

Death's other kingdom

By Brendan de Caires

The Reaper's Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery, by Vincent Brown (Harvard University Press, ISBN 9780674024229, 340 pp)

In November 1817, the novelist Matthew Gregory Lewis set sail for Jamaica. Having made the voyage once before, he felt prepared for what lay ahead, but after two weeks at sea the weather took a sudden and ominous turn for the worse. A fellow passenger recalled, "the vessel rolled so much, that we were obliged to be lashed to our berths, or wherever we were lying; and I began almost to think some Jonas-like fatality did attend our course." This brief taste of the Middle Passage made Lewis anxious. He stayed in his cabin and asked his friend to let him know when they had reached the "blue waters" — the point of no return beyond the storms of the Channel.

Accordingly, early one morning just at daybreak, having passed a sleepless night, I was the first to tap at the door of his cabin, and convey the wished-for intelligence that we were in deep water, and that a young shark had been caught. The shark was brought down, the head and tail tied together, and laid at the cabin-door. Hastily answering my summons, Mr L dressed himself, and came forth; when, just as he opened the door, the shark, which was it seems only stunned and not dead, bounded with a sudden spring almost over the head of the astonished gentleman, to his no small surprise and my extreme terror. Lewis said it was a good augury; and he was right, for we proceeded calmly the rest of our voyage.

As one of the leading Gothic sensationalists of his time, Lewis should have felt less sanguine about that shark. After visiting the sugar estate he had inherited from his father a few years earlier, he died at sea on his way back to England. Among his papers there was a sympathetic account of the time he had passed among his Jamaican slaves. In 1834 this was published as *The Journal of a West India Proprietor*.

In 1794, while working as a diplomat in the Hague, Lewis had dashed off, in ten weeks, a novel that today would be sent straight to David Lynch or Quentin Tarantino. *Ambrosio; or the Monk* was a lurid tale of medieval Madrid, in which the foundling Ambrosio, having become abbot of a Capuchin monastery, is seduced by a novice named Rosario — who

turns out to be a wealthy heiress, Matilda de Villanegas, in disguise. Once she has bedded him, Matilda's charms distort Ambrosio's righteous Catholicism into a cynical, Sadean view of the world. He embraces his id with remarkable ease. Before long he has betrayed the confidence of Agnes, a pregnant nun who plans to elope with her lover. Her prioress, Sister Agatha, locks Agnes away in a dungeon where she is later found cradling a dead child in her arms. Soon after that, Ambrosio stoops to rape and murder — incest and matricide, he will later discover. By the time Lewis's fantastically over-elaborate plot has exhausted itself, the monk's only escape from the flames of the Inquisition is to make a pact with the Devil. Denounced in the House of Commons for its violence and obscenity, the novel became a runaway bestseller. By the time he was twenty-one, "Monk" Lewis was a household name.

His father had been born in Jamaica, and was familiar with life there, but Lewis was a more traditional Englishman, a product of Westminster School and Christ Church, Oxford. By 1815 — the first time he travelled to Jamaica — he had been an attaché to the British embassy, a parliamentarian for six years, and a successful playwright for more than a decade. From afar, he must have thought of Jamaica as either a tropical paradise or as the "Torrid Zone" of popular imagination, devourer of Africans and Englishmen. As soon as he arrived in Kingston, however, these impressions would have become confused. Lewis was charmed by the landscape and cheered by the slaves' warm welcome. They asked after his family as though it were their own, and they greeted him with obvious affection as he walked around the estate. Some of them even asked him to settle private quarrels.

Lewis was fascinated by his slaves, and his journal records their songs, folk-tales, and larger-than-life stories, like that of the "runaway negro called Plato, who had established himself among the Moreland Mountains." This Byronic character "robbed very often, and murdered occasionally," but his renowned good looks had enticed so many attractive female slaves to join him in the mountains that his retreat was "as well furnished as the haram [sic] of Constantinople." Betrayed by other slaves, Plato went to his death without apparent fear. He "kept up the terrors of his imposture to the last moment," and warned the magistrate that "his death should be revenged by a storm, which would lay waste the whole island, that year." While he was being bound to the stake by a black gaoler, "he

assured him that he should not live long to triumph in his death, for that he had taken good care to Obeah him before his quitting the prison." Later that year "the most violent storm took place ever known in Jamaica." The gaoler was overwhelmed: "his imagination . . . so forcibly struck by the threats of the dying man . . . although every care was taken of him, the power of medicine exhausted, and even a voyage to America undertaken . . . [he] gradually pined and withered away, and finally expired before the completion of the twelvemonth."

