The Many-Headed Hydra

Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic

Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker

[automatically produced zine-format release in ten volumes]

VOLUME 9
Robert Wedderburn was born in Jamaica in 1762, just after Tacky’s Revolt, to an enslaved woman named Rosanna and a slavemaster named James Wedderburn, a doctor whose estates in Westmoreland (Mint, Paradise, Retreat, Endeavor, Inverness, Spring Garden, Moreland, and Mount Edgcombe) were worth precisely £302,628 14s. 8d. at his death.1 His father “insulted, abused and abandoned” his mother, as Wedderburn wrote in his autobiography. “I have seen my poor mother stretched on the ground, tied hands and feet, and flogged in the most indecent manner though pregnant at the same time!!! her fault being the not acquainting her mistress that her master had given her leave to go to see her mother in town!”2 When his father sold his mother in 1766, Robert was sent to Kingston to live under the care of his maternal grandmother, who worked on the waterfront selling cheese, checks, chintz, milk, and gingerbread and smuggling goods for her owner. Wedderburn would later recall, “No woman was perhaps better known in Kingston than my grandmother, by the name of ‘Talkee Amy.’” When Wedderburn was eleven, he watched in horror as the seventy-year-old woman was flogged almost to death. Her master had died after he and one of his ships, smuggling mahogany, had been captured by the Spanish in 1773. Before the voyage, he had liberated five of his slaves, but not Talkee Amy; his nephew (and heir), convinced that she had bewitched the vessel, punished her savagely in revenge.

What Wedderburn witnessed was discipline typical of the era. The factory overlooker carried a stick. The plantation overseer brandished a whip. Schoolmasters and parents wielded the birch against children. The master and boatswain used the cat or the rattan cane on sailors; indeed, to be whipped around the fleet was a pageant of cruelty. Soldiers were
flogged by officers, drummers, and sometimes even other soldiers. The triangle (a tripod composed of three halberds upon which the person to be flogged was bound) was notorious as a means of imperialist repression in Ireland. Disciplinary violence was carefully studied: a surgeon in the British army, whose duty it was to keep torture victims alive, published seventy pages on the subject in 1794. In Haiti, meanwhile, a manual on the theory and practice of female flagellation appeared in 1804. Cutting, bruising, penetrating, tying, squeezing, holding, and lacerating were all techniques applied by the powerful in the formation of labor power. When William Cobbett complained about the five hundred lashes administered to soldiers protesting for bread (“Five hundred lashes each! Aye, that is right! Flog them, flog them; flog them!” Cobbett cried), he was imprisoned in Newgate.

The terror visited upon his mother and upon Talkee Amy would stay with Wedderburn for the rest of his life. At the age of seventeen (in 1778), Wedderburn joined the Royal Navy during the American Revolution. He took part in the Gordon Riots of 1780, led by the African Americans Benjamin Bowsey and John Glover. Years later, in 1797, he would be connected to the naval mutiny at the Nore. Between these two events, Wedderburn, along with thousands of other workers, joined the Methodist Church. In the early years of the nineteenth century he would meet Thomas Spence and, with other veterans of the London Corresponding Society, enlarge Spence’s circle of revolutionists. He also knew the struggles of poor craftsmen: though he had acquired the skills of the tailor, these were dishonored by the prohibition against trade-union activity in the Combination Act (1799), and would be sweated by the repeal of the apprenticeship clauses in the Elizabethan Statue of Artificers (1814). He did time in Cold Bath Fields, Dorchester, and Giltspur Street Prisons for theft, blasphemy, and keeping a bawdy house. He saw many of his comrades hanged, and he himself lived much of his life as “though a halter be about my neck.” Wedderburn thus knew the plantation, the ship, the streets, the chapel, the political club, the workshop, and the prison as settings of proletarian self-activity.

Wedderburn has been a neglected figure in historical studies, or at best a misfit. He has not seemed a proper subject for either labor history or black history. In the former field he appears, if at all, as a criminal and
pornographic character, and in the latter, as a tricky and foolish one. In contrast to such views, we argue that Wedderburn was in fact a strategically central actor in the formation and dissemination of revolutionary traditions, an intellectual organic to the Atlantic proletariat. We shall explore his major notion for freedom, the biblical jubilee, in the context of
a remarkable correspondence he carried on with his half-sister Elizabeth Campbell, a Jamaican maroon. We shall also consider his understanding of history and his analysis of the people and forces that would, in his view, make a transatlantic revolution. We shall see how Wedderburn overcame the dualities of religion and secularism by synthesizing radical Christianity and Paineite republicanism, combining both with a proletarian abolitionism. Wedderburn continued the liberation theology that had originated in the English Revolution, then spread west to the plantation and African America, and finally returned to London in the 1780s and 1790s.

**Jubilee**

One of Wedderburn’s main ideas lay in the biblical tradition of jubilee, which represented an attempt to solve the problems of poverty, slavery, the factory, and the plantation. A plan for liberation, jubilee appeared both in the Old Testament, as a legal practice of land redistribution, and in the New Testament, as part of the fulfillment of a prophecy in Isaiah. The concept comprised six elements. First, jubilee happened every fifty years. Second, it restored land to its original owners. Third, it canceled debt. Fourth, it freed slaves and bond servants. Fifth, it was a year of fallow. Sixth, it was a year of no work.

In writing about jubilee in his correspondence with Elizabeth Campbell, Wedderburn joined a wide-ranging debate. George III was to organize a royalist jubilee for himself, marking the fiftieth anniversary of his reign, that would have nothing to do with debt forgiveness, manumission, or land redistribution. Samuel Taylor Coleridge advocated a deceptive jubilee that transformed active liberation into “figurative language”—rhetoric, allegory, and pedantic and cynical criticism that took the revolutionary tooth out of the scriptural bite. In 1794, as a youthful radical, Coleridge had written in “Religious Musings,”

\[\ldots the vast family of Love \\
Raised from the common earth by common toil \\
Enjoy the equal produce. Such delights \\
As float to earth, permitted visitants!\]
When in some hour of solemn jubilee
The massy gates of Paradise are thrown
Wide open . . .

which vision, while hopeful, lacked the specificity of the Mosaic agrarian law. Wedderburn asserted a proletarian version of jubilee that had its modern origins in the written and practical work of Thomas Spence on the one hand, and in the anonymous oral tradition of African American slaves on the other. As James Cone has written, “It matters little to the oppressed who authored scripture; what is important is whether it can serve as a weapon against oppressors.”

