Jamaica in 1850

OR,

THE EFFECTS OF SIXTEEN YEARS
OF FREEDOM ON A SLAVE COLONY

John Bigelow

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EMANCIPATION AND THE ATLANTIC TRIANGLE

John Bigelow's Jamaica in 1850

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Even before its passage on August 29, 1833, the British Emancipation Act became a double-edged sword for American abolitionists, inspiring but fraught with danger if the “mighty experiment” of freeing some eight hundred thousand slaves in the West Indies should be judged a failure. The colonial secretary, Edward George Stanley, used the phrase “mighty experiment” in introducing the government’s emancipation resolution to Parliament (Drescher, 123). Taking as an article of faith Adam Smith’s dictum that slave labor is more expensive than free labor, British abolitionists expected that the “experiment” would yield such positive results that other nations would follow their lead. Most Americans, however, were quite content to
wait until the evidence was in before acting. As the New York Commercial Advertiser observed on March 30, 1833, “The results which may follow the immediate emancipation of slaves in the West Indies may afford us the lesson of wisdom without the cost of experience” (Temperley, 113). But just who would evaluate emancipation? How would it be done? What mattered, the volume of sugar produced? Or was it the ability of former slaves to assume new lives as self-sufficient citizens? Whose story would be heard?

The Emancipation Act called for an apprenticeship period beginning in 1834 and ending in 1840, a time during which partially freed slaves would work approximately forty-five hours a week. Only in Antigua did freedom come immediately. Apprenticeship ended early, however, on August 1, 1838. As Sidney Mintz notes, “It was too much to ask that a man should be a slave on weekdays and a wage earner over the weekend” (206). Particularly in Jamaica, there followed a period of bitter conflict between determined, even brutal, planters and former slaves who struggled for autonomy (Holt, 79).

Charging that the British government had not provided adequate compensation for their slaves, planters complained as well that freedpersons refused to work except for exorbitant wages. In Jamaica, production of the primary export crop, sugar, fell some 23 percent during the apprenticeship period and declined substantially over the next ten years to less than half (49 percent) of preabolition levels (Holt, 119). In debt even before emancipation, many planters were forced to abandon their estates.

In 1846 Parliament approved Lord John Russell’s plan for “admitting all foreign sugars, regardless of origin, at a uniform rate” (Temperley, 160-65, quotation on 160). The advantage in the British market previously given to crops from the British West Indies was eliminated. Henceforth, free-grown sugar had to compete with slave-grown crops from Cuba and Brazil. The slave traffickers now had increased incentives to bring in additional slaves—despite the British blockade of Africa. Even progressive British periodicals came to ask just what emancipation had accomplished. American abolitionists found themselves on the defensive because their opponents had only to cite the consequences of British emancipation to counter antislavery campaigns. Emancipation, slavery’s apologists charged, had been as bad for the blacks, who were reverting to barbarism, as for planters and consumers. The prosperity of slaveholders in Brazil, Cuba, and the United States seemed to demonstrate that Adam Smith had erred in asserting that “the work done by slaves . . . is in the end, the dearest of any” (Drescher, 21).

That American abolitionists found themselves on the
defensive is reflected in the prefatory letter that Wendell Phillips added to *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* in 1845: “In 1838, many were waiting for the results of the West India experiment, before they could come into our ranks. Those ‘results’ have come long ago; but, alas! few of that number have come with them, as converts. A man must be disposed to judge of emancipation by other tests than whether it has increased the produce of sugar... before he is ready to [begin] his anti-slavery life.” (Douglass, 10). Phillips welcomed Douglass’s *Narrative* as a moving story of heroic resistance and achievement. Similarly, *Jamaica in 1850*, John Bigelow’s report of his visit to the island, became vitally important in the antislavery struggle. Better than anyone else, Bigelow rebuts those who used the decline in sugar production as evidence of racial inferiority. He, too, tells of heroic black resistance and achievement.

Bigelow argues that Jamaica’s economic collapse was caused not by the alleged incapacity of former slaves but rather by the incompetence of largely absentee plantation owners functioning within a dysfunctional colonial system. It was not that former slaves refused to work but that lazy planters were neglectful managers. Adam Smith’s dictum had not been disproved, but the sound principles of political economy—free trade, democracy, and economic opportunity and education for all—had not been tried at all. A founder of the Free-Soil Party in 1843, Bigelow appealed to that large group of Americans who disliked slavery but were fearful of ending it. He would propose that a revitalized Jamaica be invited to join the Union as a free state. It was a radical proposition indeed. A black majority state would enter the Union alongside South Carolina.

Published in New York, *Jamaica in 1850* is an American book that deals with a British question that had profound significance for America. It appeared just as the two nations were moving closer together in multiple ways. In 1846, under the Walker Tariff Act, America had reduced its restrictive tariffs even as Britain altered its protective agricultural policies. That year the two nations resolved their dispute over the Oregon boundary. On June 4, 1851, the *Times of London* claimed, “For all practical purposes the United States are far more closely united with this kingdom than any one of our colonies” (“Great Britain and America,” 4).

Progressives in both countries realized that the cause of reform was indivisible. America would have to eliminate slavery if it were to serve as a model of democratic change for Britain, and Britain would have to improve conditions for its working class in order to creditibly promote the antislavery cause. At the same time, British and American conservatives looked across the water for support. Hanging in the balance was the future of liberal democracy.
British Emancipation: A Double-Edged Sword for American Abolitionists

In 1836 the American Anti-Slavery Society sent James A. Thome and J. Horace Kimball to the West Indies to demonstrate the truth of Adam Smith's dictum on free labor. Their report, *Emancipation in the West Indies: A Six Months' Tour*, appeared in 1838. Destined to become an "antislavery best-seller in the United States," the book asserted that because emancipation already should be considered a success, America should follow the British lead (Temperley, 91n83). The young writers found the most determined resistance in Jamaica, where planters "had sworn eternal hostility to every scheme of emancipation." The "atrocities" practiced by the "masters and magistrates" were nothing short of "appalling." Nevertheless, Thome and Kimball claimed that "the degree of the failure" was "not so great as had been represented" (103).

