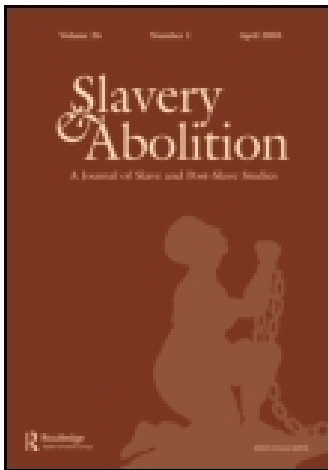


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SECTION III – THE USES AND MEANINGS OF MATERIAL CULTURE BETWEEN SLAVERY AND FREEDOM

Unsettled Houses: The Material Culture of the Missionary Project in Jamaica in the Era of Emancipation

Natalie Zacek and Laurence Brown

This article examines the role of material culture, particularly clothing, houses and furniture, in the lives of nonconformist Protestant missionaries in Jamaica during the first half of the nineteenth century, in relation both to the lifestyles of the missionaries and their families and their encounters with enslaved people. While these missionaries hoped to improve the lives of the slaves and help them negotiate their transition to freedom, their visions of the material lives to which the formerly enslaved should aspire shows them to have been in some ways as intent as the planter class in denying agency to people of colour and mandating that they conduct their lives in accordance with English ideas regarding class, labour, religion, gender and sexuality.

It is always a challenge to uncover the material lives of nonelite individuals and groups, as their homes, furnishings and clothes have, in nearly every instance, been fewer in number and lower in quality, as well as less likely than those of the privileged to be considered worthy of preservation by their heirs or by local or national museums and other institutions. This endeavour is particularly problematic in the Caribbean, as these islands have been subject, to a far greater extent than European or mainland

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American sites, to environmental degradation, natural disaster, population relocation and inadequate financial and technical support for the conservation of material cultural resources. However, in studying the material lives of slaves, free people of colour and white inhabitants of the British Caribbean in the decades surrounding the abolition of slavery in 1834, historians and scholars of material culture have an outstanding and largely untapped resource in the records, manuscript and printed, produced by nonconformist Protestant missionaries, such as the Moravians, Wesleyans, Methodists and Baptists, who visited or relocated to Jamaica in the first half of the nineteenth century. This period saw not only the end of slavery in Britain's pre-eminent sugar colony, but also the most extensive and sustained efforts on the part of missionaries anywhere in the British Caribbean to play a significant role in the reshaping of plantation society, particularly in terms of attempts to transform the lives of former slaves in not only religious but economic, social and cultural terms. With chapels and stations located across Jamaica (Figure 1), missionary writings provide a unique source for understanding material culture at the end of slavery, as missionaries focused intensively on dress, housing and consumption as key markers of the transition from the barbarism of slavery to the new moral order of emancipation.

The writings of these evangelists and their family members, whether in personal communications to relatives and friends in Britain, in official reports to denominational authorities, or in memoirs of their experiences, provide a remarkably vivid picture of the types of accommodation, clothing, vehicles and household items that were available to or desired by both the missionaries and their audiences. At least as importantly, these sources hint at the meanings which both missionaries and the slaves and ex-slaves to whom they ministered attached to these objects, as well as at the roles they played in pre- and post-emancipation endeavours of proselytisation. Initially, it might seem surprising that missionaries devoted so much discussion to the topic of material life, as we might assume that representatives of nonconformist creeds would neither have had nor wished for a standard of living beyond the barest necessities. While historians such as Dylan Penningroth have complicated our

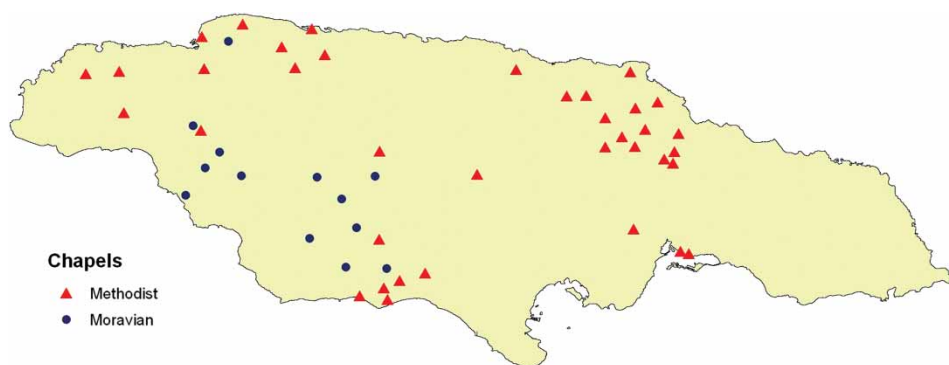


Figure 1 Methodist and Moravian missions in Jamaica, 1800–1850. Source: James Delle, 'Race, Missionaries, and the Struggle to Free Jamaica', in *Race and the Archaeology of Identity*, ed. Charles E. Orser (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2002), 184, 187.

understanding of the material lives of the enslaved, in Penningroth's case by deploying post-Civil War legal claims to show that many American slaves owned personal possessions which they were willing to go to law to reclaim, and while Sidney W. Mintz's classic studies have argued that Caribbean slaves on the eve of emancipation should be viewed as a 'proto-peasantry', the historiography of slavery and emancipation, for the most part, continues to conceive of the enslaved as entirely without possessions.¹ But, as will be explored below, English missionaries to Jamaica in the first half of the nineteenth century were profoundly concerned with the presence or absence, among themselves and the slaves (and later the freedpeople), of particular types of material objects. These goods were not important in terms of their utility or their financial value. They also underpinned the fundamental identities of men and women, English and Caribbean, white and black, free and enslaved.²