Wedderburn, the Methodists, and the Baptists brought these two traditions together, challenging the aristocratic and literary jubilees. Since Wedderburn’s jubilee was a mainstay in the intellectual history of the Atlantic proletariat, leading in one direction to the general strike and Chartist land policy of the 1830s and in another direction to the abolition of slavery in America, we would do well to explore it closely.

The Leviticus was written at the end of the sixth century, after the Babylonian captivity, when rabbis collected, copied, and edited laws, songs, poems, cultic practices, traditions, and oral memories to create the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament. The twenty-fifth chapter of Leviticus preserved the memory of an earlier, more egalitarian time, when people lived by agriculture (producing grain, oil, and wine) and a pastoral economy (tending bovine herds, sheep, and goats) amid a process of accelerating class differentiation. Jubilee was important to the visionary politics of the prophets, especially Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, who sought to turn people away from idolatry and greed and looked to the past for a more virtuous life. Thus Isaiah denounced landlords:

Shame on you! you who add house to house
and joining field to field until not an acre remains,
and you are left to dwell alone in the land. (5:8)

The meaning of jubilee lay in the experiences and struggles of the oppressed, as explained in Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me
to bring good tidings to the afflicted;
he has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and the opening of the prison to those who are bound;
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor
and a day of the vengeance of our God
to comfort all who mourn. (61:1–2)

Isaiah thus enlarged jubilee’s meaning from the ameliorist management of Leviticus to a day of vengeance on behalf of the afflicted, the bound, the brokenhearted, the captive, and the grieving. Isaiah gave voice to a class that no longer begged for reforms but rather demanded justice. When he returned to Nazareth and began preaching, Jesus opened the scroll in the synagogue to this passage in Isaiah. Then Jesus said, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Jubilee was therefore not a question of interpretation but a matter of action. From law (Leviticus) to poetics (Isaiah) to fulfillment (Luke), the liberation of jubilee was retained, calling for restitution of land, manumission of the bonded, remission of debt, and cessation of work.

In the modern era, jubilee was employed by the English revolutionaries of the 1640s, including James Nayler and the early Quakers and Gerard Winstanley and the Diggers, as a means of resisting both expropriation and slavery. It remained a living idea after the revolution, to be carried forward by John Milton, John Bunyan, and James Harrington (Oceana). Revived in the late eighteenth century, it appeared occasionally in the era of the American Revolution (one Janet Schaw, in the West Indies in 1775 to observe Christmas festivities, reported that slaves called the holiday “an universal Jubilee”) and took on broad transatlantic power in the 1780s.13 In 1769, Trinculo’s Trip to the Jubilee was presented on the London stage. In 1782 Thomas Spence wrote “The Jubilee Hymn; Or, A Song to be sung at the Commencement of the Millennium, If Not Sooner.” It was set to the tune of the national anthem, “God Save the King” (or later, in America, to “America”):

HARK! how the trumpet’s sound
Proclaims the land around
The Jubilee!
Spence was born in 1750 in Newcastle. Growing up on the waterfront as one of nineteen children in his family, young Spence joined the congregation of John Glas (1695–1773), a Presbyterian schismatic who followed the tenets of the primitive Christians as he understood them, advocating simple law, no penal code, no accumulation of property, love feasts, Scotch broth, the gift of speech, and plenty of song. Spence’s mentor was Dr. James Murray, who supported the American Revolution, opposed enclosure, and asked in his “Sermons To Asses” (1768), “Do people ever act contrary to any divine law, when they resume their rights, and recover their property out of the hands of those who have unnaturally invaded it?” Moreover, “Was the jewish jubilee a levelling scheme?” These questions were particularly relevant in Newcastle, where the bourgeoisie was then seeking to sell or lease eighty-nine acres of the town common, a plan thwarted by commoners, who pulled down the lessee’s house and fences and drove his cattle away. Inspired by the victory, Spence in 1775 wrote a lecture that he delivered before the Newcastle Philosophical Society, wherein he proposed the abolition of private property: “The country of any people . . . is properly their common,” he explained. Taking the historical view, he continued, “The first landholders [were] usurpers
and tyrants,” as were their heirs. Everyone else had become a stranger in the land of their birth. He advised appointing a day on which the inhabitants of each parish would meet “to take their long-lost rights into possession.” Spence would soon call that day jubilee; the Philosophical Society would denounce him for his “ERROUS and dangerous levelling principles.”

Jubilee lay at the heart of what came to be known as Spence’s Plan, which was chalked on walls, minted on tokens, published in halfpenny tracts that were hawked in the streets, and sung in taverns. Spence was arrested four times in the 1790s as a seditious author and a “Dangerous Nuisance.” Despite the jailings and imprisonments, the insults and death threats from members of the Association for Preserving Liberty and Property against Republicans and Levellers, he persisted. He struck a token to commemorate the death of Lord George Gordon, the insurrectionist of 1780. In *The End of Oppression; Or, a Quater Loaf for Two-Pence; being a Dialogue between an Old Mechanic and a Young One*, he wrote that revolution could be accomplished by a “few thousand of hearty determined fellows well armed.” By 1802 the prime minister of England would be informed that there was scarcely a wall in London that did not have chalked upon it the slogan “Spence’s Plan and Full Bellies.”

After moving to London in 1792, Spence took an interest in Atlantic affairs, and especially in what sailors, Native Americans, and African Americans might contribute to a worldwide revolutionary movement. He wrote about hydrarchy in *The Marine Republic* (1794), in which a dying man gives a ship to his sons. It is, the man specifies, to be “COMMON PROPERTY. You all will be equal owners, and shall share the profits of every voyage equally among you.” His injunctions are drawn up as a constitution, like the articles of pirates. When his sons, the marine republicans of the title, grow weary of England’s oppressive government, they “set sail for America, where they [expect] to see government administered more agreeably to their notions of equality and equity.” After their ship is wrecked on an uninhabited island, they establish the Republic of Spensonia, which “looks backward to the medieval commune and forward to the withering away of the state.”

In *The Reign of Felicity* (1796), Spence constructed a dialogue in which one character remarks that American Indians are the “only free-
men remaining on the face of the earth”; another explains that the Indians, unlike European workers, are “unwarped by slavish custom.” Spence, like Christian Gottlieb Priber earlier in the century, believed that the Native Americans would attract the slaves and disenfranchised laborers created by European imperialism and help lead them to libera-
tion. He knew of the triracial communities among the Seminoles and in the southeastern United States. In 1814 he would offer a spirited defense, in The Giant Killer, of the Cherokee lands; that same year, during a sacred revolt (which owed much to the federation attempts of Tecumseh, on the one hand, and to the inspiration of the African American struggle for emancipation, on the other), the Muskogees would be destroyed at the Battle of Horsehoe Bend. Apocalyptic teachings (“when the moon would be turned into blood”), the presence of numerous métis people, the earthquakes of 1811, the leadership of Paddy Walch and Peter McQueen, and a new dance had all united the Muskogee against the ecunnaunxulgee (“people greedily grasping lands”) in a desperate defense against the forces that were to bring the cotton plantation. 16

Spence also understood the African-American interest in jubilee:

For who can tell but the Millennium
May take its rise from my poor Cranium?
And who knows but it God may please
It should come by the West Indies?