On the basis of success in Antigua, where production of sugar increased slightly, the society changed its position from "immediate emancipation, gradually accomplished" to insist on "immediate emancipation." *Emancipation in the West Indies* caused a "revolution in anti-slavery doctrine. To such as were anxious to believe, it proved by example that immediate emancipation was safe, practicable, and efficient" (Barnes, 138-39, emphasis in the original). Both abolitionists and slavery's apologists saw that the battle over the meaning of British emancipation constituted a critical arena in the struggle over American slavery.

Representative of those the antislavery forces hoped to bring around was the author of an extended essay, "On the State of the West Indies before Emancipation," published in October 1838 in the *Princeton Review*, the conservative Presbyterian quarterly. Reflecting the optimism of the times, the reviewer, most likely its editor, Charles Hodge, asserted that "the great event of the present century is the emancipation of the slaves in the British Colonies. It is one of those social revolutions which, at intervals, form distinct eras in the history of our race" (602). Assuring readers that he had not become an abolitionist, the author insisted that the Bible does not prohibit slavery and that the institution cannot be considered immoral because slaveholders "were admitted to the Christian Church by the inspired apostles." Still, the early reports from the West Indies led him to claim that America would benefit enormously if slavery were eliminated because social improvement "is incompatible with the long continuance of slavery" (605). The Founders understood that "arbitrary power in the hands of sinful men is an evil, though at times necessary; that liberty is in itself a good, though at times unsustainable." Formerly, the South had been "quite as open and decided as the North in
considering slavery a great social and political evil, rendered necessary, as they supposed, for the time being, by their peculiar circumstances,” but now Southerners speak of slavery as a positive good (607). Nothing could do more to undermine the white South’s hardening position than continued success in the West Indies. Noting the absence of violence since the beginning of apprenticeship, stable agricultural production, and the willingness of freedpersons to embrace Christianity, the writer insisted that “the prosperity of the islands has not been seriously diminished. . . . Those beautiful islands now raise their verdant plains and lofty mountains, covered with a free population in the infancy of civilization and Christian knowledge. . . . We look with cheerful confidence to their yearly progress in intelligence, prosperity, and virtue” (644).

Had those reports been forthcoming, slavery’s apologists would have lost their prime argument, that blacks could not succeed in freedom. And that is precisely why such American apologists as Edmund Ruffin attempted to discredit free black communities in the United States as well (Ely, 1960). Sadly, what we might now term as a campaign of “disinformation” seems to have succeeded, as Wendell Phillips recognized in introducing Douglass’s Narrative. There was far more to the story than the amount of sugar produced, but there was no one to tell that story.

American abolitionists became anxious about the absence of accounts in the press touting the success of emancipation. Arriving at the 1840 meeting of the World Antislavery Conference in England, they implored their hosts to generate glowing stories for use at home. Phillips for one urged British antislavery leaders to see to it that the “sentiments of the [British] nation” be articulated in its periodicals, which circulated widely in America (British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, 129-33; Temperley, 91). Instead, British writers told of plummeting production and demoralized planters. Coming even from journals that had supported emancipation, such accounts were devastating. A writer in Blackwood’s Magazine in June 1844, James Macqueen, lamented that “instead of supplying her own wants with Tropical produce, and next nearly all Europe, as [Britain] formerly did, it is the fact that, in some of the most important articles, she has barely sufficient to supply her own wants; while the whole of her colonial possessions . . . are . . . supplied with—and, as regards the article of sugar, are consuming—foreign slave produce.” It was a condition that, the writer warned, “cannot continue” (742).

American apologists now possessed the seemingly irrefutable evidence they needed. John C. Calhoun, then serving as secretary of state, drew from the Blackwood’s article in telling French and British diplomats that “slave trade abolition and emancipation had cost the British people
$250 million and put twice that much capital at risk in the British West Indies” (Drescher, 171). Arguing that the Constitution established slavery, Calhoun warned the British not to interfere with the impending annexation of Texas as a slave state. In “Annexation of Texas,” published that October, the Southern Quarterly quoted extensively from Blackwood’s to gloat that the British “experiment of emancipation of the slaves . . . has not succeeded” but rather “resulted in total failure.” The accounts from the West Indies stand as “melancholy dissuasive [sic] against these fatal errors. They teach patience and sobriety, and warn us . . . to try no more experiments, with no better lights than we have at present before us” (509).

The transition from slavery to freedom in the West Indies would have been difficult under the best of circumstances. The determined resistance of Jamaican planters, however, further undermined the process. Before emancipation, slaves lived rent-free in “huts or tenements supplied by their owners and they had been allowed to cultivate estate backlands,” but “as free wage workers they were asked to pay rents for huts and land, and ex-master and ex-slaves faced each other as landlord employers and employees” (Mintz and Hall, 770-71). Attempting to control their workers, planters seized “the houses and provision grounds that the apprentices had occupied gratis during slavery” (Holt, 134). In large numbers, freedpersons abandoned the huts and farms that by custom had “belonged” to them and they had been able to “bequeath.” Remarkably, many were able to settle on Crown property; others purchased land from “ruined estates or the surpluses of economically viable estates” (Mintz, 159). Also important was the work of Baptist and Methodist missionaries in purchasing ruined estates for conversion into independent villages. “Between 1838 and 1844, nineteen thousand freedmen and their families removed themselves from the estates, bought land, and settled in free villages. In terms of the total population affected, this figure may represent an aggregate of as many as a hundred thousand persons” (Mintz, 160). On their farms, freed persons worked out a new way of life. “The material needs of daily living would be met by personal effort and because of personal motivation; the hated compulsion of the planter was no longer a spur to effort, and the freedman easily learned to live without it” (Mintz, 209).