Nonconformist Christians were notably austere in the physical aspects of their evangelical efforts. Early modern European Catholics, particularly the Jesuit order, consciously deployed ceremonial garments and liturgical objects and, eventually, large and ornately appointed edifices, in order to sufficiently impress potential colonial converts that they might be receptive to Christianity. While the post-Restoration Church of England claimed to abjure what it considered papist excess, or 'smells and bells', the clergymen it dispatched to the Caribbean colonies tended to be of relatively elite background, and many of these men insisted that the only way to convince both planters and their bondpeople towards religious observance was through the display of imposing churches and dignified ceremonial.³ Moravians, Methodists, Wesleyans and Baptists, however, had neither the desire nor the resources to overawe potential converts with lavish buildings and complex rituals. Despite this commitment by both choice and financial necessity to plain living, missionaries and their families were constantly aware of the necessity of making a respectable figure, in the eyes of both wealthy planters and their slaves.

Nonconformist missionaries occupied an awkward and difficult position in nineteenth-century Caribbean society. Many Anglican ministers were easily assimilated into planter society, into which a number married, including Reverend James Ramsay, who after two decades of service as a clergyman in St. Kitts became a leader of the nascent abolitionist movement.⁴ George Blyth, a Presbyterian missionary in Jamaica, claimed that 'many of them [clergymen] had been planters, officers in the navy, etc., and preferred the church on account of the comfortable livings which it supplied'.⁵ In contrast, the nonconformist ministers tended to come from lower middle-class stock, often from burgeoning English industrial metropolises such as Birmingham and Manchester. As such, they were neither willing nor able to insinuate themselves into the social lives of the plantocracy, with whose notoriously ostentatious and freewheeling lifestyle their ascetic ways clashed. Even if these sociocultural barriers might occasionally prove permeable, marriage into a planter family was seen as extremely damaging to the missionary cause. Visiting Barbados in 1837, the Quaker abolitionists Joseph Sturge and Thomas Harvey were told of a Wesleyan minister whose marriage to a planter's daughter caused him to lose 'the confidence of the negroes, and with it his usefulness among them . . . the negroes said of him, "He eat with manager, and drink with manager, and manager tell him what to say to us"'.⁶

But if adoption of the lifestyle of the plantation elite was neither possible nor desirable for most missionaries, it was nonetheless crucial that the latter be seen to maintain a standard of living which would encourage both slaveholders and the enslaved to deem them worthy of respect.⁷ This was especially important in relation to particular elements of the self-presentation of the missionaries, their wives and their children, notably clothing, transportation and the presence of servants in their households. West Indian planters were well known for their elaborate, and sometimes ostentatious, clothing, whereas nonconformist ministers in England and overseas favoured simple dark suits which ‘cloaked’ their masculinity, and their wives wore modest dresses of light-coloured printed muslin or cotton, but this simplicity of dress did not imply that missionaries had no interest in fashion. As John Harvey has noted, in the early decades of the nineteenth century, Protestant men increasingly came to favour dark clothing, symbolic of the virtues of ‘self-effacement’ and ‘discipline’, while bourgeois fashion norms of the era ‘blanched women as they darkened men’. Due to the high price of imported textiles and ready-made garments in the Caribbean, missionaries and their families did their utmost to outfit themselves with ample supplies of stockings, neck- and handkerchiefs, collars, hats and shirts before sailing to the islands, as in a tropical climate these items in particular needed to be changed frequently in the interest of both hygiene and appearance.⁸ In an advice pamphlet for Methodists travelling on mission to the Caribbean, it was noted that

each Missionary should have six flannel waistcoats or more, and two silk umbrellas; one three feet long in the whalebone to carry in rain; and one eighteen inches, to carry in sunshine. Each ought to have a boat cloak, that is made of camblet and lined with green baize, to keep the person dry, as many are killed by being wet.⁹

Dress was, thus, a vital means by which one can preserve both social status and personal health in the hostile tropical environment.

While planter fashion excess was to be deplored and only minor concessions in dress were to be made to the difference in climate between Britain and the tropics, missionaries were constantly aware of the importance of avoiding any evidence of sartorial shabbiness or scruffiness, which would mark them out to planters and slaves alike as persons of no consequence and thus as objects of scorn. The Jamaican minister George Henderson, the son of a missionary, wrote of his family’s attempts, in the midst of genteel poverty, to keep up appearances:

[W]hen Sunday suits became shabby, with no funds to replace them, they were carefully unpicked by our loving Mother, and her boys gathered logwood chips and boiled the dye, mixing it with copperas to turn it black, and then fixed the colour with alum. The pieces were then skilfully pressed and put together by the Mother of our love; and on Sunday we entered the chapel as proud of our renovated garments as if they had just arrived from Bond Street.¹⁰

The challenges of respectable display were shown by the combination of new and old clothing made of silk, flannel and cotton in the inventory of Reverend Charles Wilcox, who died in Jamaica. Of the 72 different articles left behind by Wilcox, more than one-third were clothing-related, including 30 cravats, 4 silk and 18 cotton handkerchiefs, 5

pairs of cotton gloves and 1 of silk, 1 good suit and hat and 2 suits made of old black with 'one very old hat'.¹¹

