

Links in history's chain



Flatts in the past: An image from the Bermuda Archives of Flatts Village in the last decade of slavery; the Flatts Bridge is on the left and what became the Frascati Hotel is on the right background.

By Dr Edward Harris

Under the patronage of the Hon Wayne Scott, JP, MP, Minister of Community and Cultural Development and Ms Cheryl Packwood, the National Museum this week launched a set of two books related to slavery in Bermuda, the latter an odious practice in these islands that ended in August 1834.

The author of the books, *Chained on the Rock: slavery in Bermuda* and *Edward Fraser: from slave to missionary*, was the late Cyril Outerbridge Packwood, formerly the chief librarian at the Bermuda Library and a trustee of the

Museum. Fittingly, the books, supported by donors who wished to remain anonymous, appeared on February 28, the last day of Black History Month 2013.

The evening of the launch was sponsored by the Department of Community and Cultural Affairs in the magnificent Queen's Exhibition Hall at the Museum, with its splendid new displays of five centuries of shipwreck heritage at Bermuda, which includes artifacts related to the African slave trade.

The new edition of *Chained* and the first publication of *Fraser* owe much to the dedicated volunteer work, over several years, of Mrs. CFE Hollis Hallett, renowned with her late husband, Dr AC Hollis Hallett, for their remarkable series of books on Bermuda history and genealogy produced over the last 30 years as a result of their diligent research and love for this island and its people.

The Bermudian scholar and professor at Millersville University, Dr Clarence Maxwell, has kindly given us a short review of the Packwood books, as follows.

"Bermuda has for its size a remarkable historical narrative tradition: as early as William Frith Williams' narrative on Bermuda history written during the mid-1800s. Yet by the 1970s, it was clear that an extensive examination on slavery was still largely missing. Two books emerged that specifically examined the lives of the enslaved in Bermuda. The first of these was 'Chained on the Rock' by Cyril O Packwood.

"Since then, and not too soon after, a number books and articles emerged discussing Bermudian slave life, and have constituted a veritable golden age for the subject. 'Chained on the Rock' still remains undiminished as a classic and a valuable historical source book. Its searching gaze reached into every aspect of the lives of enslaved people as he accessed a formidable phalanx of primary and secondary information.

"As it was the first systematic attempt toward the examination of slavery, it also dealt with the various debates related to the topic: the origins of slavery; the so-called 'chicken and egg debate' (that is whether racism produced slavery or slavery produced racism); and the important role of the skills of slaves in the development of a society.

"What made Mr Packwood's work important is that he applied the answers to those questions to Bermuda and made them relevant to its people. Important themes either introduced, or given greater attention, in Mr Packwood's book have since become topics of larger study. There has, for example, been a growing examination of enslaved Black Bermudian involvement in the 18th-century maritime commercial economy; and Mary Prince, mentioned in *Chained on the Rock* for her involvement in the nineteenth-century Anti-slavery effort, has become a popular topic in university courses.

"But Mr Packwood's research transcended slavery as he became focused on the lives of the descendants of slaves. Specifically, he used the popular genre of biography for this and one result was a monograph on the life of Joseph Rainey, the Afro-American barber who briefly resided in Bermuda during the US Civil War (1861-5). Yet his more significant study would remain unpublished until now: the biography of Methodist evangelist and teacher the Reverend Edward Fraser.

"Mr Packwood first encountered Rev Fraser in his research for 'Chained on the Rock', and the minister has a

brief appearance in the book superintending the construction of the Cobb's Hill Wesleyan Methodist Church (dedicated 17 November 1827). The biography however obliged Mr. Packwood to begin with Rev Fraser's life in Barbados, the island of the minister's birth, and to follow him around the Caribbean Basin, Bermuda and England. His book ended with Fraser's death at the Grateful Hill circuit in Jamaica at the age of 74.

"Such a study for Mr Packwood meant an understanding of the historical events shaping all of these places, with the result fitting perfectly into what is now classified as Atlantic World history writing. Mr Packwood's biography successfully revealed the life of the missionary and reflected the best of the genre's principles. It was hard not to appreciate, through Mr Packwood's skill, the life of a man whose dedication to the service of humankind is worthy of emulation today."

When the restored Commissioner's House was opened in May 2000 by the then Premier, now Dame Jennifer Smith, DBE, JP, DHUML, Bermuda's first permanent exhibit on the slave trade and slavery in these islands was also opened as a dedicatory history of Bermudians of recent African descent, in the two main reception rooms in the House.

In addition to the fundamental role of collecting and preserving material related to Bermuda's history and heritage, the Museum is also dedicated to make materials and subject matters accessible to the Public, naturally by way of exhibitions, but also through publications, such as the Cyril Packwood books, which are volumes five and six of the Museum's scholarly Monograph Series, started several years ago.

The Board of Trustees of the Museum considered it an honour to have been able to issue the two new books and also to be the custodian of Mr. Packwood's library and research files, which were donated to the Museum by Cheryl, the only child of Cyril and Dorothy.

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