As Howard Temperley observes, however, it was impossible “to convince anyone accustomed to regarding sugar production as the natural index of West Indian prosperity that the situation was not as bad as the planters said it was. Unlike trade figures, greater personal freedom and improved living conditions, real though they were to those who experienced them, were not susceptible to quantitative measurement”
(116). In the wake of the economic deterioration after 1838 even progressive British periodicals came to write critically of emancipation. After all, by 1840 “consumers were paying nearly 60 percent more for their sugar than the average price during apprenticeship, itself a 40 percent rise over the years of slavery” (Drescher, 158). In “Sugar and Slavery,” republished by *Litell’s Living Age* on July 20, 1844, the *Spectator* charged that “the public paid for Emancipation, and a badly-fulfilled bargain; it has paid long for ‘slave trade suppression,’ as the fruitless and costly efforts to suppress the slave trade are called; it pays a high price for sugar, to protect the West Indies from ruin, which is not done. . . . The public has been passive, in buying at any price the luxury of sentiment [even though] there is as much slavery as ever.” During June and July of 1844 alone, *Litell’s Living Age*, the Boston weekly, republished this and ten similar essays from British periodicals. When in 1846 Parliament passed the Sugar Duties Act the nation seemed to concede that the goals of emancipation—to free slaves while increasing production—would not be achieved. Antislavery journals angrily condemned the action but to no avail (Drescher, 174; Temperley, 161).

In 1848 a group of southern legislators led by Calthoun claimed that as disastrous as emancipation had been, it “furnishes a very faint picture of the calamities [abolition] would bring on the South” that speedily would be “overspread” by “wretchedness, and misery, and desolation” (Benton, 1:734-35). Thomas Carlyle’s “Occasional Discourse on the Negro Question,” published in *Fraser’s* in December 1849 and republished in *Litell’s Living Age* on February 9, 1850, was a heavy blow. The respected British writer depicted “Quashee,” lolling lazily about the pumpkin patch while valuable crops were rotting. Charging that the laws of supply and demand “have an uphill task of it with such a man,” Carlyle warned that “the idle black man in the West Indies had not long since the right, and will again if it please Heaven have the right. . . . to be compelled to work as he was fit and to do the Maker’s will” (250). This was interpreted in both Britain and America as a threat to compel former slaves to return to work on plantations, in effect to return them to a condition very much like slavery.

Responding in *Fraser’s* the next month, John Stuart Mill correctly predicted the damage Carlyle’s essay would do in America, where “the words of English writers of celebrity are words of power on the other side of the ocean. . . . I hardly know of an act by which one person could have done so much mischief.” Mill challenged Carlyle’s claims of innate racial inferiority and criticized him on the meaning of work. There is nothing inherently noble, Mill said, about producing spices for Europeans. Because he had not visited the West
Indies, however, he was unable to report on the new lives being built by freed persons. He failed to question Carlyle's assertion that former slaves were now able to earn such high wages that, in Mill's words, they could "exist in comfort on the wages of a comparatively small quantity of work" (466). Operating on the assumption that there was a labor shortage, Mill supported proposals to import additional workers. Bigelow would challenge these assumptions.

Carlyle's essay prompted the Democratic Review, a prominent New York monthly, to claim in "Centralization," published that April, that "a powerful re-action has taken place in England in regard to [attitudes toward] the blacks," especially as reflected in "the leading writers and the press, influenced by the Government." Noting that the "utter ruin" of the West Indies was "known to all," the author endorsed Carlyle's "very bold stand in favor of re-enslaving the blacks, who are doubtless rapidly sinking into the state of cannibalism from which white influence raised them" (302, 304). That may strike us as extreme, but that September Congress passed the Compromise of 1850, which included the infamous Fugitive Slave Law.

The Making of an Antislavery Journalist and Activist

Born into a merchant family in 1817 in the Hudson River town of Malden, New York, John Bigelow early became a passionate Democrat. In 1833, as a student at Washington (later Trinity) College in Hartford, he was thrilled when President Andrew Jackson visited. In debates at Washington and at Union College in New York, where he transferred, he vigorously articulated the principles of the Democratic Party (Clapp, 10). At Union, Bigelow came under the influence of another visionary leader, Eliphalet Nott, the long-time college president who had been "preaching against" slavery since 1811 (Hislop, 403-5). Within a decade after he graduated in 1836 Bigelow found that his commitment to Nott's antislavery stand placed him in opposition to the party of Jackson, which under James K. Polk came to be controlled by slaveholding interests during the 1840s.

Bigelow, following in the path of many ambitious young men, went to New York. Admitted to the bar in 1838, he found the law neither lucrative nor intellectually stimulating. Underemployment, however, did have its benefits. There was time for reading and discussions with a widening circle of brilliant friends, including the future governor and presidential candidate Samuel Tilden, whose biography he would write. In 1841 the editor of the Democratic Review, John L. O'Sullivan, moved the monthly from Washington to New York. O'Sullivan became Bigelow's journalistic mentor, and Bigelow found a political, intellectual, and literary home in the "Young America" movement associated with the Democratic Review (Widmer, 27ff). Strongly nationalistic, these writers identified
with the reform wing of the “Democracy,” as New York’s Democratic Party was known.

Both in the pages of the Democratic Review and in William Cullen Bryant’s Evening Post, Bigelow quickly made a name for himself as a brilliant, wide-ranging analyst, someone who could write acutely about politics, workers’ rights, free trade, Greek and Roman literature, prison reform, intellectual history, and state constitutional reform among other subjects. In “Territorial Aggrandizement,” published in October 1845, he spoke of the power of the American democratic ideal to influence other nations. But in this time of Manifest Destiny, when the United States would shortly attack Mexico, Bigelow cautioned against military adventures. Territorial expansion should come about peacefully and voluntarily—as he would propose with Jamaica (Bigelow, “Territorial Aggrandizement,” 243-48). In “The Reciprocal Influences of the Physical Sciences and of Free Political Institutions” he celebrated the United States as the superior model of a nation-state (13). Citing Adam Smith, Bacon, and Luther as the intellectual forebears of America, Bigelow claimed that the nation’s evident success came from a dynamic and open culture that encouraged innovation and scientific inquiry and prized religious freedom and democracy. He would measure Jamaica against such values.

Before the Baltimore presidential nominating convention in 1844 Bigelow and other New York Democratic leaders expected that Martin Van Buren would emerge as the nominee. After Van Buren equivocated over the annexation of Texas, however, the southern wing of the party, led by Calhoun, blocked the former president. Polk, a slaveholder, came away as the nominee. Even so, Bigelow, Tilden, and O’Sullivan established the Morning News, a daily, to make Polk better known in New York. Indeed, they claimed their advocacy was responsible for Polk’s narrow victory in New York—and hence his election as president. The reformers—now known as Barnburners—expected Polk to funnel New York patronage through their hero, Silas Wright, a former senator and now the newly elected governor, who opposed slavery. But reflecting the emergence of slavery as the preeminent national issue, Polk favored the proslavery (and conservative) Hunker faction. It is ironic that Bigelow’s work on the Morning News helped carry New York and the nation for Polk, whose policies he would oppose.