If appearing decently dressed was the *sine qua non* for missionaries and their families, it was just as crucial that they avoided being seen to travel any significant distance by foot. To attempt to claim respectability and prestige as a 'walk-foot buccra' (white person) was to be ridiculed by black and white West Indians alike, and many mission stations in Jamaica maintained two-horse chaises, despite the complaints of the London authorities that this represented a needless expense, as missionaries in Britain were accustomed to walking whenever possible. But, as Mary Turner has observed, 'missionaries were more concerned to secure respect in Jamaica than to avoid criticism from home'.¹² Certainly, the challenging topography and large size of mission districts of Jamaica made possession of a horse essential for a missionary: Wesleyan John Jenkins stated in 1824 that Jamaican roads 'in many places, are so steep that I am forced to lay on his [the horse's] back to prevent falling, and in others not more for miles than from eight to twelve inches broad', while Eliza Ann Foster, wife of another Wesleyan missionary in Jamaica, wrote in 1842 that she and her husband had completed a 60-mile circuit between their home at Guy's Hill and the chapels at Oracabessa and Port Maria, 'over such roads as you never saw, "bad fa true" (as the people say)', but the necessity of riding as opposed to walking was social as much as it was physical.¹³

If West Indian missionaries, like lower-income people in a number of historical and contemporary contexts, attempted to augment their prestige through their display of clothing and transportation resources, it was equally necessary that they prove their respectability by employing a number of domestic servants, who were in some cases slaves hired from sympathetic planters. Admittedly, both ministers and their wives had numerous time-consuming responsibilities to their congregations – mission wives were expected not only to care for their own children, but also to teach school, receive guests and assist the sick, the elderly and the destitute in their communities – but, as with horses and carriages, servants were viewed as crucial for social as well as practical reasons. According to Walter Dendy, a Baptist minister in Jamaica in the 1840s, missionaries 'cannot dig the ground, their wives stand at the wash-tub, or, cook their provisions for their respective meals', as to do so would unacceptably collapse the social distance between them and their congregations.¹⁴ Although the London Wesleyan missionary committee insisted that no family needed to employ more than one domestic servant at a time, many missionaries chose to disregard this dictum, spending three times as much on servants' wages as did their London-based colleagues in order to hire cooks, housekeepers and gardeners; Eliza Ann Foster and her husband employed 'two female servants and a boy' to assist them at Guy's Hill.¹⁵

The public display of clothing, horses and servants was especially important to missionaries and their families because these factors helped to compensate for the problematic nature of their domestic circumstances. At a time at which the home and its accoutrements were becoming ever more central to and constitutive of British middle-class identity both at home and throughout the empire, missionaries' accommodations presented both material and social challenges to ideas of reputation and prestige.¹⁶ As with other elements of missionaries' material lives, their homes were

expected to reflect denominational values of thrift, sobriety and simplicity, frequently summed up by the epithet 'neat', emphasising a modest, graceful style, free from gaudiness.¹⁷ William Knibb, a leading Baptist missionary in Jamaica, cited the report of a Quaker visitor, John Candler, that

as to the dwelling houses of the missionaries in Jamaica, I know of no one in Jamaica, whether belonging to the Baptists or any other religious body, that is either more costly or commodious, or better furnished, than any individual with a family, who has been used to move in respectable life, is fairly entitled to.

Philip Henry Cornford, a fellow Baptist missionary who visited Knibb in 1841, described the latter's house at Falmouth as 'boast[ing] no decorations or superfluities', with polished but bare floors, walls which were whitewashed or simply painted, and chairs that were made of expensive mahogany but were 'of common appearance and without cushions'.¹⁸

Knibb divided his residence between this modest but comfortable town house in Falmouth and a two-storey stone house, built for him by freedmen and valued at £1000, in the Baptist free village that he had founded at Kettering, in Trelawny parish. His domestic arrangements may have granted him a degree of prestige and respect in the colonial context, yet seemed excessive to some metropolitan observers. But many missionaries and their families struggled to provide themselves with bare shelter, let alone any sense of comfort. When Eliza Ann Foster and her husband arrived in Jamaica in 1841, they found the house which was to be their mission residence at Guy's Hill 'in a sad state, the walls broken in, the rooms hung with cobwebs, and in a dirty, dilapidated condition . . . [with] not even a bed to lie on, or a cup to drink out of'.¹⁹ When Sturge and Harvey visited Mr Vine, a Baptist minister whom the London Missionary Society had sent to Jamaica in 1835, they described his two-room house near Stewart's Town as being in 'a ruinous condition. In many places the sky can be seen through the roof. The missionary, his wife, and children, are surrounded by inconveniences, which nothing but a dedication to their work could enable them to endure'.²⁰ To add insult to injury, the Vines were paying a high price for this nearly derelict house, as the local landowners were unwilling to sell or rent property to missionaries, whom they viewed at best as irritants and at worst as dangerous troublemakers intent on inciting insurrection among the enslaved. As one Jamaican planter informed a sympathetic English visitor in the 1820s, the Methodists in particular were 'cunning, intriguing, meddling, fanatical, hypocritical, canting knaves'.²¹

Even some missionaries who, like Knibb, were lucky enough to be provided with comfortable homes might lose them, either to environmental or human violence. After a hurricane in Barbados in October 1780, 'the first thing the [Moravian] missionaries had to do was to search among the ruins of their houses for clothing and articles of food, and to erect temporary shelter', and in October 1824, the Jamaican minister John Jenkins's small wooden house-cum-chapel at Grateful Hill was 'terribly shaken [and] I imagined its fall was inevitable'.²² Enraged local whites, whether mobs or militias, were just as perilous to the security of missionaries' homes and possessions, particularly in the years immediately surrounding emancipation. Although at least

some planters were more favourably disposed towards the Moravians, whom one slave-owner termed 'moral, industrious, pains-taking people', than towards other non-conformist denominations, the Jamaican plantation which Count Nicolaus Zinzen-dorf, the founder of the Moravian missionary efforts in the Americas, had purchased for ministerial use was attacked, 'the Mission furniture was broken to pieces, and the house was much injured'. In July 1820, the Jamaican Baptist clergyman Thomas Godden could rescue only a few items from his house before it was burnt to the ground by an unknown arsonist, and the records of the Baptists in Jamaica between the 1820s and 1840s are replete with incidents in which mission property, even tombstones and sacred objects, was destroyed; following the Christmas Rebellion of 1831, one missionary reported that no fewer than 14 Baptist chapels had been destroyed by enraged planters, along with the houses and property of numerous missionaries.²³ In Barbados, the Wesleyan chapel in Bridgetown was attacked by a mob, which 'pulled down' the house of a missionary named Shrewsbury, 'destroyed his furniture, and gave his valuable papers and library, in shreds, to the winds of heaven.'²⁴