His question brings us back to the West Indian Wedderburn and the African American tradition of jubilee, which began in a subversive reading of the Bible and continued that way for generations. Similar readings had earlier inspired or been manifest in the revolutionary Christianity of the “blackymore maide” named Francis and the conversation between Sarah Wight and Dinah “the moor” about the biblical deliverance from Egyptian slavery; the use, by slaves, of the radical message of itinerant ministers of the Great Awakening to formulate their own, new designs for freedom; and the creativity of slaves and their allies, in the era of the American Revolution, in citing the Bible not only to predict an end to bondage but to justify the use of force in ending it. The resistance of slaves during the 1760s and 1770s moved many to take public positions against “man-stealing” and slavery itself. One of these was the founder of Methodism, John Wesley, who in 1774 published Thoughts on Slavery. He concluded (not unlike the revolutionary J. Philmore) that “liberty is the right of every human creature as soon as he breathes the vital air. And no human law can deprive him of that right which he derived from a law of nature.” These sentiments would inform the evangelical and mission-
ary work of the Methodists over the next fifty years. Baptists took a similar stand.\textsuperscript{17}

That such churchmen were not, however, unqualified abolitionists is shown by a look at Wesley’s right-hand man, Thomas Coke, the founder of the Methodist missions in the 1780s, who made eighteen transatlantic voyages during his lifetime. He took pride in the Irish Methodists who betrayed the United Irishmen’s attempts to take Dublin in the spring of 1798, and he believed that Methodists played a key role in preventing West Indian slaves from rising on an English island during the 1790s (“If they have Religious Liberty, their Temporal Slavery will be comparatively but a small thing”). He reported to the government on the seditious activities of obscure, humble churches in the north of England in 1800–1.\textsuperscript{18} And yet so broad was the discussion of jubilee that he devoted considerable, if equivocal, attention in his \textit{Commentary on the Holy Bible} (1801) to Leviticus 25. Coke’s view started with the point that land required rest. Jubilee would demonstrate the “fructifying influences of divine power,” it would curb avarice, and it would prevent the ambitious designs of individuals to procure estates in order to oppress others. Coke did not advocate jubilee from below, or approve of an agrarian law, or associate the practice with the English commons or the American lands. He seemed to approve the interpretation of Maimonides, that jubilee led to saturnalia in which “everyone put a crown upon his head.”\textsuperscript{19}

Methodist and Baptist ministers—some formally educated, others penniless, self-appointed “tub preachers”—began in the 1780s to preach jubilee to largely poor congregations in Britain, the Caribbean, and North America. A growing number of these preachers were African Americans: in addition to Wedderburn, their number included Moses Baker, George Liele, Moses Wilkinson, John Marrant, Thomas Nicholas Swigle, Richard Allen, Absalom Jones, John Jea, and George Gibb. The story of Moses, the flight from Egyptian slavery, and jubilee were all important to these ministers and their followers. The Baltimore Conference of Methodists declared to its mixed-race congregation in 1780 that “slavery is contrary to the laws of God, man, and nature” (though in five years it would suspend this belief in practice, permitting slaveholders to join the congregation). Baptists also preached an end to slavery in general and jubilee in particular. Several ministers spread the message far and wide.
Liele, for example, left Savannah for Kingston, Jamaica, in 1782 and formed that island’s first Baptist church two years later. “Preaching took very good effect with the poorer sort, especially the slaves,” among whom he worked as a wagoner. Other ministers left North America with the British army and carried their revolutionary heritage to Nova Scotia, British Honduras, London, and Sierra Leone.20

Within these Atlantic circuits, jubilee was taught by sermon but also by song, especially during the revivals and camp meetings of the early nineteenth century, in what has been called the Second Great Awakening. Ministers, exhorters, and obeah men taught a call-and-response style of singing. Rhythmic complexity, gapped scales, body movements, and extended repetitions of short melodic phrases characterized the singing, which has also been called the “shout.” Musicologists have noted the influence in the shout of African songs, work songs, and Indian dances. The practice of teaching the song and the Scriptures by lining out (wherein someone who could read sang one line, then those who could not read sang the same line, and so on) ensured a close, enthusiastic relationship between leader and chorus. The contrast with stiff, hierarchical upper-class religious ceremony and singing could hardly have been greater.21

Slaves and free people of color such as Wedderburn adopted biblical passages such as jubilee from Baptist and Methodist preachers and took them in new, rebellious directions. Gabriel organized a slave revolt in Richmond, Virginia, in the jubilee year 1800. He and his fellow militants were emboldened by the success of the Haitian Revolution, encouraged by the preachings of abolitionist Quakers, Methodists, and Baptists, and assisted by French revolutionaries and perhaps also by United Irishmen. Mingo, a preacher and exhorter, read the stories of Moses and Joshua. Gabriel was especially fond of Judges 15, in which Sampson “smote them hip and thigh with great slaughter,” slaying “a thousand men” with “the jawbone of an ass.” Gabriel’s insurrectionary plan was ruined by a storm, after which thirty-five were hanged, religious congregations were further segregated, and laws were passed forbidding prayer meetings between sundown and sunup.22

Closer in age and experience to Wedderburn was Denmark Vesey, born in 1767 in the Caribbean (St. Thomas, Virgin Islands), skilled as a
sailor, and converted to Methodism. A cosmopolitan, he had slaved in St. Domingue, studied with the Moravians, and learned several languages. He settled with his master, a sea captain, in Charleston, South Carolina, where during the turbulent decade of the 1790s the Methodist Francis Asbury preached on Isaiah 61 and its promise “to proclaim liberty to captives.” Vesey became a leader in the free black community and the Methodist church. He, too, took inspiration from the victory in Haiti, and possibly more direct assistance as well, as one of his fellow conspirators, Monday Gell, may have corresponded with the president of the black republic. In 1809 the Negro steward of the ship Minerva smuggled insurrectionary pamphlets into Charleston; Vesey read them aloud, as he did the Bible. In 1820 the planters passed a law against “incendiary publications.” Two years later, Vesey himself led thirty people into open insurrection, including Jack Glenn, a painter, who spoke of deliverance from bondage; Monday, an Igbo from the lower Niger; “Gullah Jack,” a conjuror; and Peter Royas, a ship’s carpenter who believed the group would get help from England. Vesey’s organizing thus brought together a coalition of different workers—agrarian, artisan, and nautical—from the different traditions of Africa, England, the West Indies, and America. The revolt, which expressed the power of transatlantic pan-Africanism, frightened the slaveowning ruling class; in response, Charleston’s rulers immediately passed the 1822 Negro Seaman Act, which permitted the sheriff to board any incoming vessel and to arrest any black sailor for the duration of the ship’s stay in the port of Charleston. 23

