

A. William Cullen Bryant Describes Slavery and the Slave Trade in Cuba (1849)

Source: Bryant, W. (1855). *Letters of a Traveller; Or, Notes of Things Seen in Europe and America*

<http://www.gutenberg.net/1/1/0/1/11013/11013-h/11013-h.htm>

[N]egroes born in the country are of a more yielding temper. They have better learned the art of avoiding punishment, and submit to it more patiently when inflicted, having understood from their birth that it is one of the conditions of their existence. The whip is always in sight. "Nothing can be done without it," said an Englishman to me, who had lived eleven years on the island, "you can not make the negroes work by the mild methods which are used by slaveholders in the United States; the blacks there are far more intelligent and more easily governed by moral means." Africans, the living witnesses of the present existence of the slave-trade, are seen everywhere; at every step you meet blacks whose cheeks are scarred with parallel slashes, with which they were marked in the African slave-market, and who can not even speak the mutilated Spanish current in the mouths of the Cuba negroes.

One day I stood upon the quay at Matanzas and saw the slaves unloading the large lighters which brought goods from the Spanish ships lying in the harbor--casks of wine, jars of oil, bags of nuts, barrels of flour. The men were naked to the hips; their only garment being a pair of trowsers. I admired their ample chests, their massive shoulders, the full and muscular proportions of their arms, and the ease with which they shifted the heavy articles from place to place, or carried them on their heads. "Some of these are Africans?" I said to a gentleman who resided on the island. "They are all Africans," he answered, "Africans to a man; the negro born in Cuba is of a lighter make."

When I was at Guines, I went out to look at a sugar estate in the neighborhood, where the mill was turned by water, which a long aqueduct, from one of the streams that traverse the plain, conveyed over arches of stone so broad and massive that I could not help thinking of the aqueducts of Rome. A gang of black women were standing in the secadero or drying-place, among the lumps of clayed sugar, beating them small with mallets; before them, walked to and fro the major-domo, with a cutlass by his side and a whip in his hand, I asked him how a planter could increase his stock of slaves. "There is no difficulty," he replied, "slaves are still brought to the island from Africa. The other day five hundred were landed on the sea-shore to the south of this; for you must know, Señor, that we are but three or four leagues from the coast."

"Was it done openly?" I inquired. "Publicamente, Señor, publicamente; they were landed on the sugar estate of El Pastor, and one hundred and seven more died on the passage from Africa." "Did the government know of it?" He shrugged his shoulders. "Of course the government knows it," said he; "every body else knows it."

The truth is, that the slave-trade is now fully revived; the government conniving at it, making a profit on the slaves imported from Africa, and screening from the pursuit of the English the pirates who bring them. There could scarcely be any arrangement of coast more favorable for smuggling slaves into a country, than the islands and long peninsulas, and many channels of the southern shore of Cuba. Here the mangrove thickets, sending down roots into the brine from their long branches that stretch over the water, form dense screens on each side of the passages from the main ocean to the inland, and render it easy for the slaver and his boats to lurk undiscovered by the English men-of-war.

During the comparative cessation of the slave-trade a few years since, the negroes, I have been told, were much better treated than before. They rose in value, and when they died, it was found not easy to supply their places; they were therefore made much of, and every thing was done which it was thought would tend to preserve their health, and maintain them in bodily vigor. If the slave-trade should make them cheap again, their lives of course will be of less consequence to their owners, and they will be subject again to be overtasked, as it has been said they were before. There is certainly great temptation to wear them out in the sugar mills, which are kept in motion day and night, during half the year, namely, through the dry season. "If this was not the healthiest employment in the world," said an overseer to me on one of the sugar estates, "it would kill us all who are engaged in it, both black and white" . . .

[T]he policy of the government favors emancipation. The laws of Cuba permit any slave to purchase his freedom on paying a price fixed by three persons, one appointed by his master and two by a magistrate. He may,

also, if he pleases, compel his master to sell him a certain portion of his time, which he may employ to earn the means of purchasing his entire freedom.

It is owing to this, I suppose, that the number of free blacks is so large in the island, and it is manifest that if the slave-trade could be checked, and these laws remain unaltered, the negroes would gradually emancipate themselves--all at least who would be worth keeping as servants. The population of Cuba is now about a million and a quarter, rather more than half of whom are colored persons, and one out of every four of the colored population is free. The mulattoes emancipate themselves as a matter of course, and some of them become rich by the occupations they follow. The prejudice of color is by no means so strong here as in the United States. Five or six years since the negroes were shouting and betting in the cockpits with the whites; but since the mulatto insurrection, as it is called, in 1843, the law forbids their presence at such amusements. I am told there is little difficulty in smuggling people of mixed blood, by the help of legal forms, into the white race, and if they are rich, into good society, provided their hair is not frizzled. . . .