Nonconformist missionaries in nineteenth-century Jamaica and throughout the Caribbean struggled to maintain their prestige and authority in colonial societies in which non-elite whites were few in number and low in status in comparison with the situation in the metropole. Their efforts were further undermined by the high cost of living in these islands, and by the fact that theirs and their wives' hard work was rewarded very scantily in financial terms. In the period under study, the annual salary for a Baptist missionary was in the range of £150 to £200, much of which was likely to be spent on medical care; a few weeks' illness might lead to £50 worth of doctors' bills, and the birth of twins to William Knibb's wife incurred charges of £30.²⁵ The situation of the Moravians was no better, while, according to J.H. Buchner, their missionary stations were better provided than those of the other denominations with 'all the necessities and some of the comforts of this life', and the missionaries in Jamaica were allotted a mere £28 per year for 'clothing and other personal wants', and their wives were granted nothing, despite their onerous responsibilities. While ministers were allowed to charge other 'necessary expenses' to the mission fund, they felt considerable pressure to keep these additional charges as low as possible, as their support came primarily from donations raised in the metropole. The missionaries were aware not only of the limited nature of these funds, but also of the donors' unwillingness to pay for anything which smacked to them of luxury or lack of thrift.²⁶ Under these circumstances, the maintenance of what they and local society considered to be a decent standard of living for white residents was a constant battle, yet it was one which missionaries believed was absolutely crucial to pursue. These efforts were still more necessary in the immediate aftermath of emancipation, because these ministers were firmly convinced that, in order for the formerly enslaved to prosper spiritually and financially in freedom, it was crucial that they follow the examples set by the missionaries in adopting a domestic lifestyle centred on the idea of the simple, thrifty and 'neat'.

Missionary narratives offer two vividly contrasting images of the material lives of the enslaved. The majority assert that the overwhelming majority of slaves existed in miserable circumstances, particularly in terms of clothing and accommodation.

According to James Mursell Phillippo, the leading Baptist missionary and anti-slavery advocate in emancipation-era Jamaica, slave cabins were 'thrown together without any pretence to order or arrangement; and, with a few exceptions, were wretched habitations'. While 'a few cottages might exhibit a somewhat nearer approach to the customs of civilised society', in the rest 'a few wooden bowls or calabashes, a water-jar, a wooden mortar for pounding Indian corn, and an iron pot . . . comprised almost all their furniture'. Many of the slaves, having few garments and little opportunity to wash themselves or their clothing, were 'exceedingly filthy in their person', and it was common for children to be 'entirely destitute of covering', even when employed as domestic servants in the Great House of a plantation. In Phillippo's view, this material poverty not only caused the slaves physical discomfort, but undermined their morality, as their homes, 'unameliorated by any firm domestic ties . . . were embittered by all the dark passions of the fallen heart', making it impossible for them to adopt their proper roles as husbands and wives, parents and children.²⁷

Other missionary accounts offered a different, but in their view an equally troubling image of slaves' material and domestic lives. George Jackson claimed that the slave congregants at his Wesleyan chapel in Jamaica were 'remarkably clean', and that their clothing, though made of coarse fabric, was comparable to that of English labourers, but asserted that 'this clothing, it must be remembered, is procured by themselves, and that chiefly working on the Sabbath'. Notable among the attendees were some female domestic slaves, who 'give even an appearance of splendour to a congregation by the gaiety of their attire'. But 'the latter are concubines of white men, and glitter at the expense of their virtue', for these women had been corrupted by the brutalities of slave society, and had lost 'all feelings of modesty and propriety', like the free mixed-race girls whom the pro-slavery apologist Cynric R. Williams observed in Kingston, 'coquetting with some of the white natives' in order to acquire money with which to purchase lavish finery for the Christmas season.²⁸ To missionary observers, the problems were obvious: slaves' morals were inevitably corrupted, either by being forced to live in comfortless squalor which prevented them from fulfilling their roles as spouses and parents, or by gaining a somewhat better standard of living through 'sabbath-breaking or prostitution', improving their material lives but jeopardising their spiritual welfare.²⁹

