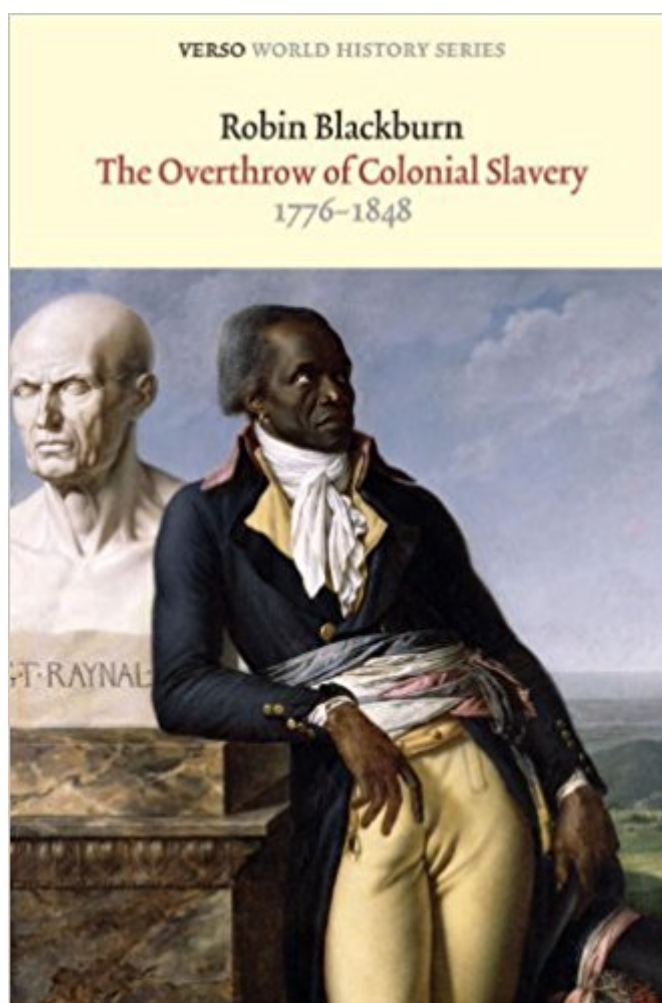


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The Overthrow Of Colonial Slavery: 1776-1848 (Verso World History Series)



Synopsis

In 1770 a handful of European nations ruled the Americas, drawing from them a stream of products, both everyday and exotic. Some two and a half million black slaves, imprisoned in plantation colonies, toiled to produce the sugar, coffee, cotton, ginger and indigo craved by Europeans. By 1848 the major systems of colonial slavery had been swept away either by independence movements, slave revolts, abolitionists or some combination of all three. How did this happen? Robin Blackburn's history captures the complexity of a revolutionary age in a compelling narrative. In some cases colonial rule fell while slavery flourished, as happened in the South of the United States and in Brazil; elsewhere slavery ended but colonial rule remained, as in the British West Indies and French Windwards. But in French St. Domingue, the future Haiti, and in Spanish South and Central America both colonialism and slavery were defeated. This story of slave liberation and American independence highlights the pivotal role of the "first emancipation" in the French Antilles in the 1790s, the parallel actions of slave resistance and metropolitan abolitionism, and the contradictory implications of slaveholder patriotism. The dramatic events of this epoch are examined from an unexpected vantage point, showing how the torch of anti-slavery passed from the medieval communes to dissident Quakers, from African maroons to radical pirates, from Granville Sharp and Ottobah Cuguano to Toussaint L'Ouverture, from the black Jacobins to the Liberators of South America, and from the African Baptists in Jamaica to the Revolutionaries of 1848 in Europe and the Caribbean.

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Customer Reviews

“A challenge to those who fondly suppose that slavery declined as ideas of Western enlightenment spread ... Blackburn deserves praise for undermining complacency about the past and the present.” — Christopher Hitchens, *New York Newsday*

“Blackburn’s highly intelligent and well-written book is a substantial contribution. In this story the central event is the French Revolution.” — Victor Kiernen, *London Review of Books*

“An incisive synthesis of developments in North America, the Caribbean and Latin America. Blackburn’s book is bold and original.” — Richard Dunn, *Times Literary Supplement*

“One of the finest studies of slavery and abolition to appear in many years.” — Eric Foner, *Dissident*

“The first historian since Eric Williams to present a comprehensive interpretation. But Blackburn, profiting from and admirably synthesizing the vast scholarship produced since *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944), is far less rigid and doctrinaire, much more attuned to the workings of politics. Unlike Williams, he includes slavery throughout the Western hemisphere.” — David Brion Davis, *New York Review of Books*

Robin Blackburn teaches at the New School in New York and the University of Essex in the UK. He is the author of many books, including *The Making of New World Slavery*, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery*, *Age Shock*, *Banking on Death*, and *The American Crucible*.

Excellent

In the 1760-1770s a handful of European settlements ruled over nearly three million blacks. Imprisoning them and exploiting their labor to produce a range of goods, from agricultural products, to spices and the finished products from mining of precious metals and rare minerals. By 1848, except for the U.S. and Brazil, the major systems of colonial slavery had been swept away either by independence movements, slave revolts, abolitionists agitation, or some combination of all three. This book goes a long way in telling us how this was accomplished. It is the story of how in Suriname -- in what was called the "First Boni War" (1765-1777) -- a group of escaped black slaves in a bid for their own independence, revolted, killed the colonists, and took over their Plantations. The masterminds of this revolt were called maroons. The maroons and their descendants were mostly

