

S P E E C H  
OF  
REV. HENRY BLEBY,  
MISSIONARY FROM BARBADOES,  
ON THE  
RESULTS OF EMANCIPATION  
IN THE  
BRITISH W. I. COLONIES,

Delivered at the Celebration of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, held at Island Grove, Abington, July 31st, 1858.

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PHONOGRAPHIC REPORT BY J. M. W. YERRINTON.

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BOSTON:  
R. F. WALLCUT, 21 CORNHILL.  
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## S P E E C H .

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I am happy, Mr. President, that you have placed me before this assembly, not as one from whom a speech may be expected, but in the capacity of a witness ; and therefore I can tell a plain, straight-forward tale, without being at all cast down by the consciousness that I cannot make any pretension to those gifts of oratory, which I have observed our friends have been accustomed to meet with in connection with those who have taken a leading part on such occasions as this.

I am, perhaps, Mr. Chairman, the only person present who was an eye-witness of that event which you have met together this day to celebrate. You will see that I am not a very old man, sir ; the snows of age have not entirely covered my head ; but I am old enough to have been present during that insurrection to which you have referred, and which was one of the principal events which hastened on the crisis of the movement for West India Emancipation, and constrained the British government to 'let the oppressed go free.' It had been customary with the pro-slavery press of Great Britain,—and a very large portion of that press was, up to a late hour, under the influence of the West India body, and of those interested in

the maintenance of slavery,—it had been customary for that press, as it is now of the pro-slavery press of this country, to endeavor to mislead the masses by asserting that the slaves were better off than they would be in freedom, that they were perfectly content with their lot, that they hugged their chains, and that it was, in brief, a condition very little short of the happiness of Paradise. You may imagine, then, what sort of feeling would be excited in Great Britain, among its churches and the people generally, when the startling intelligence reached them, in the beginning of 1832, that fifty thousand slaves in the island of Jamaica had made an effort for liberty, had resolved to strike a blow for freedom, and had stood up in opposition to their masters, and to the law which held them in bondage, and claimed their freedom. Sir, the illusion was at once dispelled, and it was seen and felt, throughout the length and breadth of Great Britain, that the public mind had been imposed upon, and that there existed in the West Indies, amongst the slaves, an intense desire, nay, more than that, a *determination* to be free. Sir, I happened to be stationed in the island of Jamaica, and in that part of it which was the scene of this insurrection. I knew the person with whom the insurrection originated very well; I marked its progress; I was an eye-witness to the cruelties and slaughter by which it was suppressed; and I saw it brought to a termination. The man with whom the insurrection originated,—Samuel Sharp,—was a slave, and a member of the Baptist church in Montego Bay. Although it may seem strange to many, Sam Sharp was a very handsome negro, a perfect model man; and, more than that, he

had learned to read. He was born in slavery, but he had never felt any thing of the bitterness of slavery. He was born in a family that treated him indulgently; he was a pet, and was brought up as the playmate of the juvenile members of the family, and had opportunities of learning to read and for mental cultivation, to which very few of his fellow-slaves had access; and Sharp, above all this, was possessed of a mind worthy of any man, and of oratorical powers of no common order. I have been astonished, when I have heard that man address a large assembly, as I did several times while he was in jail, to see the power with which he swayed the feelings, the hearts, and the minds of his auditory. He was a man of no common stamp, though a black man, and born in slavery.

Well, sir, Sharp determined to free himself and his fellow-slaves. I do not know whether he was himself deceived, or whether he knowingly deceived his fellow-conspirators, but he persuaded a large number of them to believe that the British government had made them free, and that their owners were keeping them in slavery in opposition to the wishes of the authorities in England. It so happened, sir, that, just at that time, the planters themselves were pursuing a course which favored Sharp's proceedings directly. They were holding meetings through the length and breadth of the island, protesting against the interference of the home government with their property, passing very inflammatory resolutions, and threatening that they would transfer their allegiance to the United States, in order that they might perpetuate their interest in their slaves.