Less than a decade later, sailors would begin smuggling David Walker’s Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World, but in particular, and very expressly, to those of The United States of America (1829) into the ports of the South. Walker invoked the legacies of the American and Haitian Revolutions as he exposed the butcheries, cruelties, and murders of slavery, as he railed against avaricious oppressors and hypocritical Christians, as he refuted the racist arguments of Thomas Jefferson, and as he called, with unassailable logic, for an armed war of liberation. His Appeal, which drew strongly on the apocalyptic prophetic tradition of Ezekiel and Isaiah, quickly became the manifesto of pan-African freedom. 24

William Lloyd Garrison was another singer of jubilee, and another
product of the waterfront. His maternal grandparents had sailed as bonded laborers from Liverpool; his father was a drunken sailor and his mother a flinty, New Light Baptist. His brother was a seafaring man, too. Although his mother warned him against the “hydra of politics,” he would enter the political arena and transform it forever, bringing to it the antinomian spirit of 1649. Taught by David Walker and Benjamin Lundy (who escorted freedmen to Haiti), Garrison spoke on July 4 in the year of Walker’s Appeal at the Park Street Church in Boston, proclaiming “liberty to the captives and the opening of the prison to them that are bound.” It was a turning point in the abolitionist alliance. Garrison called on Atlantic strengths—the motley crew, the fellow creatures, God as no respecter of persons—and inveighed against capitalists, slavemasters, and tyrants alike. He reprinted Bunyan’s Vanity Fair, declared that the world was his country, wrote “with the finger of God on the hearts of men,” and promised to “bind up the broken-hearted, and set the captive free!”

By the 1830s, African American children were singing hymns such as “Don’t You Hear the Gospel Trumpet Sound Jubilee?” Despite the repression and terror that rained down on its efforts to implement jubilee, African American Christianity remained a religion of action, characterized by shouting, dancing, singing, weeping, jerking, and speaking in tongues. The movement to abolish slavery sang its way to freedom. Spence began this jubilee singing, which continued in tavern and chapel in Kingston, Charleston, New York, Boston, Providence, and Dublin, in the multitude of joyful hymns following August 1, from the classics of the Wesley brothers, through the marches of the Civil War, to Henry Work’s “popular” sheet music of “Kingdom Coming”—

Oh, the master run, ha ha!
And the darkies stay, ho ho!
So now must be the Kingdom comin’
And the year of Jubilo

—finally reaching a kind of conclusion with the postwar Fisk Jubilee Singers.26 Robert Wedderburn, a Methodist and Spencean, was perfectly situated to understand and advance the Atlantic revolutionary tradition of jubilee.
The Wedderburn-Campbell Correspondence

Wedderburn wrote about jubilee to Elizabeth Campbell, his half-sister and a maroon in Jamaica. His main purpose was to discuss with Campbell the freeing of her own slaves as a prelude to an island-wide emancipation. First published in *The Axe Laid to the Root, or a Fatal Blow to Oppressors, Being an Address to The Planters and Negroes of the Island of Jamaica*, a newspaper written and edited by Wedderburn in London in October 1817, the correspondence is a unique source of knowledge about the Atlantic proletariat.27 The arrival of thousands of slaves and free blacks in the aftermath of the American Revolution and the outbreak of the Haitian Revolution in 1791 had created a new impulse for agitation and organization among Afro-Jamaicans, who by 1792 had begun to form secret societies and engage in correspondence such as the Wedderburn-Campbell letters. By the early nineteenth century, explained Campbell, “the free Mulattoes [were] reading Cobbett’s Register, and talking about St. Domingo.” Revolution in America and St. Domingue opened the way for other movements, as the motley crew carried its news and experience to Europe and Latin America. The letters between Wedderburn and Campbell crossed divides of continents, empire, class, and race.28

The *Axe* might be compared to another radical publication of 1817, Thomas Wooler’s *The Black Dwarf*. Did the title refer to the European sage or the Indian savage? Wooler teased, “We are not at liberty to unfold all the secrets of his prison-house.” Here was the motley in both its forms, rags and fooling. The black dwarf was a trickster against throne and altar, “secure from his invisibility, and dangerous from his power of division”—Wooler might be describing the hydra—“for like the polypus, he can divide and redivide himself, and each division remains a perfect animal.” (Linnaeus had given the name Hydra to a genus of freshwater polyps in 1756.) The *Black Dwarf* was international and multiethnic, featuring reviews of *Oroonoko*, news of the wild abolitionist dances of Barbados, the latest on struggles in South America. The dwarf of the frontispiece had his right hand raised in a fist of victory, and his left firmly on his hip in a further gesture of determination. A barrel-chested Pan clasped the dwarf’s arm in comradely alliance and pointed to the symbols of vanquished powers—a royal scepter, a stack of money, a lord chancellor’s
periwig—while the handcuffs and shackles of slavery lay open in the dust. The paper symbolized a tricontinental coalition of profane figures against the Holy Alliance. The worst fears of the prude and the propertyed, the royalist and the rich, were realized in the allegory of sexuality, Africa, and monsters. Two other journals, the Medusa and the Gorgon, likewise invoked invisible and dangerous many-headedness.