[I]f Cuba were to be annexed to the United States, the slave trade with Africa would cease to be carried on as now, though its perfect suppression might be found difficult. Negroes would be imported in large numbers from the United States, and planters would emigrate with them. Institutions of education would be introduced, commerce and religion would both be made free, and the character of the islanders would be elevated by the responsibilities which a free government would throw upon them. The planters, however, would doubtless adopt regulations insuring the perpetuity of slavery; they would unquestionably, as soon as they were allowed to frame ordinances for the island, take away the facilities which the present laws give the slave for effecting his own emancipation.

B. William Cullen Bryant Describes the Execution of an Enslaved Cuban (1849)

Source: Bryant, W. (1855). *Letters of a Traveller; Or, Notes of Things Seen in Europe and America*.

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The other day when we were at Guines, we heard that a negro was to suffer death early the next morning by the garrote, an instrument by which the neck of the criminal is broken and life extinguished in an instant. I asked our landlady for what crime the man had been condemned. "He has killed his master," she replied, "an old man, in his bed." "Had he received any provocation?" "Not that I have heard; but another slave is to be put to death by the garrote in about a fortnight, whose offense had some palliation. His master was a man of harsh temper, and treated his slaves with extreme severity; the negro watched his opportunity, and shot him as he sat at table."

We went to the place of execution a little before eight o'clock, and found the preparations already made. A platform had been erected, on which stood a seat for the prisoner, and back of the seat a post was fixed, with a sort of iron collar for his neck. A screw, with a long transverse handle on the side of the post opposite to the collar, was so contrived that, when it was turned, it would push forward an iron bolt against the back of the neck and crush the spine at once.

Sentinels in uniform were walking to and fro, keeping the spectators at a distance from the platform. The heat of the sun was intense, for the sea-breeze had not yet sprung up, but the crowd had begun to assemble. As near to the platform as they could come, stood a group of young girls, two of whom were dressed in white and one was pretty, with no other shade for their dusky faces than their black veils, chatting and laughing and stealing occasional glances at the new-comers. In another quarter were six or eight monteros on horseback, in their invariable costume of Panama hats, shirts and pantaloons, with holsters to their saddles, and most of them with swords lashed to their sides.

About half-past eight a numerous crowd made its appearance coming from the town. Among them walked with a firm step, a large black man, dressed in a long white frock, white pantaloons, and a white cap with a long peak which fell backward on his shoulders. He was the murderer; his hands were tied together by the wrists; in one of them he held a crucifix; the rope by which they were fastened was knotted around his waist, and the end of it was held by another athletic negro, dressed in blue cotton with white facings, who walked behind him. On the left of the criminal walked an officer of justice; on his right an ecclesiastic [priest], slender and stooping, in a black gown and a black cap, the top of which was formed into a sort of coronet, exhorting the criminal, in a loud voice and with many gesticulations, to repent and trust in the mercy of God.

When they reached the platform, the negro was made to place himself on his knees before it, the priest continuing his exhortations, and now and then clapping him, in an encouraging manner, on the shoulder. I saw the man shake his head once or twice, and then kiss the crucifix. In the mean time a multitude, of all ages and both sexes, took possession of the places from which the spectacle could be best seen. A stone-fence, such as is common in our country, formed of loose stones taken from the surface of the ground, upheld a long row of spectators. A well-dressed couple, a gentleman in white pantaloons, and a lady elegantly attired, with a black lace veil and a parasol, bringing their two children and two colored servants, took their station by my side - the elder child found a place on the top of the fence, and the younger, about four years of age, was lifted in the arms of one of the servants, that it might have the full benefit of the spectacle.

The criminal was then raised from the ground, and going up the platform took the seat ready for him. The priest here renewed his exhortations, and, at length, turning to the audience, said, in a loud voice, "I believe in God Almighty and in Jesus Christ his only Son, and it grieves me to the heart to have offended them." These words, I suppose, were meant, as the confession of the criminal, to be repeated after the priest, but I heard no response from his lips. Again and again the priest repeated them, the third time with a louder voice than ever; the signal was then given to the executioner. The iron collar was adjusted to the neck of the victim, and fastened under the chin. The athletic negro in blue, standing behind the post, took the handle of the screw and turned it deliberately. After a few turns, the criminal gave a sudden shrug of the shoulders; another turn of the screw, and a shudder ran over his whole frame, his eyes rolled wildly, his hands, still tied with the rope, were convulsively jerked upward, and then dropped back to their place motionless forever. The priest advanced and turned the peak of the white cap over the face to hide it from the sight of the multitude.

I had never seen, and never intended to see an execution, but the strangeness of this manner of inflicting death, and the desire to witness the behavior of an assembly of the people of Cuba on such an occasion, had overcome my previous determination. The horror of the spectacle now caused me to regret that I made one of a crowd drawn to look at it by an idle curiosity.