Sharp dexterously took advantage of these meetings, and pointed out to the slaves, that if it were not true that the British government were willing to make them free, there would be no necessity for such meetings and such publications as these. The consequence was, that about fifty thousand of these people, at the Christmas holidays, were in insurrection, and claimed their rights as British subjects, and as free men, refusing to go to work on any terms, except on the payment of their proper wages as free workmen. The insurrection was soon put down, as you may imagine. Sharp really believed that the British soldiers would not act in opposition to the slaves, in claiming their freedom; he soon found his mistake, however. A large body of military was ordered to that part of the island. The commander-in-chief was a man who felt as a man ought to feel under such circumstances, and sought to do every thing he could to put an end to the insurrection by lenient measures, and issued a proclamation, promising that all who would return to their duty within a limited period should be pardoned,—that no notice should be taken of what they had done, unless they had been guilty of incendiarism, or had committed personal violence upon the opposite party. Parties were sent out with the proclamation, and many of the slaves, finding that their attempt to recover their freedom in this way would be vain, came in, and resumed their labors upon the estates. The insurrection would soon have been put down, and very little loss of life would have ensued, had not the militia of the island, consisting of the planters, who had manifested the greatest cowardice when the insurrection broke out, now recov-

ered their bravery, and subjected those who had taken part in it to every indignity and outrage. I have seen men and women who came in under the proclamation, and the promise it contained from the commander-in-chief, taken out of the field, with their hoes in their hands, tied, and shot dead. I used to see the gallows filled with insurgents from morning to night. I remember, on one occasion, my attention was directed to an execution which was about to take place—that of one of the principal leaders in the insurrection. A court-martial was sitting in Montego Bay, and about twenty or thirty yards off, a gallows had been erected, on which five or six persons could be executed at once. Five men were hanging on it, and five more were beneath it, and it was rumored that Capt. Dehany, a man who had taken a leading part in the insurrection, was to be executed in the next lot. The executioner, who was a brutal black man, and one who had escaped the gallows on condition that he should perform these horrible duties, was leaning against one of the posts of the gallows, eating his breakfast,—a piece of salt fish in one hand, and a piece of plantain in the other. He was told his victims were ready. (They only allowed the doomed ones half an hour after their conviction to prepare for death.) Bacchus,—that was the name of the executioner,—put down his food upon a projection of the gallows, walked up the ladder, and with the knife with which he had been eating his breakfast, severed the cords on which the victims on the gallows were hanging, and down they fell, one after another, upon the heap of dead below. Then he brought out Dehany and his fellows. I knew him at once,

though I had never seen him before, by the demeanor of the man,—a fine, broad-chested, model man,—a yellow-skinned negro, as they called him there; but there rested upon his countenance an angry frown. The man walked out to meet his doom as if he were walking at the head of a triumphal procession. A gentleman stepped up to him and said, ‘Dehany, what is troubling you at a time like this?’ ‘Mr. Manderson,’ said he, ‘they want me to go before God with a lie in my mouth. They want me to say that the missionaries put us up to it. They know it is a lie.’ ‘Well, never mind,’ said the gentleman; ‘don’t let that trouble you now.’ The frown soon passed off his face, and they were marched up the platform and tied up; signal was given, and the rope was cut. I looked, and only four of them hung upon the gallows, and Dehany was not among them. The rope had broken, and he had fallen to the ground. They picked him up, half-strangled, and in a state of unconsciousness for a moment or two. I went up, in the midst of the crowd, to witness his demeanor. Still, sir, with all these horrors about him, the man was undaunted. I could hear the whisper of prayer upon his lips; there was nothing about him of bravado, but every thing that indicated the manly courage of one who is conscious he is dying in an honorable cause. (Applause.)

So it was with Samuel Sharp. After the insurrection was put down, Sharp was taken, and he was the last man put to death in consequence of that insurrection. About two thousand were slain; many of them, of course, in encounters with the military, but most of them were either shot or hanged in cold blood.

I have myself seen not less than nineteen of these poor creatures led out in one batch, to be hanged up like dogs. I have known sixty to be led out from the same jail, in the course of three days, and put to death. On one occasion, I saw a poor fellow brought into town, his hands tied behind him; a court martial was immediately summoned, and with scarcely a show of evidence that the man had done any thing in connection with the insurrection,—indeed, there was nothing found, except that he was in the midst of a crowd looking on whilst a building was burning which had been set on fire by the insurrectionists,—he was convicted, and led out to be shot. They were in such a hurry, that they did not even take the trouble to pass sentence upon him; and when within an hour and a half from the time he was brought into the town, he stood under the gallows, I heard him inquire, ‘What are you going to do with me?’ They had not even had the humanity to tell him he was going to die. The officer stepped up to him, took up his jacket, which had been torn off when he was brought to the spot, threw it over his face, and said, ‘You will find out in a moment.’ He stepped back, the word was given, and the man lay there, a bullet through his brain, and another through his heart. I heard one man say to the crowd of slaves standing round,—pointing to the hole in the slave’s head,—‘You want your freedom, do you? Put your finger there! That is the kind of freedom we will give you, you black devils!’ This I heard with my own ears.