Two rebellions—one in the Caribbean, the other in England, both against slavery—provided the background for Wedderburn’s correspondence. On Easter, 1816, Bussa’s Rebellion engulfed Barbados. Nanny Grigg, a domestic worker on the Simmons plantation, read newspapers and informed the other slaves of developments in Haiti and England. One important piece of news concerned the Imperial Registry Bill of 1815, actually passed by Parliament to prevent the smuggling of slaves into British colonies but transformed by slave rumor into an act of emancipation: “high buckra” (the king), the rumor had it, had sent a “free paper,” but the local planters were refusing to obey it. Hundreds rose up, burning almost a quarter of the sugar-cane crop and demanding their freedom. A planter alleged that William Wilberforce and the abolitionist African Institute had “pierced the inmost recesses of our island, inflicted deep and deadly wounds in the minds of the black population, and engendered the Hydra, Rebellion, which had well nigh deluged our fields with blood.” Horace Campbell has written that “the widespread nature of the revolt and the organizational skills which went into the planning [were] the result of a new kind of leadership; this was the leadership of the religious preacher, literate in the English language and in the African religious practices, who combined the ideas of deliverance and resistance.” Deliverance from slavery was not to be realized in Barbados in 1816, however, as almost a thousand slaves were killed in battle or executed after the rising.29

A few months later, the Spa Fields Riots in England were led by Spenceans and waged by canal diggers, porters, coal and ballast heavers, soldiers, sailors, dockworkers, and factory workers. Among the leaders was Thomas Preston, a Spencean who had traveled to the West Indies and considered himself an “unregistered slave.” James Watson the younger, another Spencean, argued with a servant wearing the livery of Chancellor Leach just before the riots: “He was like a negro,” said Wat-
son, “that had run away, and had a mark of disrespect; and that very soon the time would come, when his master might lose his estate, and that he might be as good a man as his master.” At Spa Fields, Watson asked the ten thousand assembled, “Will Englishmen any longer suffer themselves
to be trod upon, like the poor African slaves in the West Indies, or like clods or stones?” The riots simultaneously raised the issues of the “abolition and regulation of machinery” and the abolition of slavery.30 These were Luddite years, when, on the one hand, steam engines and textile machinery were introduced to abridge and cheapen labor, and on the
other hand, the workers who were degraded as a result protested by direct, violent action against the mechanical means of their oppression. Like Byron before 1816 and Shelley afterward, Wedderburn opposed mechanization when it was employed to dehumanize work. Lord Byron’s maiden speech in the House of Lords (on February 27, 1812, when he was twenty-four) was on a bill providing the death penalty for Luddites: “You call these men a mob,” he said, “desperate, dangerous, and ignorant; and seem to think that the only way to quiet the ‘bellua multorum capitum’ is to lop off a few of its superfluous heads.” He reminded the peers that those heads were capable of thought. Moreover, “it is the mob that labour in your fields and serve in your houses,—that man your navy, and recruit your army,—that have enabled you to defy the world, and can also defy you when neglect and calamity have driven them to despair.”

Bussa’s Rebellion and the Spa Fields Riots helped Wedderburn to see that the circulation of information had become dangerous to West Indian planters—hence his decision to publish the Axe Laid to the Root, which apparently reached both of its intended audiences, planters and slaves. A merchant had warned the Jamaican Assembly about such publications, “in which were found doctrines destructive of the tranquillity of this island, containing direct incitement to the imitation of the conduct of the slaves of St. Domingo, and loading the proprietors of slaves with every odious epithet.” In his first letter to Campbell, Wedderburn responded to the news that she had manumitted his aged mother and his brother with an enthusiastic denunciation of slavery, an exhortation to his half-sister to free her remaining slaves, a recollection of history—of the Hebrew flight from Egyptian slavery, of the early Christians, of the freedom-loving maroons—and an endorsement of the more recent ideas of Thomas Spence. In reply, Campbell described her freeing of her slaves, their restitution to the land, and her efforts to record these transactions with the governor’s secretary, who had referred the matter to the governor himself, who had in turn dismissed her with mutterings about Haiti. In the third letter, Campbell explained that the governor had taken the news of her emancipation to the Jamaican Assembly, where one Macpherson had risen to speak against the doctrines of Thomas Spence and to recommend revolt against the authority of the Crown unless the licenses of Dissenting missionaries were revoked. He moved that Camp-
bell be treated as a lunatic and that the government confiscate her slaves and lands. He also suggested that Jamaican planters import “starving Scotchmen to manage the slaves” and servants “dying for want” in England to be used “against the Blacks.” The assembly then nullified Campbell’s manumission, since “slaves and lands set free by an Spencean enthusiast should not be entered on the records”—but neither should the record of the assembly itself be published, for fear that “it should fall into the hands of the slaves.” Worry that the *Axe Laid to the Root* had already reached the wrong hands impelled the rulers of the island to offer rewards for copies turned in: for slaves, freedom; for freemen, a slave from the estate of Elizabeth Campbell. The Wedderburn-Campbell correspondence ended with the words “To be continued,” as the *Axe Laid to the Root* ceased publication.31

Wedderburn prophesied that “the slaves shall be free, for a multiplied combination of ideas,” which the *Axe Laid to the Root* was meant to embody. Although lacking the urbane tone of Wooler’s *Black Dwarf* or the confident command of Cobbett’s *Political Register*, Wedderburn’s newspaper nonetheless gave life to a transatlantic intellectual dialogue that synthesized African, American, and European voices. “The axe laid to the root” had special meaning for the hewers of wood and drawers of water. The words came from the books of Luke and Matthew, where they were part of the curse that John the Baptist invoked against class arrogance. They were also part of his announcement of the Messiah and of the coming baptism by fire. The phrase was readily appropriated in the English Revolution; for example, Abiezer Coppe, having commanded the great ones to deliver their riches to the poor, answered his critics by laying “the Axe to the root of the Tree.”32 The revolutionary meanings of John the Baptist and “the axe laid to the root” were revived in the 1790s on both sides of the Atlantic, among both evangelicals and secular radicals. In Jamaica, the American preacher Moses Baker taught African slaves the Baptist version of Christianity, emphasizing John the Baptist and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, which proved congenial to Akan and Yoruba practices of riverine spirits and their mediumship. The resulting religion, called myalism, became a “hotbed of slave rebellion” and a means of transmitting the memory of resistance.33 In New York, George White, who had run away from slavery, heard a sermon on John the Baptist and
“the axe is laid to the root.” He fell prostrate on the floor, had night visions of the torments that would befall the rich, and converted to Methodism. Thomas Paine wrote *The Age of Reason* in prison in 1794 in order to “lay the axe to the root of religion.” Thomas Spence repeated the phrase in *The Restorer of Society* in 1801 and at the beginning of his last publication, *The Giant Killer, Or, Anti-Landlord* (1814). Also in the former year, the American Baptist minister John Leland expressed his opposition to slavery in *A Blow to the Root.*

And Shelley explained in *Queen Mab,*

> From kings, and priests, and statesmen, war arose,  
> Whose safety is man’s deep unbettered woe,  
> Whose grandeur his debasement. Let the axe  
> Strike at the root, the poison tree will fall;  
> And where its venomed exhalations spread  
> Ruin, and death, and woe, where millions lay  
> Quenching the serpent’s famine, and their bones  
> Bleaching unburied in the putrid blast,  
> A garden shall arise, in loveliness  
> Surpassing fabled Eden.