In the view of many missionaries, in order for freedmen and freedwomen to truly benefit from the end of servitude, it was necessary that they completely reorganise their domestic lives, aligning them with the examples set by mission families. As James Delle has observed, the missionaries' goal was to 'create a new Jamaican society, one in which the emancipated slaves would become God-fearing holders of private property engaged in the cash economy developing under nineteenth-century capitalism'.³⁰ To do so, though, presented a real conundrum: if ex-slaves were to adopt such a lifestyle, they would need to be motivated to work sufficiently hard to earn money by which to support their wives and children and purchase the accoutrements of the 'neat' home, but simultaneously it was essential that they not become materialistic and come to see a lavish lifestyle as the proper reward for their industry. Missionaries debated how this balancing act might be carried out. Phillippo worried

about what he considered to be the innate 'indolence of the negro', while arguing that, 'under the circumstances in which they were placed [under slavery], they had not a single stimulus to industry', and the Moravian John Henry Buchner expressed concern that, prior to emancipation, 'the slave had no occasion to exercise forethought', as 'his raiment, part of his food, and medical attendance', however poor they might have been in quality and quantity, 'all had been provided for him. Now suddenly he had to care for himself'. In contrast, George Blyth claimed that some ex-slaves had 'acquired habits and tastes for comforts, gaities [*sic*] in dress and luxuries, which they will put themselves to considerable trouble to gratify'. As a result, 'not a few are tainted with an avaricious spirit, strong enough to overcome indolent habits' – but in this instance, the cure appeared to be worse than the disease.³¹ The tropical environment of the islands, with its natural bounty, struck a number of missionaries as deleterious to the inculcation of habits of industry among the former slaves; in such a setting, how might the freedpeople's desire for 'artificial wants', described by Locke and by philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment as a necessary element of the progress of civilisation, be stimulated? Yet too ardent an interest in such 'wants' would be just as problematic, as it would cause laziness to be replaced by greed.³² Moreover, if ex-slaves believed that emancipation had rendered them, at least in theory, equal to their former masters and mistresses, it would be quite natural for the former to conceive of the ostentatious lifestyle eagerly displayed by the latter as one of the potential rewards of freedom, thus discouraging them from adopting the ascetic material culture exhibited and encouraged by the missionaries.

The obvious solution, to many Jamaican missionaries, was that they must lead by example, which in this instance required that they work to establish free villages in the countryside, away from the temptations of town life and the continued domination of the plantocracy, where former slaves could draw upon their experiences as agricultural labourers and learn to become their own masters. These villages were to be created *ex nihilo*, centred on the mission and under the aegis of the minister and his family, and were to replace the irretrievably corrupted and corrupting environment of the plantation. Perhaps, the most famous of these communities in the mid-nineteenth century was Sligoville, in the parish of St. Catherine, which was laid out in 1835 by James Phillippo and named for Howe Peter Browne, second Marquess of Sligo and governor of Jamaica, whom Phillippo greatly admired for his overseeing of the political process of emancipation. Sligoville's early inhabitants included a schoolmaster and a schoolmistress, two butchers, four carpenters, a shopkeeper, a tailor, a blacksmith, two gardeners, two sawyers and a farrier, who were to provide for the residents' material and intellectual needs. No liquor could be sold within the village, and Phillippo's aim was that the inhabitants would focus their energies on industrious labour, abstention from alcohol, careful financial management, mutual assistance and the avoidance of the 'folly of extravagance in dress'.³³ These aims matched the Baptist John Clarke's hopes that former slaves in Jamaica would 'reside on their own freeholds, purchased with the fruits of their industry, forming . . . peaceful and prosperous villages, the principal building of which is generally a chapel or school-house'.³⁴ In 1842, Eliza Ann Foster happily wrote to her childhood friend

Miss Alsop, in Hull, that ‘the black people are purchasing grounds, and erecting houses; and they who, a short time since, were poor, ill-used, and degraded slaves, are now respectable and respected members of society . . . now they are their own masters, they act as such.’³⁵

The visual representation of this new moral order was striking for its continuities with past representations of the plantation. In Phillippo’s memoir of Baptist missionary activity in Jamaica, it is the grounds surrounding the houses of freedpeople that is emphasised in his depiction of Sligoville, with the chapel located on high ground in the same position as the Great House or works were often depicted in plantation landscapes.³⁶ Clearly delineating the spaces adjacent to the houses of freedpeople marked the potential for individual respectability and economic productivity. However, other visions of the freed villages, such as that of Sligoville’s near neighbour Clarkson Town that was also published in Phillippo’s memoir, suggests a spatial order that is not very distant from the linear rows of slave huts that were attempted by some plantation owners and that were strongly resisted by the enslaved.³⁷ While James Delle has read these images as representing the extent to which missionary projects sought to support a new waged labour force for the plantations, Jean Besson’s analysis of the formation of free villages emphasises the extent to which the allocation of land was shaped by the environmental constraints.³⁸ Phillippo’s images of ordered individual small-holdings were ultimately more expressive of a missionary narrative of emancipation as symbolising material and moral progress, rather than of the negotiations both between humans and environments that formed the free villages.

Yet as gratifying as the external view of the free villages might be to missionary observers and their friends and supporters, what transpired within the villagers’ homes was at least as important for the true reconstruction of black society following emancipation. If black men had transformed themselves from slaves into independent cultivators and artisans and black women were no longer drudges or doxies, but they had failed to adopt what the missionaries considered to be the appropriate mode of domesticity, their liberation remained incomplete. While Phillippo proudly recorded that a visiting doctor from England had praised Sligoville’s ‘comfortable cottages’, and Blyth was delighted to report that Goodwill free village was made up of ‘neat and substantial’ habitations, it was the interiors of these residences that offered the true test of state of their inhabitants’ souls.³⁹ If a freedman could learn to conceive of his home as his castle, he would have become a true British subject, not just as a property-owner, but as a respectable Victorian paterfamilias, and his wife and their children, too, would move smoothly into their allotted roles.

In pursuit of this spiritual transformation, missionaries, notably through the medium of the *Baptist Herald*, a weekly newspaper that Knibb founded in 1839, provided meticulously detailed guidance regarding the proper furnishing and arrangement of the domestic interior. In relation to mealtimes, for example, a *Herald* columnist urged that each family acquire

a neat white-pine or cedar table, with a good few chairs . . . so that you and your family may be comfortably seated at meals; have a clean table-cloth, plates, knives

and forks on your table, and accustom your children to come to meals with their hands and faces clean.

