

The writing of *The Long Song*

by Andrea Levy

At a conference in London, several years ago, the topic for discussion was the legacy of slavery. A young woman stood up to ask a heartfelt question of the panel: How could she be proud of her Jamaican roots, she wanted to know, when her ancestors had been slaves? I cannot recall the panel's response to the woman's question but, as I sat silently in the audience, I do remember my own. Of Jamaican heritage myself, I wondered why anyone would feel any ambivalence or shame at having a slave ancestry? Had she never felt the sentiments once expressed to me by a Jamaican acquaintance of mine? 'If our ancestors survived the slave ships they were strong. If they survived the plantations they were clever.' It is a rich and proud heritage. It was at that moment that I felt something stirring in me. Could a novelist persuade this young woman to have pride in her slave ancestors through telling her a story? That was where the idea for *The Long Song* started.

There was one big problem though – the last thing I wanted to do was to write a novel about slavery in Jamaica. Why? Because how could anyone write about slavery without it turning into a harrowing tale of violence and misery? The young woman at the conference did have a point. I remember as a girl being unable to watch much of the TV dramatisation of Alex Haley's *Roots* because it was too upsetting. Every book on slavery that I had read (and I have read a few – it's hardly virgin territory) was not an easy read, with definitely little room for humour. And if I was to write a convincing story I would have to

spend a great deal of time researching eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Jamaica – a truly horrible part of our history.

More than that, I would have to immerse myself in the weird world of European racism. I would have to fill my head with sentiments like those of the eminent Enlightenment philosopher David Hume:

‘I am apt to suspect the negroes and in general all the other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to the whites.’

Or this from Emmanuel Kant:

‘Humanity exists in its greatest perfection in the white race. The yellow Indians have a smaller amount of talent. The Negroes are lower, and the lowest are a part of the American peoples.’

Or how about the esteemed writer Anthony Trollope who, in his book *West Indies and the Spanish Main*, says of the negro:

‘They are covetous of notice as is a child or a dog: but they have little idea of earning continual respect... On the whole they laugh and sing and sleep through life: and if life were all, they would not have so bad a time of it.’

I could go on. Racism as a belief system had become truly endemic in Britain at this time; making ‘negroes’ into non-people – into sub-human livestock – was

an important aspect of justifying slavery. So was this to be my reading matter for the next few years? I wasn't sure I would be able to stomach it.

Yet writing about the experience of slavery was a natural progression for me. *Small Island*, my last novel was the story of Jamaican immigrants to England in the early years after World War Two. Before that I had written three other novels that dealt in some way or another with the experience of black people in Britain. How could I not write about where and why the relationship with the Jamaica and the Caribbean began? It made sense. I had to do it.

So I started the rather uncomfortable mental journey back to early nineteenth-century Jamaica, with what I already knew from the history I was taught at school. It wasn't much. In a nutshell it went something like this:

Sometime in the 1500s white Europeans 'discovered' the Caribbean islands along with the Americas. Then, in their efforts to put the lands to productive use they got involved in the business of buying captive Africans (mainly from African traders, it seems), shipping them in chains across the Atlantic and using them as slave labour. A triangular trade grew up: from Britain to West Africa carrying manufactured goods to buy slaves: from West Africa to the Caribbean where the slaves endured the infamous 'middle passage' and then were sold to plantation owners: and finally back to Britain carrying the product of their trading – sugar. Eventually, thanks to the likes of William Wilberforce *et al*, the British saw the error of their ways and abolished the slave trade in 1807 and, eventually, slavery itself in 1838. They governed the islands for another hundred years or so and then

packed up and left, leaving the land to the descendants of those black African slaves.

So if this was the potted history, where was I going to find a fuller one? My family background was my first source of inspiration, but not in the way that you might think. When I was growing up, my parents, who were from Jamaica, were at pains to distance themselves from every aspect of their slave ancestry. My mum would sooner say her family were slave owners than that they were once slaves. My parents couldn't – or wouldn't – tell me much about the history of where they came from. But if they didn't add any more in words, everything about them, the way they looked, their names, even the silences and the things they didn't say, hinted to me that Jamaican society was in fact a very densely woven affair with a rich history. A history which includes not only the slave population from West Africa, but people coming from all over the world – as white owners of plantations or their employees, indentured labourers from India, workers from China, Jews from North Africa and Portugal. Clearly this all created a society that was considerably more complex than I had appreciated.

Slavery in Jamaica was so inhumane that it is hard to think of it as a society. Instead it seems to have been boiled down to the potted version – the middle passage, the cruel plantation life, and the perhaps disproportionate attention paid to the struggle for its ending. It could almost be a morality play with the planters as the villains, Wilberforce as the white knight and the slaves as simply a mass of wretched voiceless victims.