The American-born former slave George Liele had in the 1790s introduced into Jamaica the class-leader system, in which the black ministers washed the feet of their disciples. “Slaves who could read the Bible . . . had thrust into their hands the sanction and inspiration of English protest movements from Wycliffe to the Levellers, and some found lessons there the missionaries did not teach,” wrote historian Mary Turner. Methodists and Baptists taught scriptures aloud, by means of hymn singing and lining out. Wedderburn wrote and published hymns of his own in his early pamphlet *Truth Self-Supported* (1802); John Jea wrote a book of hymns in 1817. Methodist hymnody in particular was rich with references to jubilee. Moses Baker, the Baptist, was arrested on a charge of sedition in 1796 for including in his sermon the hymn

> We will be slaves no more,  
> Since Christ has made us free,  
> Has nailed our tyrants to the cross,  
> And bought our liberty.
One black Baptist in Jamaica was hanged and another transported for fomenting rebellion in 1816. A Jamaican king of the Igbo was elected and celebrated in song:

\[\begin{align*}
O \text{ me good friend, Mr. Wilberforce, make we free!} \\
\text{God Almighty thank ye! God Almighty thank ye!} \\
\text{God Almighty make we free!} \\
\text{Buckra in this country no make we free:} \\
\text{What Negroe for to do? What Negroe for to do?} \\
\text{Take force by force! Take force by force!}
\end{align*}\]

The singer of the song explained that “he had sung no songs but such as his brown priest had assured him were approved of by John the Baptist . . . [who] was a friend to the negroes, and had got his head in a pan.” The Spenceans in England had a similar penchant for subversive singing, matching revolutionary lyrics with popular tunes such as “Sally in the Alley” or, inevitably, “God Save the King.”

In his letters to Campbell, Wedderburn presented a radical account of early Christianity. In this he was much influenced by his fellow Spencean Thomas Evans, who himself had witnessed “the effect of enclosure after enclosure, and tax after tax; expelling the cottager from gleaning the open fields, from his right to the common, from his cottage, his hovel, once his own; robbing him of his little store, his pig, his fowls, his fuel; thereby reducing him to a pauper, a slave.” In Christian Policy, the Salvation of the Empire (1816), Evans maintained that the answer to expropriation and slavery lay in the communism of the early Christians; a new era must now be “HAILED AS A JUBILEE.” Wedderburn wrote, “The Christians of old, attempted this happy mode of living in fellowship or brotherhood, but, after the death of Christ and the apostles, the national priests persuaded their emperor to establish the Christian religion, and they . . . took possession of the Church property. . . . They have taken care to hedge it about with laws which punish with death all those who dare attempt to take it away.” For her part, Campbell signified the broad-based approval of the ideas of Evans by saying that she knew that he and his son had been imprisoned and that the freed slaves “are singing all day at work about Thomas Spence, and the two Evans’ in Horsemonger Lane prison, and about you too, brother, and every time they say their prayers,
The last of the letters between Wedderburn and Campbell contained a discussion about the Methodists. Campbell had argued with the governor’s secretary, who accused her of having listened to the Methodists. Behind his worries lay secret nightly meetings held on estates in eastern Jamaica in 1815 by brown Methodists, who taught that the regent and Wilberforce wanted the slaves to be free. Some years earlier between (1807 and 1814), authorities had closed the Wesleyan Chapel in Kingston. The British and Foreign Bible Society had been formed in 1804, and its Jamaican branch in 1812, but just a month before the first issue of the _Axe Laid to the Root_, a Baptist missionary had spoken out in favor of the slaves and been dismissed from his position. It thus took courage for Campbell to reply to the secretary, “I say, God bless the Methodists, they teach us to read the bible.” They helped to make jubilee possible.

The Bible was one source of the “multiplied combination of ideas” that would lead to freedom; others were the maroons in Jamaica and the Spenceans in England. The Jamaican maroons were important to Wedderburn personally, as his extended family, but even more so historically, as a force for freedom. He began his first letter to Campbell by appealing to her ancestors: “You have fallen from the purity of the Maroons, your original, who fought for twenty years against the Christians, who wanted to reduce them again to slavery, after they had fled into the woods from the Spaniards.” Here Wedderburn was referring to the first Maroon War, which he conceived as an equivalent to the movement for freedom promoted by the Diggers and Levellers, whose defeat in the English Revolution had made the Cromwellian conquest of Jamaica possible and the struggle of the maroons necessary. Cromwell and his supporters had asserted a limited “rights of man at home,” Wedderburn told his half-sister, but had busied themselves “destroying your ancestors then fighting for their liberty.”

The recounting of this history served as a practical introduction to the acts of manumission—the jubilee—that Campbell was to perform:

Then call your slaves together, let them form the half circle of a new moon, tell them to sit and listen to the voice of truth, say unto
them, you who were slaves to the cruel Spaniards stolen from your country, and brought here, by Cromwell, the great, who humbled kings at his feet, and brought one to the scaffold, sent a fleet out, whose admiral dared not return without performing something to please his master, came here and drove the Spaniards out; the slaves, my people, then fled to the woods for refuge, the invaders called to them to return to bondage, they refused; they contended for twenty years, and upwards; bondage was more terrific than death.

The history of the maroons was a necessary prelude to freedom, which had been won and renewed in three wars, in the 1650s, the 1730s, and the 1790s.40

“I, who am a weak woman, of the Maroon tribe, understood the Spencean doctrine directly: I heard of it, and obey, and the slaves felt the force directly,” wrote Campbell. It is not clear why she referred to herself as a “weak woman.” She may have been ill, or perhaps she was being ironic, malingering, signifying. It may have been a pose that she had to assume with the governor, who condescendingly answered her by saying, “Well, child, I will hear you on this head at a more convenient time.” Campbell and the governor both knew, however, that the women workers of Jamaica never submitted without a fight. Indeed, within very recent memory was a strike in (1816) in which the women of one plantation had, “one and all, refused to carry away the trash”—that is, the crushed sugar cane whose removal was essential to the operation of the “factory in the field.” The mill stopped, the driver drove, and “a little fierce young devil of a Miss Whaunica flew at his throat and endeavoured to strangle him: the agent was obliged to be called in, and, at length, this petticoat rebellion was subdued.”41