The missionaries' aims here stretched beyond questions of health and hygiene. Their ambition was that the freedpeople would replicate the metropolitan ideal of appropriate behaviour and appearance of the 'respectable' working classes, with the well-scrubbed members of the household seated calmly around a clean and neatly ordered dining table, rather than mealtimes resembling those common under slavery, where families consumed 'the farrago of vegetable ingredients which composed their daily meal', seated on the floor in the one room 'which served the whole family for all domestic uses'.⁴⁰ Whereas slave families spent their nights 'huddled promiscuously round a fire', often sleeping on the ground, the *Herald's* columnists asserted that 'three bed-rooms are necessary' for each family, one for the parents and one each for male and female children, and each room should be provided with 'good mahogany bedsteads', rather than sleeping mats. Ideally, each house should have an area specifically for sitting, furnished with a table and sufficient 'decent-looking' chairs for all family members, as well as a sideboard, perhaps 'displaying sundry articles of crockery-ware' and 'a few broad-sheets of the Tract Society . . . in neat frames of cedar'. Even luxuries such as framed pictures were recommended, 'but do not purchase any that are foolish, or merely daubs'.⁴¹

As Catherine Hall has noted, the type of advice on domestic economy offered by Phillippo and other missionaries strongly echoed that which English middle-class reformers of the nineteenth century regularly presented to the working classes at home, which conceived that 'a poor man's home kept clean by his wife was still the best place in the world', much in the way that George Henderson and his brothers were proud to wear the old suits which their mother's skill and labour had rejuvenated. Yet at least some missionaries, such as William Knibb, were not displeased to see the more prosperous among the freedmen acquiring some relatively luxurious household objects, as long as these were practical items, not examples of ostentation or waste. When Knibb visited London in 1842 to present evidence regarding the state of Jamaica to the Select Committee on West India Colonies, he was confronted by the Hon. George Berkeley, a committee member notorious for his love of gaudy, modish clothing, with reports that some ex-slaves had furnished their homes with items of fine mahogany furniture. Knibb neither dismissed nor apologised for these stories and stated that 'he would be very sorry to see them [the freedmen] as badly off as the labourers here [in England]; half of them [the workers] were starving'. But beyond scoring a point off an opponent and commiserating with the sufferings of the English working classes, Knibb was convinced that the desire of at least some of the ex-slaves to acquire possessions beyond the basic standard of 'neatness' was not a negative but a positive: it demonstrated that these men would work hard and save their earnings in order to make such purchases, and thus showed that they were respectable and responsible heads of household, much as an aspirational English working man might hope to acquire at least one or two luxuries for his household, both for their usefulness and as symbols of his industry and ambition.⁴²

Similarly, it showed freedwomen as house-proud homemakers who were appropriately occupying the roles of wives and mothers which Knibb and his fellow missionaries argued had been entirely denied them during slavery.

If cleanliness and respectability in dress was crucial to the self-presentation of the missionaries, it was seen as equally important as evidence of the transformation of ex-slaves into people of virtue and industry, who had adopted appropriate gender roles after gaining their freedom. In their travels through the British Caribbean in 1837, Joseph Sturge and Thomas Harvey cited the opinion of a gentleman whom they had encountered at the Moravian mission in Antigua, to the effect that ‘the people have improved much in dress and general appearance, since emancipation’.⁴³ Phillippo concurred with this optimistic opinion, rejoicing that, in comparison with the lamentable situation of the slaves, ‘the decencies of society are no longer outraged by insufficient and filthy apparel’; the Jamaican freedpeople sported ‘the most becoming attire’ at Sunday services, and even their everyday clothes were kept clean, with every effort made to limit the damage to textiles posed by insects and the humid Jamaican climate. The minister was particularly pleased to report that, ‘contrary to the prevailing opinion in England, the taste of the females is no longer characterised by a love of gaudy colours’, which proved that ‘modesty, a sense of shame, together with a refined and delicate sensibility, are . . . becoming increasingly apparent’.⁴⁴

For Phillippo and his fellow missionaries, this laudable change in women’s dress went beyond issues of fashion and taste, as it seemed to them to be symbolic of the process by which black women were becoming more similar to their white counterparts – not plantation ladies, but respectable wives and mothers, along the approved lines of the English middle classes. Reverend William Brock, a leading Baptist minister in London, claimed that a major source of Britain’s political, economic and moral superiority to all other nations was that its women, or at least those who followed the norms of middle-class marriage and motherhood, were ‘helpmeets, not toys or drudges but companions’. Freedwomen who appeared in public dressed in immaculate, simple, but elegant clothing epitomised the replacement of the toxic regimen of slavery, in which most enslaved women were indeed ‘drudges’, and a few were ‘toys’ for white men, with an environment in which they could fulfil their destinies as wives and mothers, just as their male kin were to learn to take on the responsibilities of husbands and fathers.⁴⁵

Writing a decade after Emancipation, James Phillippo hailed the Jamaican freedpeople’s ‘progress in social taste and improvement’ by listing some of the names which they had given to their homes in the free village at Sligoville, which included such optimistic titles as Happy Home, Comfort Castle, Thankful Hill, Good Hope, Content My Own, Jane’s Delight and A Little of My Own. That in such a short period of time the men and women who had experienced perhaps the harshest regimen of enslavement anywhere in the British or American plantation colonies had not only gained their freedom, but also had been able to leave the plantations and establish themselves as independent householders in a peaceful and well-administered community is hugely impressive, and while it is essential to appreciate the agency of the ex-slaves in bringing

about this positive change in their circumstances, it is equally important to acknowledge the crucial role which nonconformist missionaries played in this situation.