Lewis began his journal with a hopeful epigraph, an adaptation of a line from Virgil's *Georgics*: *Nunc alio patriam quaero sub sole jacentem* — "I seek now a new fatherland, lying under a different sun." In this spirit, he worked hard to improve the lot of slaves on his plantation. He bought ploughs and oxen, redistributed property evenly, and he banned any use of the cart-whip ("if the estate must go to wreck and ruin, without its use, to wreck and ruin the estate must go"). And yet, as often as not, the slaves responded with suspicion, even resistance. At first he was baffled by this, but in time he seems to have understood that behind the façade of pastoral life there was a very different, Hobbesian Jamaica in which white overseers raped, mutilated, and murdered their slaves with impunity. Freed of the usual constraints, many of them had become West Indian Ambrosios, respectable in white society but appallingly vicious in their private lives. Ironically, Lewis himself was a man of unshakeable Christian principles: decent and considerate towards his own slaves, and often outraged by the casual barbarity on other estates. At the Spring Garden plantation, for instance, "the cruelest proprietor that ever disgraced Jamaica" had been known to strip a dying slave of all his belongings and leave him in "a solitary vale upon his estate, called the Gulley" to be "half devoured by the john-crows, before death had put an end to his sufferings."

This other Jamaica required a different literary mode, a darker myth. Lewis died too soon to write one, but towards the end of his journal there is a bizarre twenty-page poem that suggests one direction he might have taken. "The Isle of Devils" tells the story of Irza, a young woman separated from her lover Rosalvo in a shipwreck. Marooned on a "devil isle", like Miranda in *The Tempest*, she finds herself besieged by "monstrous dwarfs" whose "gnashing teeth seemed for her blood to long." She is rescued by a giant demon-king ("black as the storm, / All shagged with hair, wild strange in shape and show"), but he hides her away in a grotto. While she is sleeping, the beast impregnates her. Their child is a monster with "shaggy limbs, and eyes of sable fire." Irza nurses the baby, but only out of necessity: "Loathing its sight, she melts to hear its cries, / And, while she yields the breast, averts her eyes." When Rosalvo turns up to rescue her, the beast brains him with a club. Irza's grief drives her mad, so the demon-king brings her flowers and behaves tenderly. Then he sires another child during her sleep. This one is a "cherub elf / In small the model of her beauteous self." Content that this child will secure her affections, he lets Irza roam outside the grotto. In a final twist, Irza's father — another casualty of the shipwreck — now an abbot with a shipful of monks, appears out of nowhere to rescue her. He refuses to rescue the white child — Irza doesn't even mention the dark one — so, heartbroken, she leaves it behind on the isle. The demon-king rushes up to find her being rowed

away by the friars. He holds the white child high in the air, to tempt her back, but dashes it to death on the rocks when her abandonment is clear. In a flash, his mood changes again. As she is rowed to safety:

Swiftly from crag to crag he following sprung,
While round his neck his shaggy offspring clung



A Negro hung alive by the Rites to a Gallows.

William Blake's famous anti-slavery engraving

And now, like some dark tow'r, erect he stood,
Where the last rock hung frowning o'er the flood:—
"Look! look!" he seem'd to say, with action wild,
"Look, mother, look! this babe is still your child!
With him as me all social bonds you break,
Scorn'd and detested for his father's sake:
My love, my service only wrought disdain,
And nature fed his heart from yours in vain!
Then go, ingrate, far o'er the ocean go,
Consign your friend, your child to endless woe!

Unable to live without her, the monster clasps the dark child to his breast, and with three hideous yells, "Plunged headlong from the rock, and made the sea his grave."