escaped slaves who had formed communities in the woods where they had not only survived as renegade tribal groups, but also had even thrived, developing their own culture in their self-made homes in the wilderness. Throughout the Caribbean islands, especially in Haiti, and in both the East and West Indies, the maroons had been a chronic problem for Europeans from the time of their first settlements. Communities of maroons also appeared and often flourished in the wilderness of the Southern USA. In the U.S., they often formed coalitions with and intermarried with Native Americans as together they fought the American colonists as far north as Virginia. In a book written in 2011, (The Untold Story of America's Largest Revolt), Daniel Rasmussen gives us a skillfully told and vivid narrative about the role maroons played in the New Orleans slave revolt of 1811, where a ragtag group of them nearly took over that city. (See my review of that book). However, nowhere were the maroons more successful in defending their bid for freedom than in the Dutch colonies of Guiana, particularly in the colony of Suriname. Even today, the six tribes that descended from these same maroons, still live in the rain forests, making up nearly 10 percent of Suriname's population. This book is the story of how the black slave population rose up in a mass revolt in 1763 in Suriname, seizing control of much of the sugar colony and holding on to it until out of desperation, troops were sent from Holland, other Suriname colonies, as well as from other neighboring white colonies. They came to the rescue just in time to save the colonial interests and stifle the slaves' bid for freedom and independence. This book captures vividly the complexity of this very troubled, turbulent but important era. It gives the reader a secure feel for what it was like when all across the colonial world the sins of slavery were being stiffly challenged. Abolitionists were demonstrating, slaves were uprising, and colonial armies were either in retreat or were digging in their heels for the long haul. Even Napoleon's army was defeated in Haiti by Toussaint L'Ouverture. However, it must be said that clear victories on the battlefields such as the one in Haiti for slaves seeking freedom and independence, were few and far between. In most instances, thankfully, the colonial rulers bowed to their greater humanity, seeing the moral handwriting on the wall and begrudgingly gave in to the slave's demand for their freedom and independence -- as was the case throughout the British and French West Indies. Then sole holdouts, in the most peculiar of all instances, were Brazil and the U.S. Only in these two countries was colonialism overthrown and independence secured -- but only for the white populations? Even as whites gained their own freedom and independence, enslavement of blacks remained even more rigidly in place and enforced. And most contradictorily of all, in the U.S., slaves were actually used to help secure the freedom and independence of whites! In relief, this book dramatizes just how morally incongruous this inversion of the evolving moral code by the U.S. and Brazil actually was. And of course, it does not take much speculation to

connect the inferential dots as to why it is that even now it is these same two countries (along with South Africa, which adopted the U.S. model in toto), are still lagging in finally granting blacks their full rights, freedom and independence. In this regard and many others, perhaps even without intending to, Blackburn gives us a mini history of the era of the slave revolts -- literally a panoramic summary and overview that shows the evolution of the relationship between many causes and movements traditionally treated as unrelated: such as the anti-slavery movements across the colonial landscape; the relationship between the maroons and pirates; the evolution of medieval communes into dissident abolitionists Quakers; and the relationship between revolutionaries from Granville Sharp and Ottobah Cugnano to Toussaint L'Ouverture, to the black Jacobins and the Liberators of South America, and from the African Baptists in Jamaica to the Revolutionaries of 1848 in Europe and the Caribbean. Now, with this book, it has become clear to me, why it is that so many of America's own black activists like Marcus Garvey, Stokely Carmichael, Harry Belafonte, Malcolm X have Caribbean roots, while the more timid ones, like Dr. Martin Luther King Junior, were spawn from the black American Christian tradition. Five Stars

Another excellent book on slavery by Robin Blackburn. This book is an outstanding synthesis of a large literature on the abolition of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and of slavery in the Caribbean and Spanish America. Blackburn opens with a concise description of the highly economically successful state of colonial slavery that existed in the Atlantic world and of the powerful forces fostered its development and apparently guaranteed its stability. Briefly, and this is the subject of another outstanding Blackburn book on the origins of colonial slavery, expanding European capitalism backed up by the success of the powerful imperial British and French states resulted in vigorous slavery based production systems. How this system cracked is the subject of this book. In a series of very well written and documented chapters, Blackburn discusses the origins of anti-slavery agitation, particularly in Britain, the American colonies of Britain, and France, the impacts of the American, French and Spanish American Revolutions, the great Haitian slave revolt, and the post-Napoleonic events leading to campaigns against the slave trade and for abolition. Briefly, the abolition of the slave trade and slave emancipation occurred in the Caribbean and Spanish America because of favorable conjunctions of 3 major factors; political crises reducing the influence of slave holding interests and usually in settings of revolution or (in the case of Britain) considerable pressure for political reform, threatened or actual major slave resistance, and metropolitan political currents that mobilized relatively broad political coalitions in which anti-slavery was an important component of reformist or actual revolutionary movements. Blackburn is particularly good at

showing the complex interactions between these features. His discussions, for example, of the complex politics of Revolutionary France or the British anti-slavery movement during the Napoleonic period are outstanding. He is excellent on interactions between events in the colonies and the metropolitan centers, particularly in the way in which slave resistance, especially the great Haitian slave revolt, had consequences throughout the Atlantic world. Another crucial Blackburn point is that many of the social and economic forces that propelled colonial slavery also contributed to the growth of anti-slavery movements. In a double irony, some of these forces also contributed greatly to deepening and success of slavery in the 3 regions where slavery persisted after its extinction in the Caribbean and Spanish America; the USA, Brazil, and Cuba. This book should be read with Blackburn's equally good book on the development of slavery in the western hemisphere. I believe that *Overthrow...* was written first but I recommend reading *The Making of New World Slavery* first, then this book. Blackburn has just published a book that takes the story through to the second half of the 19th century and the death of slavery in the USA, Cuba, and Brazil, an exciting prospect for readers interested in this important topic.

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