How could a woman of the maroon tribe “understand the Spencean doctrine directly”? The answer lay in the provisioning, or agricultural production for immediate use, that was common to both the maroons and the Spenceans. The maroons practiced a subsistence agriculture that was much admired by the agrarian communists in England: “Fruit and vegetables were to be found in every band, for the first thing every Maroon group did, as a prerequisite of survival, was to plant provision
ground” with plantains, cocoa, bananas, pineapples, sweet corn, and cassava. Both maroons and Spenceans advocated strict, collectively set limits on individual accumulation. Cattle grazed in communal pastures, and the allotted lands were held in common. Wedderburn thus emphasized a commonality of interest between the workers of Jamaica and those of England, one that had begun a century and a half earlier in a common history.42

How would a woman such as Campbell have learned about the Spencean doctrine in the first place? And how, in turn, could the Spencean in England have learned the history of the maroons? The governor of Jamaica knew that the Spencean doctrine circulated via the printed word, by pamphlet and by newspaper. Robert Southey wrote about Spence’s Plan in the Quarterly Review of October 1816; the Courier and the Political Register also published the plan, with the former source’s claiming that the Spenceans had some three hundred thousand people ready to revolt. Campbell had read, with some surprise, newspaper accounts opposed to the Spenceans; she asked Wedderburn for the opinion of the Parliamentary reformer Sir Francis Burdett.43 Throughout this period, the most important and most subversive news networks were maritime. When the governor’s secretary tried to dissuade Campbell from freeing her slaves, she explained that word of her intentions had already got around: “I told them [her slaves] not to speak of it, but they talked of it the more. The news is gone to Old Arbore and St. Anns, to the Blue Mountains, to North Side, and the plantain boats have carried the news to Port Morant, and Morant Bay.” Thomas Thistlewood described such coastal communication in greater detail: “The way to go was by water, along the trenches, canals and rivers, and along the coastline, from one estate’s barcadier or jetty to another, in all manner of small craft, manned by slaves who heard and carried news.”44

In fact, the strategic link in Wedderburn and Campbell’s own correspondence was a sailor. Campbell explained the protocol: “I send this letter by a black cook: I dare not trust it to the Post, for they open people’s letters.” By the end of the Napoleonic Wars, roughly a quarter of the Royal Navy was black, and the proportion was probably only a little smaller in both the English and American merchant shipping industries.45 John Jea, born in Calabar before being enslaved to a New Yorker,
was himself working as a ship’s cook aboard the *Iset* of Liverpool when it was captured by the French in 1810. The black cook was so common as to become a stereotype in nautical fiction, reaching its apogee in Frederick Marryat’s *Mr. Midshipman Easy* (1836). This figure, who was as important to pan-African communication in the age of sail as the sleeping-car porter would be in the age of rail, carried the news of jubilee.46

In his first letter to Elizabeth Campbell, Wedderburn assured her that a jubilee would come to Jamaica, and he assumed that she would know exactly what he meant: “The slaves begin to talk that if their masters were Christians they would not hold them in slavery any longer than seven years, for that is the extent of the law of Moses.” Some of the Mosaic law of jubilee was already part of transatlantic labor policy.47 Many servants who emigrated to America indentured themselves for a period of seven years, for example, and manumitted people of color were issued certificates of freedom that were valid for seven years.

Wedderburn quoted Isaiah in condemning those who were “adding house to house, and field to field, that is turning little farms into great ones, swallowing up widows’ children and their heritage.” Campbell freed her slaves as required by jubilee, then took the next step toward liberation by redistributing her land: it was reported that “Miss Campbell then cried, the land is yours . . . for I have read the word of God, and it says, the Lord gave the earth to the children of men.” She added, “I am now instructed by a child of nature, to resign to you your natural right in the soil on which you stand, agreeable to Spence’s plan.” She stressed that her deed was not unique, merely neighborly: “I will manage it myself, as your steward, my brother will assist us, we shall live happy, like the family of the Shariers in the parish of St. Mary’s, who have all things common.” Perhaps she was referring here to a family name (according to the *Almanac for Jamaica* for 1818, three plantations were owned by the Shreyers), or perhaps she was thinking simply of unnamed “sharers.” In either case, there was at least one other jubilee practiced on Jamaica in 1817, when “Monk” Lewis implemented a jubilee from above on his sugar estates in Westmoreland to prevent inequitable accumulation of property among his slaves: “I made it public, that from henceforth no negro should possess more than one house with a sufficient portion of ground for his family, and on the following Sunday the overseer by my order looked over the
village, took from those who had too much to give to those who had too little, and made an entire new distribution according to the most strict Agrarian law.  

The period from 1790 to 1820 was one of social engineering and reorganization of villages and provision grounds by Jamaica’s big planters. The actions taken by Lewis and by Elizabeth Campbell were consistent with themes of Jamaican agrarian history in this era, as shown by Barry Higman in his study of maps and plans of estates, which were largely regular and linear until 1810 and more irregular thereafter because of struggles over space between slaves and planters. Spence and Wedderburn anticipated the postemancipation transformation of agriculture to smallholding settlements in free villages, either founded by missionaries within the north coast estate zone or formed by squatters on abandoned estates or underutilized back lands. Some of these free villages even pre-dated emancipation, establishing customary practices that lasted into the twentieth century as “family land.” Claud McKay’s novel Banana Bottom is about jubilee in just such a village.

**History and Revolution**

Having explored the Wedderburn-Campbell correspondence and the history of jubilee that lay at the heart of it, let us now pose some questions about Wedderburn as a theorist of the Atlantic proletariat. First, what was his understanding of history? Second, how did he conceive of the revolutionary tradition? Third, what constituents did he see as composing the social and political force that would make the revolution? And finally, how did he combine Christianity, republicanism, and abolitionism? Wedderburn understood, perhaps as well as anyone of his day, that the fates of workers on the two sides of the Atlantic were linked. He would be a lifelong teacher of this truth, through his actions, his sermons, and his writings, including *The Axe Laid to the Root*. He was part of the postwar radical milieu and was thus familiar with both Shelley’s *Queen Mab* and Volney’s *Ruins*.