In 1848 the rival factions of New York’s Democratic Party each sent delegations to the national convention, where they were offered a compromise under which they would share power equally—but only if each pledged to support the party’s nominee, most likely Sen. Lewis Cass, who was friendly to the South. Bigelow and other antislavery New York Democrats elected to bolt and form the Free-Soil
Party. They nominated Van Buren for the presidency and the Massachusetts "Conscience Whig" Charles Francis Adams as his running-mate.

With "Free Soil, Free Speech, Free Labor, and Free Men" as their motto the Free-Soilers "demanded that the federal government commit itself 'not to extend, nationalize, or encourage, but to limit, localize, and discourage Slavery' by all constitutional means" (Spann, 169). The defection ensured a Whig victory. Eric Foner has written that most Free-Soilers were more concerned with protecting white labor from competition with blacks than with ending slavery. Bigelow, however, was "one of the few Barnburners to support equal suffrage in 1846" (315, 323).

Following the 1848 election, Bigelow faced a tough question: Were his disagreements with the Democratic Party so fundamental as to force him to leave? A solution offered itself in December 1848 when the antislavery William Cullen Bryant invited him to become associate editor of the *Evening Post*. With borrowed funds Bigelow purchased a one-third interest in the firm. His energy, skill, and business acumen dramatically improved both the quality and the profitability of the newspaper and its printing plant.

Bryant quickly realized that in Bigelow he had a most capable associate, so capable that he left the publication in Bigelow's hands for much of 1849 while he traveled. Bigelow wrote hard-hitting editorials opposing the spread of slavery and urging that it be outlawed in the District of Columbia. He deplored the disproportionate political power of a comparatively few slaveholders, supported the admission of California to the Union as a free state, and insisted that the Founders had not intended that slavery would be permanent. Antislavery leaders such as Charles Sumner recognized that in Bigelow they had a powerful ally. Still, the *Post*, which adhered to the states' rights principles of the Democratic Party, did not call for immediate emancipation. It sought to prevent slavery's spread while attempting to strengthen the hand of antislavery moderates in the South. Bryant's "natural optimism of spirit" had convinced him that slavery would gradually give way "of its own innate weakness before the advance of free labor" (Floam, 25). On May 3, 1851, Emerson advocated a similar position: "First, abrogate [the Fugitive Slave] law; then proceed to confine slavery to slave states, and help them effectually make an end of it" (370).

"When I joined the New York *Evening Post,*" Bigelow recalled, "we were constantly confronted with the assertion from Southern statesmen that the negro was wholly unfit for liberty, and the British islands of the Antilles were referred to in proof of it. We were also told that the island of Jamaica had gone back almost to barbarism since the Emancipation Act" (*Retrospections*, 1:94-95). Bigelow realized that the only
way to explode such myths would be to report factually about actual conditions on Jamaica. After Bryant returned to New York from Europe in December 1849, Bigelow claimed his turn to travel. If he needed prompting to go to Jamaica, the appearance of Carlyle’s “Occasional Discourse” would have provided it.

Politics and Travel: Free Soil, Free Labor,
and Free Men in Jamaica

Bigelow set off for Jamaica determined to confront the several assertions or myths surrounding the collapse of the Jamaican economy: first, that emancipation had failed because the former slaves had regressed to sloth and barbarism; second, that despite the offer of generous wages the freedpersons refused to work; third, that if planters only had reliable workers, production would increase and bring prosperity; and, fourth, that the profitable expansion of slavery in Brazil and Cuba proved that the “mighty experiment” had failed. “What was at stake on both sides of the Atlantic” in 1850, Seymour Drescher has written, “was not just a grim present but also an immensely grimmer future” (192).

Ominously, slaveholders were increasing agricultural production through new technology, suggesting that the institution was far more resilient than had been thought. Where did the apparent repudiation of Adam Smith leave Bigelow, who had called Wealth of Nations “the novum organum of political economy”? There was no underestimating the stakes. British conservatives understood that the campaign for instituting something very much like slavery in the West Indies would help protect the institution in the United States, thereby buttressing the conservative cause in Britain. A slaveholding America could not push for reforms in Britain. Jamaica became a battleground in the great transatlantic struggle for reform.

Far from retreating from Adam Smith and political economy, Bigelow argued that only fundamental, even radical, reforms could bring revitalization. The work of Smith and such theorists as James Mill in Elements of Political Economy (1844) provided him with the necessary analytical tools. What were the island’s human and natural resources? What would be the most efficient means of production, distribution, and exchange? Political economy removed race from the equation and claimed that the best decisions are made by those closest to the situation. In 1846, writing in the Democratic Review, Bigelow had credited Smith with having created “a new science” designed “to enable [humankind] more completely to realize all the fruits of [its] industry” (“Reciprocal Influences,” 13). He could not have anticipated that in just a few years he would face the challenge of applying those principles to a failing colonial economy.
But so committed was he to Smith’s progressive project that Jamaica in 1850 might just as well have been entitled Political Economy in 1850: The Challenge of Jamaica.

In the volume’s preface Bigelow disingenuously claims he had decided to travel “merely for recreation, with no thought of troubling the public about it” other than to send an occasional letter to the Evening Post (1). His persona is that of a busy New Yorker bent on escaping the frigid city for a tropical vacation; no political agenda is evident. As soon as he disembarked at Port Royal, however, Bigelow confronted such shocking evidence of physical decay and economic decline that it required explanation. How had a land so rich in potential been allowed to stagnate?

Bigelow came prepared. He had read all the relevant government reports and the standard histories, including Bryan Edwards’s The History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies (1793), which was “well known in the United States” (127). Although Edwards conceded the damaging effects of slavery, in the end he defended the institution (Lewis, 553). Further, Bigelow, as a journalist, knew how to identify and cultivate the best sources, notably liberals within the governing class. He quoted in full a letter to the Colonial Standard from William Wenyss Anderson, an attorney who had traveled in the United States. Anderson articulated the argument Bigelow developed: Poor management was responsible for the economic collapse. Bigelow’s most important sources, it would seem, however, were members of the freeborn brown community, particularly Richard Hill, a distinguished naturalist and magistrate.

