Paton, Diana
Reseña de "Bushas Mistress or Catherine the Fugitive: A Stirring Romance of the Days of Slavery in Jamaica" de Cyrus Francis Perkins
Instituto de Estudios del Caribe
San Juan, Puerto Rico

Available in: http://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=39233114
Swords. 75-84. London: Longman.

Faith Smith
Chair, Department of African and Afro-American Studies
Brandeis University
fsmith@brandeis.edu


“A satisfying ageless story of romance and heartbreak,” claims the cover blurb of this novel, originally written in 1854-55 but published in this edition for the first time in book form. It is hard to agree with this judgment, for the novel
is incoherently plotted, clumsily written, and generally does little to engage the reader’s attention. Nevertheless, the editors have done serious scholars of Caribbean history and literature a service, for Perkins’s work is an interesting source for investigating the construction of a memory of slavery by Creole whites in post-emancipation Jamaica.

Cyrus Perkins was a member of a social group often overlooked in analyses of Jamaica that focus on the dichotomy being slaveholders and enslaved people: professional non-elite whites. As the introduction informs us, he was the Jamaican-born son of a medical doctor and a schoolteacher, and himself became a printer. Written during a year in Ontario, Perkins’s manuscript was not published in his lifetime, but remained in the possession of his family and was eventually published in installments in the short-lived Kingston newspaper the *Daily Telegraph and Jamaica Guardian* in 1911. This new edition is based primarily on the manuscript version, now held in the Jamaica Archives. As well as the novel itself, the edition includes an introduction by Lovejoy, Shepherd and Trotman, ten poems, and a genealogical chart of the Perkins family.

The “author’s preface,” placed in this edition before the editors’ introduction, declares slavery to be “repulsive, degrading, and brutalizing, to the human mind.” The novel goes on, as this preface leads us to expect, to deploy many of the tropes of anti-slavery writing: the flogging scene, complete with reference to the flogging of women while pregnant; the slave auction, including the separation of families by sale; and the sexual immorality of the plantation. *Busha’s Mistress* is by no means a standard antislavery tract, however. Rather, it vacillates between representations of the cruelty of slavery on the one hand, and portrayals of enslaved people as credulous and superstitious more characteristic of pro-slavery writing on the other. A series of scenes present black people’s belief in duppies and obeah as comically foolish, for instance. The narrator’s pronouncements about the “moral degradation” (p. 47) and “brutal[ity]” (p. 51) of slavery carry little weight in the
context of a plot in which the enslavement of several of the main characters does not limit their lives in any serious way.

Catherine, for instance, the Busha’s mistress of the novel’s title, is that stock figure of fiction about slavery, the light-skinned “concubine” of the master (in this case, of the overseer Jackson) who runs away. But in contrast to the tradition of the antislavery novel, Catherine’s flight is precipitated not by any dramatic act of cruelty but by anger at her lover’s unfaithfulness. The estate managers do not pursue her, and she easily manages to escape to England as a servant, where she learns to read and speak standard English, and eventually return to Jamaica as a free woman to be reunited with Jackson, who she now regrets leaving. The novel thus perpetuates the myth that slaves became automatically free by virtue of residence in England.

It almost appears that the author wanted to write a politically engaged, antislavery novel (perhaps, in the wake of Uncle Tom’s Cabin, believing that this was what the market required?), but found himself—through lack of skill, commitment, or both—unable to do so. His use of the genres of comedy and romance, rather than of the melodrama used by Harriet Beecher Stowe and many other writers of antislavery fiction, reduces the possibility of a serious literary attack on slavery. The technically weak execution of the novel, which often loses sight of its central characters for pages at a time and then presents major plot developments in a few barely descriptive lines, also limits its emotional and political power.

The novel is preceded in this edition by a substantial introduction giving a full account of Perkins’s life, contextual information about slavery in the parish of Trelawny, Jamaica, where much of Busha’s Mistress is set, and a chapter-by-chapter summary of the novel. While all of this is helpful, the introduction leaves many important questions unasked. Its discussion of slavery provides useful, if sometimes overly detailed, background, but the editors do not relate the novel to the context in which it was conceived and written (the Jamaica and Canada of the 1850s) nor to that in which it was published (early-twentieth-century Jamaica). Why,
they might have asked, did Cyrus Perkins choose to set his fiction in the recent past of slavery, rather than the present of “free” Jamaica? What does the contradictory presentation of slavery as at once abhorrent and relatively benign tell us about the mentalité of Jamaican whites in the post-emancipation period? Why was the novel finally published in 1911, and what might readers then have made of it? The introduction would have been strengthened had the editors explored in more detail their critical insights, such as the point that “the novel glamourises the position and status of coloured women in slave systems” (p. 33). While this is true, the possibility that Busha’s Mistress will “give support to those who exaggerate coloured women’s ‘independence and autonomy’ under slavery” (p. 33) would be more effectively countered had the editors explored at greater length the status of the text as a work of fiction, rather than focusing on the question of the reliability or otherwise of its presentation of plantation society.

The editors have annotated both the novel and the poems. Their notes are almost exclusively concerned with textual issues, in particular the differences between the manuscript version and the newspaper edition. For use with students and those unfamiliar with Jamaican history and culture, it would have been useful if fuller notes had been included. For instance, a note to the reference to “Bridges the great Annalist of Jamaica” might have explained that George Bridges was a proslavery Anglican clergyman who published the Annals of Jamaica in 1828. Similarly, references to obeah, duppies, myal, and the rolling calf might usefully have been annotated. Still, even without such notes, this is a useful edition of a work which will no doubt come to be widely used in studies of the cultural and intellectual history of post-emancipation Jamaica.

Diana Paton
University of Newcastle Upon Tyne
diana.paton@ncl.ac.uk