abolitionists who were intent on mobilizing the white British masses against the apprenticeship system, this new form of slavery. In a sense, it was also an act of revenge because radical abolitionists were enraged when West Indies planters received compensation monies for the losing of their slaves. Paton writes that the narrative is evidence but it is also evidence about the strategies and assumptions of those involved in the transatlantic campaign against apprenticeship.

A Narrative of Events is permeated with key abolitionist rhetorical strategy. It was intentionally contrived to tell a particular story and Williams was selected as the storyteller. The work was engineered by Sturge, one of four British abolitionists who went to the West Indies to report firsthand the abuses and oppression of apprenticeship. Sturge worked within the local Baptist missionary network through which he established contacts and found translators, enabling him to communicate with Creole-speaking blacks. Sturge was also put in touch with a black artisan named Finlayson who had been apprenticed to the same estate where Williams worked. It was Finlayson, a "leader" in a local church, who arranged the meeting between Sturge and Williams. Sturge paid for Williams's freedom and took him to England. Later Sturge sent him back to Jamaica to be, once again, apprenticed so that Williams would learn wage labor and work discipline. There, Williams had no place to go but back to whence he had come.

The story of Williams was conceived by a white man and written by a white writer. Price, a white British Baptist minister, also authenticated the pre- and postscripts. *A Narrative of Events* was written in an anglicized version of Jamaican Creole accompanied with Price's exaggerated high-flown standard English prose. The use of Creole was limited but, according to Paton, still

evoked a scene, analyses, and range of emotions that served the purpose of the abolitionists. Much emphasis was given to the treadmill, the symbol of the oppressive apprenticeship system. It was published at a time when the British audience was saturated with pictures of the treadmill. In addition, there was a focus on women who were forced to raise their dresses as they worked the treadmill and who were assaulted or sexually harassed by the jailers. Third, there were descriptive passages describing how the elderly and pregnant women were abused beyond what was morally acceptable to a God-fearing English public. Fourth, blacks who were Christians and God-fearing were clearly identified in the narrative and when they testified at the inquiry that followed because they had credibility, even though of African heathen stock. After the release of this widely read narrative, the Secretary of the Colonial Office questioned its authenticity and assigned two magistrates to investigate. Although the inquiry substantiated the story, Paton writes that even in this situation the search for truth was compromised. For example, all told their stories for a purpose. Some witnesses feared reprimands. Both interrogator and witness were placed within a courtroom setting and positioned within a particular process of questioning. Furthermore, Castello, a free man of color and editor of a liberal Jamaican newspaper, kept the only record of the evidence.

In concluding, there are a few concerns with Paton's book. Principally, it, too, cannot stand alone and be completely truthful. First of all, Paton writes that Williams speaks for 800,000 former slaves. Substantial evidence exists that many former slaves successfully navigated through the apprenticeship system and bettered themselves. Is it fair to speculate that most of the apprentices in Jamaica and throughout the British West Indies were incarcerated or flogged as many times as Williams? Perhaps Williams speaks for 800,000 in a different way, by providing a partial entry into the mentalit= of the apprenticed. It also speaks for

the people in another way. As Paton writes, the narrative tells of a group of people with a particular shared history. It shows the emergence of complex relationships within the apprentice community and between apprentices and free people and it also gives a sense of how former slaves became small holders.

Second, it is unfair to suggest that all stipendiary magistrates throughout the region were ruthless and arbitrary enforcers of the newly emerging labor laws. This raises another point. This work was clearly positioned within the slave narrative literature. It can, however, be placed within a wider framework, as part of a larger picture. It is part of an indictment of nineteenth-century labor practices that emerged following the emancipation of slaves in the British West Indies. Yes, apprentices were active agents in the early dismantling of the apprenticeship system but not in the dismantling of an arbitrary and abusive prison structure. *A Narrative of Events* has a familiar ring to it. It can be compared to labor stories and inquiries in the later postemancipation era, after the apprenticeship came to an end. Many East Indian indentured laborers, but certainly not the vast majority, had similar tales to tell.

In conclusion, this is a fine piece of scholarship, not only because it releases a narrative that has not been reprinted in 163 years but because it is an in-depth analysis of how knowledge is produced. As Paton demonstrates, the construction of new knowledge is a dialectical process in which one must juxtapose discursive practices, visions, and projects of multiple players and link them to the practices of everyday life. It is produced by individuals enmeshed in the dialectics of power, and each has his or her own particular agenda. This book brings further attention to a serious dilemma facing scholars debating the "Production of Knowledge." Knowledge that is produced, oftentimes, filters down and becomes the truth in educational textbooks, frequently perpetuating misinformation and stereotypes about the past,

people, and places. It is important to recognize that producing knowledge is relative and, even when authentic, it is a particular interpretation of truth.

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