But as soon as I began to reflect upon on the plain historical facts, I realised that slavery was much more than a two-act play; it was a massive social

system – a society in the true sense – that endured for three hundred years.

Three hundred years! Let's just imagine what that means; if you were a slave in Jamaica in, say, 1815, it was possible that all your ancestors stretching back to your great, great, great, great, great, great, great, great, great, great, great, great, great, great grandparents had also been slaves in the same place. A whole society had built up over time according to the distorted rules that slavery imposed. People were suffering and dying. But clearly people were living and surviving as well.

There is an excellent body of scholarship, both in Britain and in the Caribbean, on the history of slavery. But there are very few surviving documents and artefacts that I could find where enslaved people speak of and for themselves. Little writing or testimony has emerged that was not filtered at the time through a white understanding or serving a white narrative – whether it be the apologists for slavery and the West Indian planter classes, or their opponents, the abolitionists.

This is where I believe that fiction comes in to its own. Writing fiction is a way of putting back the voices that were left out. Not just the wails of anguish and victimhood that we are used to, although that is very much part of the story, but the chatter and clatter of people building their lives, families and communities, ducking, diving and conducting the businesses of life in appallingly difficult circumstances. Now THERE is a story. A story of a totally unique society that developed around a giant, brutal island factory and survived, if not to tell the tale, then to give us their descendants, black and white, the privilege of piecing it together, warts and all, and telling it for them. I was beginning to get excited about this new book of mine – this long song of a tale.

I researched as widely as I could for *The Long Song* – through archives, libraries, the internet, contemporaneous books, anything I could lay my hands on, though sometimes my heart would sink on discovering yet another planter’s account of the negroes’ childlike ways, that I felt I would need to read. I visited Jamaica and spent days staying on an old sugar plantation; wandering amongst the preserved waterwheels, the old Georgian factory buildings now mostly crumbling, the planter’s Great House still cool and luxuriously furnished in early nineteenth-century style, and the lumpy scrubland full of broken pottery that was all that remained of the old slave village. I tried to imagine myself – literally myself, because it could have been me... hey, it could have been you – living through that time and place.

We’ve all heard about sugar plantations, but how did they work? What were the day-to-day concerns, routines and power games of a people the vast majority of whom were the property of the remaining few. And what about that tiny slave-owner minority? What did it feel like to be living on a far-away island vastly outnumbered by people who you owned, who you needed for your very survival, who you constantly feared and who you believed to be at best childlike and at worst bestial?

I began to piece together a largely unrecorded domestic history. Though there are very few black people’s accounts, there are many narratives from the time, written by white people from different viewpoints concerning how life was lived by blacks, as well as factual records of circumstances, that were very useful if you were prepared to read between their lines.

Lady Nugent, for example, the wife of the Governor of Jamaica from 1801 to 1805, records in her journal:

‘The sea was rather rough this evening, and I took a walk with the little ones, instead of a row. We met a horrid looking blackman, who passed us several times, without making any bow, although I recollected him as one of the boatmen of the canoe we used to go out in... he was then very humble, but to-night he only grinned, and gave us a sort of fierce look, that struck me with a terror I could not shake off.’

First I read the fear, real enough, of a white woman in the presence of a black man who is not behaving with proper deference. But re-imagined from the black man’s point of view, perhaps a delicate calculation has been made here; away from the gaze of others, and the need of the obsequious demeanour required of a boatman, he can take a risk. What cathartic relief might he feel by showing this woman just a hint of what he really thinks of her and all that she represents.

Or think about this from the wife of a Scottish planter, Mrs Carmichael, in her book *Domestic manners and social conditions of the white, coloured and negro populations of the West Indies* published in 1833:

‘The first defect of character which struck me as very marked among negroes, was a love of deceit...I have seen negro servants appear with part of my wardrobe, and wear it without fear of detection, or shame at being a thief.’

How can you practice deceit but ‘without fear of detection’? It seems to me to be something of a contradiction. I suspect something more open, more defiant

was happening here. Maybe they were trying to tell you something, Mrs Carmichael, and you just didn't get it! She goes on to say:

‘The negro women are such connoisseurs of dress. Standing by I heard them criticise everything I wore, both in materials and make.’

Yes, sisters! I could imagine those proud slave women so clearly, looking down their noses at this dowdy white woman. Even slaves can have a fierce pride in their appearance.

And then there were the ‘field slaves’, the ones that actually laboured in the cane fields and factories:

‘One slave came perpetually up. Her tongue was every morning a different colour. One morning it was bright blue. The doctor took a wet towel and he told her to put out her tongue whereby he washed the die off and a healthy tongue was underneath.’