The transformation of slaves into freedmen and freedwomen who were able to learn trades, acquire land and homes, and live in at least modest comfort as families, never to be separated by a master's whim, is an inspiring one. In helping to achieve this aim, the missionaries spent decades living thousands of miles from their homes, friends and kin, endured a physically challenging environment, risked their health and even their lives, incurred hostility and even violence from the white community, and worked tirelessly for very little financial reward. But it is possible to laud the efforts of these missionaries without overlooking the fact that, while their ascetic lifestyle presented a striking contrast with that of the typical West Indian planter, the former were in many ways just as determined as the latter to control the lives of Africans and Afro-Caribbeans.⁴⁶ Nonconformist missionaries were ardent and open in their conviction that all men were brothers, and that people of African descent were men and women who were not significantly different from white people, but at the same time, whether or not they were always aware of it, they were intellectually committed to a view of the world characterised by racial hierarchy. Many would likely have echoed the words of a visitor to Sligoville that the former slaves were 'eminently grateful, both to Christians, who worked for, and to the God who gave them freedom.'⁴⁷ That the freedpeople had no agency in their change of status, and that they were and should be grateful to Christians and their god for their liberation, passed without question.

Returning in conclusion to the issue of material culture, few traces remain of the objects and buildings discussed above. We cannot see or touch the lavish gowns of the mixed-race Kingston coquettes or the lovingly remade Sunday suits of the Henderson brothers, nor can we visit the Fosters' house at the Guy's Hill station or the freedperson's cottage called Jane's Delight. We can, however, observe the ways in which these examples of material culture contributed both to the missionaries' sense of 'displacement from their own society' and the ways in which Jamaica and other British Caribbean sugar colonies became 'sites for acting out white visions of how black people should live'. In the most significant study of missionary activity in the Caribbean in the decades immediately preceding and following Emancipation, Catherine Hall has written at length of the creation and deployment of what she terms 'the missionary fantasy'.⁴⁸ Material culture – clothing, dwellings and furnishings – played a central role in this fantasy, and analysis of it raises important and ongoing questions regarding the nature and meaning of this fantasy, and the agency of Afro-Caribbean slaves and freedpeople in both upholding and destabilising it.

Notes

- [1] See Dylan C. Penningroth, *The Claims of Kinfolk: African-American Property and Community in the Nineteenth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Sidney W. Mintz, 'The Question of Caribbean Peasantries', *Caribbean Studies* 1, no. 3 (1961): 31–4.
- [2] The foundational text on the role of objects in the construction of personal and communal identities is Arjun Appadurai, ed., *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

- [3] See Nicholas Beasley, *Christian Ritual and the Creation of British Slave Societies, 1650–1780* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010); Louis Nelson, ‘Building “Cross-Wise”: Reconstructing Jamaica’s Eighteenth-Century Anglican Churches’, *Jamaican Historical Review* 22, no. 1 (2003): 11–39.
- [4] Folarin Shyllon, *James Ramsay: The Unknown Abolitionist* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1977).
- [5] George Blyth, *Reminiscences of Missionary Life* (Edinburgh: William Oliphant, 1851), 46.
- [6] Joseph Sturge and Thomas Harvey, *The West Indies in 1837* (London: Dawsons of Pall Mall, 1968), 129.
- [7] James A. Delle, ‘Race, Missionaries, and the Struggle to Free Jamaica’, in *Race and the Archaeology of Identity*, ed. Charles E. Orser (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2001), 184.
- [8] Erin Skye Mackie, ‘Cultural Cross-Dressing: The Colorful Case of the Caribbean Creole’, in *The Clothes That Wear Us: Essays in Dressing and Transgressing in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Jessica Munns and Penny Richards (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1999); John Harvey, *Men in Black* (London: Reaktion Books, 1995), 156, 211; Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination, 1830–1867* (Cambridge: Polity, 2002), 92.
- [9] James Hamilton, *Advices Relative to the Preservation of Health: Given to the Missionaries of the Society of People Called Methodists, upon Their Embarking for Their Several Destinations, January, 1819* (London: T. Cordeux, 1819), 6.
- [10] George Henderson, *Goodness and Mercy: A Tale of a Hundred Years* (Kingston, Jamaica: The Gleaner, 1931), 96. The acquisition of clothing was even more challenging for the Jamaican Baptist preacher Moses Baker, a free man of colour, who reported in 1803 that he and his family had been ‘very bare of clothes’, and that only the gift of 20 yards of cloth from Mr Winn, a local planter, allowed them to be decently dressed. See John Clarke, *Memorials of Baptist Missionaries in Jamaica* (London: Yates and Alexander, 1869), 21.
- [11] Wilcox also left behind a library of 215 printed volumes, a dozen framed paintings, and several mahogany boxes and ‘country baskets’. See Dorothy Ryall, ‘The Organisation of Missionary Societies and the Recruitment of Missionaries in Britain, and the Role of Missionaries in the Diffusion of British Culture in Jamaica During the Period 1834–65’ (PhD diss., University of London, 1959), 460–1; *The Wesleyan-Methodist Magazine* 58 (1835), 711.
- [12] Mary Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries: The Disintegration of Jamaican Slave Society, 1787–1834* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 26, 27.
- [13] George Jackson, *A Memoir of the Rev. John Jenkins, Late a Wesleyan Missionary in the Island of Jamaica* (London: J. Mason, 1832), 141; Eliza Ann Foster and Henry Blaine Foster, *Memoirs of Mrs. Eliza Ann Foster, Wife of the Rev. H.B. Foster, Wesleyan Missionary, Jamaica, Compiled from Her Diary and Correspondence, by Her Husband*, new ed. (1844; London: John Mason, 1853), 205, 217.
- [14] Hall, *Civilising Subjects*, 234.
- [15] Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries*, 26; Foster and Foster, *Memoirs*, 192.
- [16] On the meaning of the home and its furnishings in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain, see Amanda Vickery, *Behind Closed Doors: At Home in Georgian England* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009); Deborah Cohen, *Household Gods: The British and Their Possessions* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006).
- [17] ‘Neatness’ is similar to the aesthetic of Quakerism, which valorised items that were of the ‘best sort, but plain’; see John Chenoweth, ‘Social Identity, Material Practices, and the Archaeology of Religion: Quaker Practices in Context’, *Journal of Social Archaeology* 9, no. 3 (2009), 322.
- [18] Quoted in Hall, *Civilising Subjects*, 158, 169.
- [19] Jean Besson, *Martha Brae’s Two Histories: European Expansion and Caribbean Culture – Building in Jamaica* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 116; Foster and Foster, *Memoirs*, 182.
- [20] Sturge and Harvey, *West Indies*, 214.
- [21] Cynric R. Williams, *A Tour Through the Island of Jamaica* (London: Hunt and Clarke, 1826), 37.