Torn from their families and abandoned to a devil-isle, it was of course the enslaved Africans who were being raped and terrorised by the British, but Lewis's confusion of roles and colours nevertheless makes an important point. In nineteenth century Jamaica, it was obvious, even to a somewhat naïve plantation owner, that master and slave would eventually share a common future. Their traditions and bloodlines were already intermixed, and whether or not either wanted to acknowledge the other, they were forging a new society together.

The *Reaper's Garden* is a lengthy, subtle, and often brilliant analysis of how English planters and their African slaves coped with the lethality of Jamaica from the middle of the eighteenth century until Emancipation in 1838. Vincent Brown, Dunwalke Associate Professor of American History at Harvard University, is chiefly concerned with contemporary attitudes to death, but his book could have been written as a sourcebook for interpretations of Lewis's journal.

In his introduction, Brown concedes that there is no easy way to determine how "the meaning of mortality motivate[s] people" during any period, so he has cast his net as widely as possible:

People have derived profound social meaning from the beliefs and practices associated with death, and they have employed those meanings — charged with cosmic importance — in struggles towards particular ends. I call such activity *mortuary politics*, employing a capacious general definition of politics as concerted action toward specific goals . . . this broad definition allows me to consider how people justify actions, claim and dispute authority, or create and use the cultural categories that mediate social life.

This latitude allows him to tease out a fascinating series of parallels and contrasts, not just between either side's interpretations of the dead, but the ways in which their separate traditions begin to converge towards the end of the eighteenth century. Jamaica's mortuary politics begins as a quarrel be-

tween animist Africa and Protestant Europe, but it evolves, dialectically, into something that collapses these distinctions. Over time, the hybrid nation produced by these exchanges accommodates meanings that both sides hold in common. "Death in Jamaica," writes Brown, "destroyed individuals, while generating a society. In the midst of catastrophe, people anxiously imagined the future, expecting the dead to assist them in their endeavours, just as they expected to play a continuing role in the lives of their own descendants."

Between 1740 and 1807, the "omnipresence of corpses . . . made death a vital subject of strife and debate" in Jamaica. "In one of history's greatest episodes of creative destruction," quips Brown, "Jamaica's dynamic and profitable economy consumed its inhabitants." During periods for which there are reliable figures, it appears that between two and three per cent of the enslaved population died each year. Adults tended to die within the first three years of their arrival — if they didn't, they became "seasoned" slaves and fetched a higher price. Children were not expected to survive at all. On the plantations, child mortality seems to have run as high as eighty percent — maybe even higher, since most managers did not register new births until the infant had survived for nine days.

The carnival of death produced a torrent of newcomers. Its discontinuities meant that "implementers of social order could never count on having people know or internalise the rules." This was as true for the "petty whites" who oversaw the day-to-day management of the plantations as it was for the slaves. Neither side could count on a long life. Field slaves, who did the heaviest work, were usually broken after thirteen years of unrelenting labour; most others lasted just a few years more. This endless attrition forced the British to "externalis[e] the costs of raising children to villages in West Africa." During its peak years, in the 1760s, British ships embarked more than forty-two thousand slaves annually. More than ten per cent died on the journey to the New World, but of the 1.9 million who arrived in the Atlantic British colonies, more than six hundred thousand found themselves in Jamaica.

Dysentery, yellow fever, and other tropical hazards carried off large numbers of whites too — between the 1780s and 1820s there is no record of a missionary who survived for more than twenty years in Jamaica. By and large, however, there were always plenty of aspiring capitalists ready to take their place, people whose fear of Jamaica's deadliness was quelled by the belief that in Jamaica "with industry and economy every man may here prosper." A prominent scholar has written that "the foremost characteristic of white Jamaicans was an all-consuming ambition for wealth, an avaricious and aggrandising self-interest." Brown clarifies the implications of this statement by adding that "self interest nearly always meant the domination of others, for slavery was the basis of prosperity."