This just tells me of the ingenious ways people tried to escape their working day. It made me laugh out loud. What a plucky woman! If Mrs Carmichael could smugly record one slave's unsuccessful attempt, just imagine how many succeeded.

Even the progressive voices of the time – the missionaries and the abolitionists – can still make uncomfortable reading with our modern sensibilities. Again I detected the underlying pseudo-scientific racism, but here with a kindly face: *If only we would treat these simple creatures better, they would be grateful, and be happy to follow white people's wishes, requirements and example.* When emancipation finally came this proved not to be the case,



much to the bitter disillusion of many reformers. It seems that ex-slaves were not especially grateful or pliable. Why should they be? Whatever pragmatic tactics and pretences they had employed to endure their slavery, as free people they would do what they wanted. Wouldn't you?

For me, reading these British settlers' accounts was a bit like gazing at an optical illusion – at first I see a candlestick, but suddenly it turns into two faces in profile. By reading between the lines of these narratives, and by tapping into our common human ways (our motives, fears and ways of coping with the hand life deals us) I found it was possible to imagine a vivid picture. As a novelist it is important for me to have the confidence, when I have no documentation to actually support me, to rely on an understanding of human nature; how a person will *feel* about something. Once the customs and mores of the time are allowed for, this is surely the one thing you can be confident has not changed over the years.

Having found my story, I now had to think about how I wanted to tell it in a book which will, inevitably, be thought of as a 'historical novel'. Many such novels start from the history, and place their characters as witnesses or participants in the events, often dramatic ones, that we know about from our history books. But what I wanted to explore isn't in our history books. I wanted to put back in the voices of everyday life for black Jamaicans that are so silent in the record. When I researched for my book *Small Island*, I interviewed my own mother and numerous other people for their recollections. This first-hand oral research lead me to a very individual understanding of events that went on sixty years ago. When the time you are writing about is two hundred years ago, there's no one to interview and so the individual view has to come from the writer's imagination. A historical novel may not pass the exacting standards of

history as an academic discipline, but it is not supposed to. I was treading where academics cannot go because of the rigour of their discipline. I was trying to breathe back the life of ordinary people into the skeleton of recorded events. And that requires imagination as well as research.

Slowly I began to realise that I was not in fact writing a novel about slavery. *The Long Song* is set in the time of slavery, and the years immediately after, but it is really a story about a person's life, a lost voice from history that needed to be heard. July, a black house slave, is my main character and she tells her own story. It features her mother, her father, her owner, her lover, her children. It's the story of her life lived in a society so strange to us that we can barely understand it. But she lives it much as you or I would try to – with ingenuity, cunning, charm, resilience, despair, love. As for there being no room for humour, on the contrary, as in any life lived, it is part of the fabric. Dramatic events happened in Jamaica during this time – real events, like the Baptist Wars, the period of Apprenticeship, and emancipation itself – but again, just like you or me, July is never really at the centre of the action. She hears about it, is affected by it, but her experience of her times is an individual one, full of action of her own.

The black peoples of the Caribbean are not the only lost voices of course. Many white men and women's stories are ill served by history too. But the truth is that the story of the Caribbean cannot ultimately be divided into 'black' and 'white' or African and European, just as slavery cannot be filleted out of three hundred years of British history. Those island societies would not exist as they do today were it not for Britain, and Britain would certainly not exist as it is today were it not for those islands.

So what do I have to say to the young woman at the conference who was shamed by her slave ancestry? Why should she be proud? Well, there was hardship, cruelty and humiliation to be sure. But I would tell her that through everything I have read of slaves in the Caribbean there runs a constant thread of small but courageous acts of defiance. A spirit that would see them endure and ultimately thrive. Out of circumstances where their very humanity was denied, I would ask her to just look at what these people created: a vibrant language that infuses our own modern speech; a rich fusion of oral stories; complex festivals of dance and costume that echo today on our own streets; A musical tradition that has spread across the globe; religious innovation; fabulous cuisine; world-class sporting prowess; a strong literary canon. I could go on. These are people who, from their tiny islands, have made a mark on the world.

Instead of a sense of horror, I have emerged from the experience of writing the book with a sense of awe for those millions of people who once lived as slaves. I would tell the young woman that our slave ancestors were much more than a mute and wretched mass of victims and we do them a great disservice if we think of them as such. These were people who needed strength, talent, guile and humour just to survive. But they did more than survive, they built a culture that has come all the way down through the years to us. Their lives are part of British history. If history has kept them silent then we must conjure their voices ourselves and listen to their stories. Stories through which we can remember them, marvel at what they endured, what they achieved, and what they have bequeathed to us all. *The Long Song* is my tribute to them and, I hope, an inspirational story not only for their descendants, but for us all.