The power of Bigelow’s narrative in this volume comes from his ability to support his arguments with precise observations of human activity placed in well-realized settings. Here is his description of women and children coming into town to market produce: “One of the most interesting spectacles to be witnessed about Kingston, is presented on the high road through which the market people, with their donkeys, in the cool of the morning, pour into the city from the back country. They form an almost uninterrupted procession four or five miles in length” (117). It is as if the procession itself leads the reader to Bigelow’s conclusion: “One may readily perceive how strong and universal must be the desire of the poor laborers to exchange their servile drudgery, on the lands of others, for this life of comparative ease and independence” (117). Such statements were, of course, meant to assure Americans anxious about the possible dangers of ending slavery.

In their ability to establish themselves as independent farmers the former slaves became heroic protagonists in Bigelow’s narrative; the antagonists are planters and their defenders in Britain, particularly Carlyle and the colonial
secretary, Lord Stanley, who had written a report justifying absentee ownership because the tropics posed unacceptable health risks to whites. Bigelow demolished that claim as well as Stanley’s other major points. “On the whole,” he observed, “the negro laborer has retrograded” following emancipation and “indolence, not industry, has been the result of his freedom” (129n). Stanley had come to function very much as the agent of the planters in the Foreign Office (Holt, 199).

Bigelow credits the British with having gotten it right in one area. Although not the case in the United States, in Jamaica it was common for people of all races to associate comfortably with each other. Anyone “accustomed to the proscribed condition of the free blacks in the United States will constantly be startled at the diminished importance attached here to the matter of complexion,” although growing divisions existed between the “negroes or Africans, and the brown” who “shun all connection by marriage with the former, and experience no more unpardonable insult, than to be classified with them in any way” (25). Legal equality is a necessary condition for social and economic progress, but it is not sufficient. High-property qualifications for voting and serving in the assembly resulted in the planters controlling public policy and thwarting needed reforms. Bigelow’s verdict—that Jamaica, despite appearances, was far from being a functioning democracy—has been confirmed by historians (Holt, 217).

Bigelow understood that the more graphic he was in describing economic decline in Jamaica, the more ammunition he would supply to American apologists. Nevertheless, he was unsparing. Property values had plummeted, and “poverty and nin” were everywhere. The extent of the “financial reverses of this gem of the ocean” could be realized only by understanding its “exceeding fertility and unequaled natural resources,” which Bigelow then enumerated. The central question concerned whether “human agency [could] extend any relief, and if any, what is it?” (70). Here Bigelow looked to the achievements of freed persons who at great personal sacrifice purchased small plots to cultivate “economically and intelligently.” Far from reverting to barbarism, they were making sound economic decisions, and their productivity demonstrated what was now possible.

Bigelow’s observations support the findings of those later scholars, including Sidney Mintz, who have emphatically rejected the view that the “adaptations of the ex-slaves were the result of a low level of economic aspirations, reflected deficient skills, or were evidence of regression to an African past” (Holt, 149). On the contrary, freedpersons, who were entrepreneurial before emancipation, were adapting well
to the new economy. "On a patch of less than two acres, owned by a negro," Bigelow writes, was to be seen "the bread fruit, bananas, yams, oranges, shadducks, cucumbers, beans, pine-apple, plantain and chiramoya, besides many kinds of shrubbery and fruits of secondary value" (116). Astonished to discover that "the number of these colored proprietors is already considerably over hundred thousand, and constantly increasing," Bigelow charged that planters "discourage" land sales to the "blacks in every possible way, for they say that it raises the price of labor by increasing the independence of the laboring classes" (116, 118). But planters were unable to thwart the drive for independence.

Bigelow explicitly challenged Carlyle, whose assertions on race were "calculated to destroy all hope of ever bringing the blacks within the pale of an exalted civilization" (123). Further, the so-called exorbitant wages offered by planters were totally inadequate, contradicting both Carlyle and Mill. The "fact is, the negro cannot live on such wages, unless he owns in fee, a lot of three or five acres" (126). Forget about race, the real question was how to improve productivity: "Let labor be rewarded as it is in the United States or even in England, and let it be used with the same economy, and the face of Jamaica would change" (138).

To Bigelow's American eye, most planters failed to make efficient use of the workers who were available, and estates engaged in other inefficient practices such as owning their own sugar mills. These operated only part of the year and only part of the day. The central mills that Bigelow recommended, in contrast, could run around the clock. He did not report that Cuban planters were doing just that and, ironically, by importing advanced British machinery—often from British planters facing bankruptcy (Dresser, 186). Operational efficiencies enabled the Cubans to undercut British sugar. In Jamaica, central mills would not be established until late in the century, and then "progress was slow, despite legislative changes intended to facilitate this form of organization" (Holt, 369).

Arguing that Jamaica's reliance on staple crops for export placed it in a vulnerable position, Bigelow recommended that the government encourage farmers to find new opportunities by growing fruits and vegetables for the New York market, where they were in short supply in winter. To do that, the large estates would have to be subdivided, but Jamaicans would not adopt such sensible suggestions until the concluding third of the century, when a dramatic expansion of the fruit trade provided "unprecedented prominence to peasant agriculture" (Holt, 347). Bigelow also advised that Jamaica move to self-sufficiency by producing locally such necessities as lumber, fish, and wheat, which were being imported at high prices.
Bigelow's prediction that "nothing is more probable, in respect to the political fate of the island, twenty years hence, than that it will be one of the United States of America" (161) might well be read as a disguised manifestation of American imperialism. Because Bigelow saw the United States as the world's leading democracy and expected that slavery would be abolished, he believed that Jamaica would make far more progress if the island broke free of its colonial status and looked to the United States as a trading partner and political model. There is nothing of force or compulsion in Bigelow's statement, however, and it should be contrasted with the filibustering activities in Cuba of his former journalistic mentor John L. O'Sullivan. In 1851 O'Sullivan would be arrested in New York for violating the Neutrality Act by supporting a military expedition aimed at overthrowing the Cuban government so the island could become a slave state (Sampson, 216). In contrast, Bigelow's vision of a black-majority Jamaica entering the Union as a free state represented a challenge to American racism, which, as supported by ethnographic "science," held that "other races were incapable of reaching the level of the white race" (Horsman, 148).