White Jamaica honoured the dead to reassure themselves that a semblance of civilised life was still possible in the Torrid

Between 1740 and 1807, the “omnipresence of corpses . . . made death a vital subject of strife and debate” in Jamaica, writes Vincent Brown in *The Reaper’s Garden*. During periods for which there are reliable figures, it appears that between two and three per cent of the enslaved population died each year

Zone. For the African slaves, however, funeral rituals had a much deeper significance:

Without relatives and compatriots to mark the passage, death threatened the deceased with eternal alienation. The absence of commemoration compounded the social disruption caused by capture and sale, constant movement along the trading routes, and high mortality. For most Africans, as for most people in general, death represented a rupture in social relations that required some form of ritual healing, even under normal circumstances. The groups captured and sold into slavery had limited means to adequately ritualise death so they left restless spirits in their wake.

Outwardly, the last rites for the African and English dead could not have been more different. The English mourned with formal prayers, coffins, church services, gravestones, and monuments. Their last rites marked a final loss. Brown reminds us that “in the early eighteenth century, orthodox Protestantism held that death severed all meaningful communion between the living and the deceased.” For the slaves, however, the dead were still accessible, and their rituals reflected this. They sang and danced with palpable joy, they dug graves close to or even within their homes, sometimes they used obeah to communicate with ancestral spirits. One practice that seems to have perplexed the English more than any other was the tradition of allowing the corpse to “speak” through dancing pallbearers who lingered outside the huts of anyone who owed the dead man money, or hadn’t yet apologised for an insult. Unable to translate these gestures, the planters drew their own conclusions:

Understanding the ceremony as little more than a pretext for greed allowed whites to fit the ritual comfortably into their assumptions about the relation between individuals, property, and the dead. Avaricious planters were projecting their own values onto the enslaved, viewing black customs in terms they could well understand.

On the other hand, both sides held similar views about the importance of legacies, and tried to prevent them from being misconstrued. Among the plantocracy, there were lots of social climbers willing to take advantage of an unexpected death. “When a man dies in Jamaica, he is ruined for ever,”

warned a popular saying. Corrupt executors would often misread wills in their own favour, or seduce young heiresses with “every flattering and seductive charm.” Shrewd women could accumulate large estates through timely marriages to wealthy old men. On the other side of the property line, a master’s debts could destroy a life without warning. Between 1807 and 1827 more than 22,600 Jamaican slaves were sold to cover debts. The redistribution of human property meant that “the enslaved could expect to lose many of their social connections and to have their families scattered about in a final act of domination. Here, again, the dead continued to shape the society they left behind.”

Despite this, the slaves did their best to copy the English tradition of will-making: “Enslaved men and women made their last wishes known verbally to trusted kin, friends, or authority figures, who administered the deceased’s effects without the sanction of law.” Whenever possible they asked sympathetic whites to give their final wishes greater force by writing them down.

In order to maintain the profitability of their properties, all slaveholders, but especially the landed planters, had to contend with the communal aspirations of their slaves. Inheritance claims, reflecting proprietary, familiar, and emotional attachments to land and goods, formed a significant part of those aspirations. To gain recognition for those claims, the enslaved continually had to test, challenge, and negotiate the authority of slaveholders, and in this sense the politics of inheritance formed a critical aspect of the politics of slavery. The expectations of the dead thus shaped social hierarchy and conflict over time.

The afterlife presented even trickier problems. When slaves chose to commit suicide, many seem to have done so in the hope of being reunited with lost kin. Half-understanding the slaves’ motives, the planters devised a brutal response.

Africans, lamented Richard Ligon, a seventeenth-century chronicler of slave society in Barbados, “believe in a Resurrection, and that they shall go into their own Country again, and have their youth renewed. And lodging this opinion in their hearts, they make it an ordinary practice, upon any great fright, or threatening of their Masters, to hang themselves.” A planter acquaintance of Ligon’s,

The abolitionists used Thomas Malthus's principles to demonstrate that the slave population's inability to grow was by itself a sufficient proof of the cruelty they endured. If nothing else, these efforts made the planters aware that living conditions on the plantations had to be improved

Colonel Walrond, had in a short time lost three or four of his most valuable slaves to suicide. Fearing they had set a costly example to others, Walrond ordered that one of their heads be chopped off and fixed to a pole a dozen feet high. He marched all his slaves around the icon, commanding them to gaze at the severed head, and he asked them to acknowledge that this was indeed the head of one of the self-murderers. As they did, Walrond told them that "they were in a main error, in thinking they went into their own Countreys after they were dead; for, this man's head was here, as they all were witnesses of; and how was it possible, the body could go without a head." As Ligon remembered it, the Africans were convinced by the "sad, yet lively spectacle." They apparently changed their convictions, and hanged themselves no more.