- [22] *Retrospect of the History of the Mission of the Brethren's Church in Barbados for the Past Hundred Years* (London: William Mallalieu, 1865); Jackson, *Memoir*, 140.
- [23] Clarke, *Memorials*, 6, 81, 106, 163; Williams, *Tour*, 37. Delle, 'Race, Missionaries, and the Struggle to Free Jamaica', 186. The magistrate Richard R. Madden estimated the damage to Baptist chapels in Jamaica in this period at £23,000. See Richard R. Madden, *A Twelvemonth's Residence in the West Indies* (Philadelphia, PA: Carey, Lea and Blanchard, 1835), 170.
- [24] Jackson, *Memoir*, 70.
- [25] Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries*, 70; John Howard Hinton, *Memoir of William Knibb, Missionary in Jamaica*, new ed. (1847; London: Houlston and Stoneman, 1849), 76.
- [26] J.H. Buchner, *The Moravians in Jamaica: History of the Mission of the United Brethren's Church to the Negroes in the Island of Jamaica, from the year 1754 to 1854* (London: Longman, Brown, 1854), 155–6.
- [27] James Mursell Phillippo, *Jamaica: Its Past and Present State* (London: John Snow, 1843), 216–9.
- [28] Jackson, *Memoir*, 97–8; Hall, *Civilising Subjects*, 158; Williams, *Tour*, 3.
- [29] Jackson, *Memoir*, 98; David Lambert, *White Creole Culture, Politics and Identity During the Age of Abolition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
- [30] Delle, 'Race, Missionaries, and the Struggle to Free Jamaica'.
- [31] Phillippo, *Jamaica*, 219; Buchner, *Moravians*, 130; Blyth, *Reminiscences*, 109.
- [32] Hall, *Civilising Subjects*, 246; Elizabeth Elbourne, *Blood Ground: Colonialism, Missions, and the Contest for Christianity in the Cape Colony and Britain, 1799–1853* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002), 242.
- [33] Hall, *Civilising Subjects*, 116.
- [34] Clarke, *Memorials*, 233.
- [35] Foster and Foster, *Memoirs*, 211.
- [36] Phillippo, *Jamaica*, plate between 222 and 223; Geoff Quilley, 'Pastoral Plantations: The British Slave Trade and the Representation of Colonial Landscape in the Late Eighteenth Century', in *An Economy of Colour: Visual Culture and the Atlantic World, 1660–1830*, ed. Quilley and Kay Dian Kriz (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 106–28.
- [37] Phillippo, *Jamaica*, plate between 228 and 229; B.W. Higman, *Jamaica Surveyed: Plantation Maps and Plans of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2001), 250.
- [38] Delle, 'Race, Missionaries, and the Struggle to Free Jamaica', 187–94; Besson, *Martha Brae's Two Histories*.
- [39] Phillippo, *Jamaica*, 222; Blyth, *Reminiscences*, 116.
- [40] Hall, *Civilising Subjects*, 133; Phillippo, *Jamaica*, 216–7.
- [41] Hall, *Civilising Subjects*, 134; Phillippo, *Jamaica*, 216, 221.
- [42] Hall, *Civilising Subjects*, 134–5.
- [43] Sturge and Harvey, *West Indies*, 30.
- [44] Phillippo, *Jamaica*, 230–1. In the first half of the nineteenth century, British opinion conceived that the wearing of brightly coloured clothing indicated that a woman was lacking in taste, refinement and even sexual morality, but after the 1850s technological advances in the quality of garment dyes made bright fabrics both more desirable among the ranks of the respectable (Harvey, *Men in Black*, 202).
- [45] Hall, *Civilising Subjects*, 332, 336.
- [46] Patrick Bryan, 'Aiding Imperialism: White Baptists in Nineteenth-Century Jamaica', *Small Axe* 14 (2003), 140. For an example of the social control of slaves by missionaries in another Caribbean context, see Stephan Lenik, 'Mission, Plantations, Space, and Social Control: Jesuits as Planters in French Caribbean Colonies and Frontiers', *Journal of Social Archaeology* 12, no. 1 (2012): 51–71.
- [47] Hall, *Civilising Subjects*, 105; Phillippo, *Jamaica*, 222.
- [48] Hall, *Civilising Subjects*, 136.