The question of statehood aside, it is unfortunate that no group, whether in Jamaica or Britain, pushed for the fundamental reforms that Bigelow outlines in this book. No other contemporary observer had such keen insight into what had to be done to revive a failing economy and support freedpersons. Bigelow, in connecting political freedom and education to economic development, anticipated the approach of such progressive economists as Amartya Sen, who argues that freedom is a "causally effective factor in generating rapid change" (297).

Bigelow says nothing about the important work of dissenting missionaries in helping former slaves to purchase farms and yet that support was of great importance in the move toward independence that Bigelow describes. While he was in Jamaica, Bigelow heard rumors that the Haitian emperor, Faustin Soulouque, had begun persecuting brown citizens, causing many to flee, some to Jamaica. Bigelow met with one such refugee, whose complaints he reported. He dismissed these complaints, however, as overblown (28). He also includes, as an appendix, a report from a young Frenchman of a "Visit to the Emperor of Haiti," which put the situation in the best possible light. Bigelow should have trusted the Haitian refugee; the emperor, who deployed various paramilitary groups against his opponents, had a rule that was notably bloody and corrupt (Rotberg, 83-84). Bigelow's misreading grew from his determination to support the antislavery cause; he would visit Haiti some three years later to report firsthand on that island.
"The Democratic Horror of Black Blood": Responses to Jamaica in 1850 in Britain and America

When Bigelow returned to New York in early March he faced stiffening resistance to the antislavery cause. On March 7 Daniel Webster delivered "The Constitution and the Union," an address the Post fiercely attacked as a sell-out to the slave power (Clapp, 71). The desire to preserve the Union had come to trump antislavery feeling in many circles in the North. Bigelow’s former colleagues at the Democratic Review published "Centralization" that April, which cited Carlyle’s "Occasional Discourse" to claim that the British were now coming around to support the American position on slavery. In June, New Orleans’s DeBow’s Review prefaced its reprinting of the Carlyle essay with an assertion that "the West India question is for the first time put in its true light" (527). It was against this darkening atmosphere that Bigelow’s dispatches appeared in the Post, the first on February 20 and the concluding installment on May 24.

Antislavery Americans faced a daunting challenge. As John Greenleaf Whittier wrote in responding to Carlyle in the National Era on May 2, "It is difficult to treat sentiments so atrocious, and couched in such offensive language with anything like respect." He feared that "our anti-Christian prejudices against the colored man might be strengthened and confirmed by [Carlyle’s] malignant vituperation and sarcasm" (1-4). In Britain, Carlyle’s essay "signalized the emergence of a new and particularly ugly form of racism" (Rice, 330-31).

Just when antislavery leaders needed transatlantic support more than ever, the apparent British retreat was discouraging. Were the British fearful that abolition would threaten their supply of cotton? The Post came under attack from the New York state Democratic Party and from Tammany Hall "for its uncompromising resistance to the extension of slavery," as it reported on March 14, 1850. The passage of the Compromise Act of 1850 provoked mob attacks on abolitionists in northeastern cities. On the other side, New York senator William Henry Seward spoke on March 11, 1850, of a "higher law" than a constitution that recognized slavery. Abolitionists began to form vigilance committees to save fugitive slaves from capture.

As soon as they began to appear, Bigelow’s dispatches in the Post attracted attention, as reviewers of the published volume would note. On March 23, Litell’s Living Age began serializing them, and while preparing the book for publication Bigelow strengthened and expanded his arguments. Most important, he added the uncompromising response to Carlyle in chapter 13. The book, which George P. Putnam released on Monday, October 28, was an account of what Bigelow
actually saw and an attempt to counter the hardening of the proslavery position.

The Putnam firm was known for travel books, but Bigelow’s work was sold as a treatment of the most pressing social problem that faced Americans (Greenspan, 250). The volume drew impassioned reviews from both the pro and antislavery camps, and, significantly, a number of reviewers not identified with either side responded positively to Bigelow’s economic arguments.

On November 14, 1850, a full-page review in Horace Greeley’s Daily Tribune weighed in on the question of race: “In the course of his argument, the author has occasion to refer to the extravaganzas of Carlyle on the subject of West India Slavery, and inflicts on that writer a summary chastisement.” The review described Jamaica in 1850 as primarily a “treatise on Political Economy . . . rather than a book of travels, or a record of personal incidents.” Still, “It cannot be read without interest” (6). Given the extensive circulation of the Tribune throughout the Northeast and into the Ohio Valley, Bigelow had reason to be pleased. Similarly, on November 28, 1850, in a wide-ranging discussion, the National Era commended Bigelow for publishing “the best work concerning the present condition of Jamaica” (191). Such commercial New York newspapers as the Journal of Commerce and Courier and Inquirer were also positive, and

in December 1850 Harper’s New Monthly affirmed Bigelow’s thesis that “the root of the evil . . . is to be found [not in the former slaves, but] in the non-residence of the landholders, encumbered condition of real estate, and the monopoly of the soil by a small number of proprietors” (140).

One finds, however, ambivalence on the question of race, even among those who wrote positively of Jamaica in 1850. That is evident, for instance, in a discussion from February 1851 in the New Englander and Yale Review, a “magazine devoted to expressing the views of free Christian men and women,” as its proprietor E. R. Tyler wrote in the 1843 prospectus (1). The reviewer recognized that Bigelow raised important questions: Are “the inferior races of men” destined to “become extinct by the necessary progress of the superior races?” Or, is it possible that “by the divine influences of Christianity, they are to be elevated and brought to stand on the same level with the most civilized nations?” Will they “by intermarriage” become some other race. No answers were given even though Jamaica in 1850 was praised as “by far the best” of the books on Jamaica (155). Bigelow prompted a reconsideration of racist assumptions.