Brown is wary of such easy conclusions, and he points out that, once again, the planters seem to have been projecting their own ideas. In fact, their efforts to manipulate the meanings of the corpses spoke more to their own spiritual preoccupations than those of the Africans:

Whether such mutilations in fact constituted an effective deterrent is open to question. Dismemberment certainly represented a compelling metaphysical threat to English Protestants, but there is little or no direct evidence that Africans believed that losing their head or a limb would prevent their return to ancestral lands. Many Africans had surely seen severed heads taken as trophies by warring state authorities in Africa. Indeed, in parts of West Africa, slaves were routinely beheaded after the death of nobles, so that they could continue to serve their masters in the spiritual world. European masters in Jamaica, only dimly aware of African parallels, beheaded and dismembered their own slaves with a similar desire that the dead continue their service. Through the treatment given dead bodies slaveholders attempted to seize and manipulate the African vision of the afterlife, to govern the actions of the living.

The two groups almost never interpreted death in the same way, but the insistent pressure of mortuary politics eventually created common ground. In his closing chapters, Brown makes a convincing case that when the sympathies of the English shifted towards a more indulgent understanding of the African dead, the end of slavery was all but inevitable.

The highlight of *The Reaper's Garden* is a chapter entitled "The Soul of the British Empire", in which Brown examines Britain's slow awakening to the monstrosities of the slave trade. His wide-ranging brief allows him to show how several concurrent developments — in religion, literature, and the law — enabled this change of heart. He begins with the Protestant revival of the 1730s and 40s, in which preachers like George Whitefield and John Wesley "abandoned the previous century's difficult and uncertain preparations for death and advocated instantaneous deliverance through faith and repentance." Importantly, these evangelicals (like Abraham Lincoln several decades later) "generally subscribed to a providential worldview according to which hell's terrible punishments would be visited on entire nations." Setting aside its uncanny similarities to some of the apocalyptic Christianity in the United States today, this new outlook unquestionably set the stage for all of the great reforms that came later.

Evangelical religion supplied a nearly irresistible motivation for purposeful moral action, and new conventions for expressing moral sentiments and for representing relationships linking the dying, the dead, and the living helped shape the moral impulse at the heart of abolitionism.

The easy availability and wide distribution of printed matter also helped. John Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* was one of the "most widely read and affecting texts of its time" and Brown argues that it "helped create a sense of nationhood founded on persecution, death, and Christian righteousness." The re-ordering of relations with the dead was evident in poetry too, most famously in Thomas Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Church Yard* and Edward Young's *Night Thoughts*, but also in the vogue for shadowy landscapes and brooding solitudes that Horace Walpole, Ann Radcliffe, and Matthew Lewis would soon gather into the Gothic novel. Brown suggests that all of this helped to alter the national conscience.

Gothic and Romantic narratives, revolving as they did around evocative images of pain and death, helped to build a morally charged aesthetic around mortality that directed sentiment towards the mortal trials of others.

Nothing roused more sentiment than the case of the *Zong* massacre. In November 1781 an English slaver named the *Zong* (or *Zorque*) had pitched 132 sick Africans into the high seas, partly because the ship had lost its way and was running out of water, but also because its captain, Luke Collingwood, had decided there was more profit to be had from insurance claims on dead slaves than from low auction prices for sick ones. Up to this point, the gist of the religious critique against the slave trade was that it placed a higher value on material goods than salvation. The shocking details of the *Zong* murders — which came to light when the insurance company challenged Collingwood's claim — was a perfect illustration of this spiritual sickness:

Evangelical abolitionists charged that in the commercial arrangements that defined slavery and the slave trade, money replaced the souls as the ultimate desideratum in death. Moreover, the murder of heathens was a compound crime, extinguishing not just the living body but also the eternal soul before it could know Christ and be assured of salvation.