I saw hundreds thus slaughtered in cold blood. Sharp was the last brought out to be put to death; and his end was worthy of his character.

I had frequent opportunities to converse with him while he was in jail. When I saw so many put to death, I wrote a communication for one of the island newspapers, with the intention of directing the Governor's attention to the wholesale slaughter that was going on. It had the effect I intended. The Governor read it, and the next post brought down an order to the authorities, civil and military, that no further executions should take place for crimes committed during the insurrection, without his own warrant. Thus it happened that Samuel Sharp was detained in prison several weeks after he had been tried, and sentence of death pronounced upon him, and I had frequent opportunities of conversing with him. He was a man who had read the New Testament, and read the newspapers, and was in all respects a superior man. I asked him what it was that induced him to take part in this movement, since he had never suffered, as many had, under the lash. 'Sir,' said he, 'in reading my Bible, I found the white man had no more right to make a slave of me than I had to make a slave of the white man—(applause); and I would rather go out, and die on that gallows, than live a slave.' (Loud applause.) The young ladies of the family to which he belonged made him a very handsome suit of white clothes, and I saw him march to his death. I heard the remarks which he made when he stood on the platform under the gallows; and, sir, I could not but drop a tear to see a man like that put to death, whose only crime was, that he made an effort to recover that liberty which is the right of every human being, and of which he, in common with his brethren, had been wrongfully and wickedly deprived.

The insurrection was put down, and the intention which Sharp entertained in connection with it was frustrated. His design was not to do violence to any person or property, but simply to act upon the principle of passive resistance. He argued in this way :—‘They will put to death some of us, if we sit down and refuse to work after Christmas, and we must be content to die for the benefit of the rest. I, for one, am ready to die, in order that the rest may be free. (Applause.) They may put some of us to death, but they cannot hang and shoot us all, and if we are faithful one to another, we must obtain our freedom.’ (Renewed applause.)

Samuel Sharp’s plan was defeated, in this way :—He had not calculated sufficiently upon the impulsive character of the men he undertook to lead in this movement,—upon their not being accustomed to exercise self-restraint; consequently, when some of them broke into the store-houses of the estates, and became intoxicated, and then set fire to the buildings, that was regarded as a signal all over the country, and the works and mills were destroyed on two hundred or three hundred estates. Sharp said, ‘When this occurred, I saw the scheme was defeated. I knew that the whites would slaughter us without mercy, and our freedom be a long while put off.’

But, sir, although the immediate design of Sharp was not accomplished, yet it was ultimately. This very insurrection was one of the events which hastened the abolition of slavery in the West Indies. I dare say my friend Mr. Garrison is sufficiently acquainted with the history of those times to remember that in the Committee appointed by the House of

Lords to investigate the whole question of slavery, and also that in the Committee appointed by the House of Commons, the decision on the question of the immediate abolition of slavery turned upon this point,—‘ Will it be safe to the planters that slavery be continued ? ’ Two of my brother missionaries, who went home for the express purpose of appearing before these Committees, gave it as their opinion that it would not be safe ; that these insurrectionary attempts would be repeated, and that the probability was, that if the British government did not bring slavery in the colonies to a peaceful termination, it would soon be quenched in blood, and the slaves would emancipate themselves. That conviction was forced upon the Committees of both Houses of Parliament ; they reported accordingly, and the doom of slavery was sealed.

Sir, it was my privilege to be in Jamaica when slavery came to an end, and I rejoiced the more to be a witness of its extinction, because I had suffered in common with my brethren, in connection with it. We were sent out as the instructors of the slaves and free colored people. We built churches, assisted by the liberality of the British people, all over the island, wherever we could, and we were sustained by funds contributed by British benevolence, as instructors of the negroes. Well, sir, we were denounced by the planters, from the beginning of our efforts, as spies of the Anti-Slavery Society. They had sagacity enough to discover, at a very early period of our labors, that slavery and Christianity could not long co-exist ; that they were essentially antagonistic, and that the one must ultimately destroy the other. De-