Proslavery journals recognized the need to respond, and the Democratic Review delivered an extensive rebuke in December. Drawing from Bigelow’s own descriptions, it claimed that “a completely savage state is being rapidly
approximated” on the island. The culprits were former slaves, who “will not work.” Ignoring Bigelow’s report that former slaves were making exceptional progress, the reviewer insisted that for blacks to attempt to achieve anything beyond mere subsistence would “do violence against their nature.” Bigelow’s prediction that Jamaica would join the Union induced the reviewer to apoplexy, describing “the complete inferiority [of the black] to the white race, and its utter incapacity to maintain by itself the state of civilization, to which it has been advanced by white aid” (496). Abolition posed a dire threat to this “great and glorious nation.” Americans of Anglo-Saxon descent had built a nation “upon a soil, previously occupied for countless ages, by a race who never improved it.”

It is a short step from the Democratic Review’s justification of dispossession and extermination of Indians to its justification of slavery. Only when placed “under the direction of the whites” would blacks make “progress both physically and mentally.” If slavery were to be abolished, “a rapid retrogression would result, until the blacks, having receded to the savage state of the aborigines, would be displaced and exterminated” (“Jamaica,” 496).

Southern periodicals similarly attacked Jamaica in 1850, arguing that the economic difficulties of the West Indies provided evidence of racial inferiority. The Southern Quarterly commented that “the African race seems to have stood still, and only to have emerged from its profound barbarism and ignorance when brought in contact with and under the subjection of the white” (“Emancipation in the British West Indies,” 444).

The most curious response came from the North American in October 1851. In a wide-ranging essay on “Slavery in the United States,” it revealed the tortured moral reasoning of the “Cotton Whig” community of Boston and Cambridge, in particular the contradictions of Harvard moral philosophy. As Daniel Walker Howe has written, “The slavery problem brought to the fore the basic contradiction between Unitarian ethical thought, which taught the limitless perfectibility of every person, and Harvard ‘civil policy,’ which praised a stable and hierarchical society” (271). The reviewer conceded that slavery was evil but could not think of a way to eliminate it because he could not envision an America where races live side by side as equals. The only solution, the reviewer maintained, was colonization. The fact that millions of Irish and Germans had crossed the ocean to come to America was proof that large populations could transfer themselves in the other direction, whether back to Africa or down to Jamaica. Had not Bigelow demonstrated that free blacks could do well on that fertile island?

In his Retrospections Bigelow recalled that Jamaica in
1850 sold very rapidly and attracted considerable attention in England (1.95). Yet the book was not widely reviewed; neither the Spectator nor the Times did so, nor did Chambers’ or The Athenaeum. Only one review is listed in the Wellesley Index, that in the Edinburgh Review of April 1859. The comparative lack of reviews can be explained by the fact that the book did not have a British publisher. The title page identifies “W. C. Bryant & Co.” as its printers. Because most of the material already had been set in type at the Post—and given the urgency in getting the book in print—such an arrangement made sense. Typically, however, Putnam contracted with one of several well-established New York printers for his books (Greenspan, 215). It would seem that Putnam acted more as distributor than publisher. On May 4, 1851, Bigelow would note in his Journal that he still had approximately one hundred copies on hand (Clapp, 70).

The need to get the book into print quickly meant that neither Bigelow nor Putnam had time to secure a British publisher or arrange for the book to be printed in Great Britain, something that was necessary for a volume to receive copyright protection. By way of contrast, Bryant’s Tales of a Traveller, also published in 1850 by Putnam, was brought out in London by Richard Bentley, also the publisher of Herman Melville’s Moby-Dick, which was published in England in October 1851.

Even though the title page of Jamaica in 1850 identifies New York and London as the cities of publication, it was not considered a British book. The British Catalogue lists only New York as the place of publication, and each review lists New York as the city of publication. Yet there is no reason to doubt Bigelow’s assertion that the book was well received in Britain.

Bigelow recalled that “Mr. [Albany] Fonblanque, then editor of the Examiner,” wrote about it in several articles “which he employed with effect in defense of the English policy of emancipation, adopted only sixteen years before” (Retrospections, 1.95). Remarkably, The Examiner, the “chief organ of high-class intellectual radicalism” (Davies, 363-65), published its first discussion of Bigelow’s Jamaican trip, “Prospects of Jamaica,” on June 1, 1850. Having read the dispatches in the Post, Fonblanque praised Bigelow as an “acute and traveled American,” someone who “sees at a glance what the proprietors cannot see, that their real want of success is not owing to the dearness of wages or loss of protection, but to their indolence, want of enterprise, and unskilfulness” (339). The Examiner published as well excerpts from Bigelow’s letters. In Boston, Living Age reprinted Fonblanque’s essay on August 10, 1850, strategically placing it following the last of its own republication of Bigelow’s dispatches.
British progressives such as Fonblanque saw that Bigelow offered just what they needed—ammunition to respond to the racist voices heard with increasing frequency following Carlyle’s article in *Fraser’s*. In February 1851, for instance, in “The Dangers of the Country,” *Blackwood’s* blamed black inferiority for the collapse of the West Indies: “Jamaica, Demerara, and India, *might* have furnished cotton enough for all our wants. Why, then, do they not do so? . . . We have ruined the West Indies by emancipating the negroes, and then admitting foreign sugar all but on the same terms as our own, and therefore cotton cannot be raised to a profit in those rich islands—for *continuous* labor, of which the emancipated negroes are incapable, is indispensable to its production” (216).

Most likely the book was actually sold in London by Putnam’s energetic British agent John Chapman, who was both publisher and bookseller (Greenspan, 215). Chapman, who in October 1851 would purchase the *Westminster Review*, occupied a commodious establishment at 142 Strand, which served as his residence, his place of business, and also as a rooming house much favored by visiting Americans, including Emerson, Greeley, Bryant, and Putnam (Eliot, 48). Another border at this time was Marian Evans, “George Eliot,” with whom Chapman was both romantically and professionally involved. Chapman’s establishment, the scene of his famous soirees, had become “a focal point for uniting the scattered forces of liberalism” in Britain (Secord, 486).

A great champion of American writers, Chapman was the ideal person to promote and sell Bigelow’s book. He wrote in his diary on February 9, 1851, that he tried to interest the editor of the *Edinburgh Review* in employing “Miss Evans of whom I spoke as a man proposing she should write . . . on Mackay, Martineau & Atkinson’s book, on Slavery, or any subject . . . if within her province” (Eliot, 140). Nothing apparently came of the proposal, but the entry shows that the slavery question was much on his mind, and that of George Eliot, at just the time *Jamaica in 1850* would have come into his hands.