Since the harsh realities of industrial Britain were already well known by this date, it should surprise no one that “the first [anti-slavery] petition drives were in incubated in burgeoning and fractious industrial” places like Manchester, Birmingham, Sheffield, and Leeds.

Brown's brief history of the British abolition movement is a tour de force. Wisely, he steers clear of the human drama of books like Simon Schama's *Rough Crossings* (2005) and Adam Hochschild's *King Leopold's Ghost* (1998). Instead, he focuses on the evolving strategies that the abolitionists Granville Sharp, Thomas Clarkson, and William Wilberforce used in their various battles against the plantocrats. At first they made their case through religious and sentimental appeals — Blake's unforgettable engraving *A Negro Hung Alive by the Ribs to a Gallows* (which appears on the book's front cover) is discussed with great sensitivity. But when it became clear that there was not yet enough political will to support straightforward abolition, the reformers kept altering their tactics. One of their master-strokes was the use of the notorious image of the *Plan and Sections of a Slave Ship* (based on the vessel *Brookes* of Liverpool) which appeared as a frontispiece to the reformers' *Abstract of the Evidence* given to a House of Commons committee in 1790 and 1791.

If the story of the *Zong* symbolised the Atlantic slave trade as a moral dystopia, the plan of the *Brookes* refined the abstraction. “Designed,” according to Thomas Clarkson, “to give the spectator an idea of the sufferings of Africans in the Middle Passage,” the image effected a subtle shift in evocative technique, inspiring horror not through the details of suffering, but through its lack of detail. Although close inspection of the image would reveal gender distinctions,

shackles, and bodily contortions, nothing indicated the anguished cries, or the blood and filth in the hold. For viewers trained by moral sentimentalism and gothic fiction to see authentically human experience in such details, the revelation that slavers could coolly reduce human bodies to such neat, lifeless patterns was in itself horrifying.

The abolitionists also went to great lengths to collect evidence that the trade was consuming white lives. They used Thomas Malthus's principles to demonstrate that the slave population's inability to grow was by itself a sufficient proof of their cruelty they endured. If nothing else, these efforts made the planters aware that living conditions on the plantations had to be improved. Later on, when the sugar industry lost much of its political support due to chronic oversupplying of the market, these gradual advances had undoubtedly opened the way for full emancipation. It is easy to over-extend these arguments, but Brown never does. He is firmly with Eric Williams when it comes to being sceptical about the role of moral crusaders in overturning Britain's commercial interests. As part of his caution, he mentions the nicely phrased judgement of the historian Robin Blackburn that

it was only after the threat of Jacobinism and the French Revolution had faded, and once a majority of MP's were “convinced that abolition did not contradict ‘sound policy,’” that “knowing it to be dear to the heart of middle-class reformers, they allowed themselves to be shocked by the appalling brutalities of the Atlantic slave trade.”

In a thoughtful epilogue, Brown considers some of the consequences of “reading politics through the social and cultural history of death.” He suggests that it serves as a useful reminder that “the modern world [of Jamaican slavery] was still an enchanted one,” and that historiography that limits itself to single nation-states often misses connections between North America and the British Caribbean. He also argues that “the shift in perspective yields insights into the ways in which people have negotiated the catastrophic effects of a successful imperial economy, into unlikely patterns of identification, into affiliations and collective struggles that enlist the intangible to accomplish worldly ends, and into the claims the dead make on the living or the living on the dead.”

This is well said and true, but I believe that Brown's real achievement can be put in simpler terms. William Faulkner, whose haunting fictions are among the most sensitive records of slavery's aftershocks, famously wrote that “The past is never dead, it's not even past.” To convey the full force of that *aperçu* a historian must know his material to the point of possession, and shape it with an imaginative grace that has too often been confined to literary fiction. *The Reaper's Garden* is an uncompromisingly academic work, but, at least for this reader, Vincent Brown passes muster on both counts. ■