A laudatory review did appear the *Westminster Review* in April 1851. Explicitly responding to Carlyle and other racist voices, the author counters the myth that the blacks had regressed to barbarism: “The abolition of slavery seems to have had an excellent effect upon the negroes, who exhibit marked symptoms of improvement, while their former masters content themselves with idle lamentations on the ‘good old times.’ In the end, slavery eventually avenges the wrongs of the oppressed upon those who have profited by the atrocious crime.” Moreover, “we have been much interested in the account Mr. Bigelow gives of the eagerness which the negroes exhibit to become small landed proprietors, in
order that they may have votes for the Assembly” (Review of Jamaica in 1850). With biting irony the reviewer claims that even the few extracts provided would “serve to show that what the Jamaica landlords most require is, ‘protection’ from their own mismanagement and folly.” However, “the habits produced by protection and slavery upon the planters, are eminently unfavorable to the business-like management of their property” (Review, 135-36). Was the review by Marian Evans?

Fonblanque’s review in The Examiner, which appeared on April 5, 1851, was similarly acute and biting.

We recognize in Mr. Bigelow the author of some excellent letters from Jamaica which appeared last year in an American newspaper, and on which we had ourselves to bestow a very hearty approbation. [The present volume] contains the most searching analysis of the present state of Jamaica, and, moreover, the most sagacious prognostications of the future prospects of the island, that have ever been published. Mr. Bigelow is an accomplished, acute, and liberal American. As such, an eye-witness and a participator of the greatest and most successful colonial experiment the world has ever seen, he is, necessarily, a better and more impartial judge of the subject he treats of than any Englishman of equal capacity and acquirement. Mr. Bigelow makes short and easy work of planters, attorneys, book-keepers, sophistries, and Sunleys. In doing so, his language is invariably that of a man of education and a gentleman. He might have crushed them with a sledge-hammer, but he effects his purpose as effectually with a pass or two of a sharp and polished small-sword. (212-13)

The Examiner’s only point of disagreement was with Bigelow’s prediction that Jamaica would join the Union as a state. American racism, Fonblanque maintained, was too deeply ingrained to allow for a black-majority state. He predicted that Jamaica would come to look to America in matters both of trade and social development (212-13). Again the review in The Examiner did double duty; Living Age reprinted it on May 31, 1851 (426-29). The two reviews alone would be enough to bring the book to the attention of progressive British readers.

Although the Times of London did not review the book, there is a telling reference to it in Samuel Phillips’s extended discussion of Uncle Tom’s Cabin on September 1, 1852 (also republished in Living Age on October 16, 1852). After drawing from Bigelow to report that “the manumitted slaves of Jamaica, are, in the sight of the law, in the estimation of their fellows, and in the eye of God, equals with those whose actual ‘property’ they were the other day,” Phillips compared this “salutary state of things” with the “certain doom of the negro emancipated by his American master! The democratic horror of black blood knows no bounds. . . . What avail the pathetic appeals, the painful incidents, the passionate denunciations with which Uncle Tom’s Cabin abounds, in the teeth of such facts as these?” (Littel’s, 100).

Additional evidence of the book’s lasting impression in
Great Britain comes from an extended essay on "The West Indies" published in the *Edinburgh Review* in April 1859. The liberal quarterly conceded that "the world" had long since reached the conclusion that emancipation had failed, that "our sugar colonies are as good as swept off the face of the earth" (423). In framing his response Charles Buxton drew extensively from Bigelow, whom he described as "an American traveler of great intelligence and observation" (437). *Jamaica in 1850* remained essential for progressive Britons throughout the decade.

In America, *Jamaica in 1850* figured in the ongoing debate. Apologists warned that were slavery to be abolished the horrors of Jamaica would be visited upon the South—but on a far greater scale. Edmund Ruffin condemned Bigelow as a "Northern Abolitionist and negrophilist" who erred in ascribing the condition of Jamaica to the "residence of the few remaining whites." Instead, "All Bigelow's facts go to prove these evils to be the result of the incurable indolence and improvidence of the freed negroes" (35). But the Abolitionist leader Lydia Maria Child drew extensively from Bigelow for her *The Right Way the Safe Way, Proved by Emancipation in the British West Indies, and Elsewhere* (1862).

**Conclusion**

When Bigelow set out for Jamaica in January 1850 the view that British emancipation had failed because of the alleged inferiority of blacks was widely held on both sides of the Atlantic. Bigelow brilliantly turned the tables by demonstrating that freedpersons had become productive citizens. It is, essentially, their story that he tells, and from their perspective, Emancipation was a resounding success. *Jamaica in 1850* was recognized as the best book that had been written on the topic to that date, and it has found a place among the important books written about the island.

In 1936 Lord Sydney Haldane Olivier drew extensively from Bigelow for *Jamaica: The Blessed Island* and praised him as "an exceptionally well qualified American observer" (143).

In championing free soil, free men, and free labor Bigelow looked ahead to the campaign of Abraham Lincoln. By 1856 he had left the Democratic Party and produced a campaign biography of the Republican candidate John C. Frémont. In 1861 he sold his interest in the *Evening Post* and became the U.S. counsel-general and then ambassador in Paris, where he helped keep the French and other European powers from recognizing the Confederacy. While in France, Bigelow purchased the original holograph of Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* and published a notable edition of it in 1868. Like Franklin, Bigelow, who died on December 19, 1911, was a skilled and effective journalist, publisher, and diplomat. *Jamaica in 1850* is a brilliant expression of his commitment to freedom, democracy, and racial equality.
WORKS CITED

I first learned about Jamaica in 1850 from reading John Bigelow's dispatches to the Post, which Einkim Littell reproduced in Littell's Living Age, the Boston weekly now available on-line through the Making of America project. Although the Living Age specialized in reprinting articles from British periodicals, Littell understood the crucial importance of Bigelow's work for the ongoing transatlantic dialogue on slavery. In order for American readers to appreciate its importance for British readers, he reproduced in full the Examiner's ardent review of the volume, which had appeared on April 5, 1851. He included as well the work by Thomas Carlyle and John Stuart Mill cited below. All American periodicals cited are accessible on-line through the Making of America.


"The War against the South.” DeBour's Review 8 (June 1850): 271-77.


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Jamaica in 1850