Wedderburn saw history as an international process of expropriation and resistance. The rich of all countries used their economic and political power first to steal the land and then to crush the people who had once
occupied it, using terror to set them to work in circumstances of slavery. Wedderburn wrote that “the great majority in every nation are dispossessed of their right to the soil throughout the world.” The resulting resistance he called “universal war.” In 1819, at Wedderburn’s Hopkins Street Chapel, the question for discussion was, “Which of the two parties are likely to be victorious, the rich or the poor in the event of Universal War[?]” Wedderburn opened with the proposition that “there were but two classes of people in England.” He then extended to the assembled an invitation to historical analysis: “How did this happen?” How, we may ask, would Wedderburn have answered his own question? In his first address to the slaves of Jamaica, Wedderburn explained the centrality of the struggle over the land:

Above all, mind and keep possession of the land you now possess as slaves; for without that, freedom is not worth possessing; for if you once give up the possession of your lands, your oppressors will have power to starve you to death, through making laws for their own accommodation; which will force you to commit crimes in order to obtain subsistence; as the landholders in Europe are serving those that are dispossessed of lands; for it is a fact, that thousands of families are now in a starving state; the prisons are full: humanity impells the executive power to withdraw the sentence of death on criminals, whilst the landholders, in fact, are surrounded with every necessary of life. Take warnings by the sufferings of the European poor, and never give up your lands you now possess, for it is your right by God and nature, for the “earth was given to the children of men.”

The starting point for Wedderburn was the idea that the Earth belonged to God, who gave it to “the children of men,” allowing “no difference for colour or character, just or unjust.” Then came the violence and terror, as the encloser and engrosser turned the land into private property and created slavery: “He that first thrust his brother from his right [to the soil] was a tyrant, a robber, and a murderer; a tyrant because he invades the rights of his brother, a robber, because he seized upon that which was not his own, a murderer, because he deprives his brother of the means of subsistence. The weak must then solicit to become the villain’s slave.”
system of terror was perpetuated as landowners, who possessed no “title deed . . . consistent with natural and universal justice,” nonetheless sold or willed “that which was first obtained by force or fraud” to their children. Wedderburn’s message to his brothers and sisters in Jamaica was based on his own generation’s experience of massive theft in England, where between 1801 and 1831 alone, 3,511,770 acres of common land were legislated from the agricultural population, an instance of class robbery by the Parliament of landlords. Arthur Young likened the process to a man’s stealing another’s handkerchief and then employing him to embroider the new owner’s initials on it.51 Conditions of rural life were so terrible in 1816 that the government attempted to suppress the annual report entitled The Agricultural State of the Kingdom. Many were actually hanged for protesting the enclosures and the high price of bread. (At the sentencing of twenty-four of them at a special assizes in Ely Cathedral, Handel’s Air was played, with its lyric “Why do the Heathen so furiously rage together?”)

Wedderburn considered it wrong that “a few should have the power to till or not to till the earth, thereby holding the existence of the whole population in their hands. They can cause a famine, or create abundance.” The travesty was perhaps clearest among the Irish: “How can anyone account for the gigantic strides that death has taken through Ireland, a country that was able to supply your navy and army, all your colonies? And now the inhabitants are dying for want?” He exclaimed, “Oh! ye poor of Ireland, your death, through starvation, will be a perpetual, yea, and eternal monument of disgrace to the landholders, it will be an immortal book, wherein will be read the wicked system of private property in land.” In answer to the new science of demography, which tried to disguise such murder, Wedderburn wrote, “Malthus has said, to please the rich, that the superabundant population is doomed to perish by the laws of nature, which are the laws of God. The Spenceans say the Deity gave the earth to the children of men, he is no respecter of persons”!52

Wedderburn emphasized that tyrants, robbers, and murderers operated not only in England and Ireland but also in Africa and America, seizing not only land but also labor. African slaves, he insisted, were “Stolen Men,” “stolen persons,” “stolen families,” people who were then “sold, like cattle, in the market.” He quoted Exodus 21:16: “He that
stealeth a man and selleth or if he be found in his hand, he shall surely be put to death.” He condemned “all potentates, governors, and governments of every description with felony, who does wickedly violate the sacred rights of man—by force of arms, or otherwise, seizing the persons of men and dragging them from their native country, and selling their stolen persons and generations.” A spy reported that Wedderburn denounced the slave traders, who “would employ blacks to go and steal females—they would put them in sacks and would be murdered if they made an alarm. Vessels would be in readiness and they would fly off with them.” This, he explained, “was done by Parliament men—who done it for gain,” just as they made slaves in their cotton factories, which was how they had got the “money to bring them into Parliament” in the first place.

Wedderburn wanted the slaves of Jamaica to know that as the rich swept the people off the land, they made laws to protect themselves and to criminalize the dispossessed, whose efforts to subsist would now earn them the lash, the prison, or the gallows. English prisons were full of the expropriated and the criminalized. In the Axe Laid to the Root, he warned the slaves who would be emancipated to “have no prisons” as they organized a better society, as “they are only schools for vice, and depots for the victims of tyranny.” He went on to compare the prison to the slave experience, warning the planters, “I will inform you for your present safety, and for the future good of your offspring, to let the slaves go free immediately, for in their prison house a voice is heard, loose him and let him go.”

As for the prisons that already existed in England, Wedderburn favored opening them. He would have agreed with the sentiment addressed by a member of the “Tri-Coloured Committee” to “Our Fellow Countrymen suffering Incarceration” in 1816, as reported by a government spy: “The prison doors will be opened [and] your lofty Bastiles be reduced to Ashes.”

Wedderburn also stressed the role that hanging played in the crushing of proletarian movements and the establishment of class discipline. He remembered three militants on whom the hangman’s noose had tightened: Edward Marcus Despard; the Irish sailor Cashman, executed for his part in the Spa Fields riots; and John Bellingham, the assassin of Spencer Perceval, the prime minister. He learned from Elizabeth
Campbell the latest news about hangings in Jamaica: “There is a law made by the assembly to hang a slave. One has been hung for preaching, teaching, or exhorting, another has been hung for throwing up his hoe and blessing the name of King George, through mistaking the abolition of the slave trade for the abolition of slavery.” Wedderburn expressed his own fears at the end of his autobiography: “I should have gone back to Jamaica, had I not been fearful of the planters; for such is their hatred of any one having black blood in his veins, and who dares to think and act as a free man, that they would most certainly have trumped up some charge against me, and hung me.” 56 Despite the claim that the planters “can do little, for the leaven is laid too long in the dough, and as the slaves are their bread, they must not hang them all,” British policy remained murderous, on a large scale if necessary, as a private and confidential message from Downing Street to a previous governor, Sir George Nugent (1801–6), had made clear in 1804: “The influence of a Free Black Government in Saint Domingo may be always dangerous, the extinction therefore of that class of slaves in whose fidelity there is no reason to rely, and the propagation of those alone who by the habits of infancy childhood and education are susceptible of the attachment, appear to be the secur-est system.”57

A new stage in the historical process was suggested by Wedderburn’s pamphlet Cast-Iron Parsons, or Hints to the Public and the Legislature, on Political Economy (1820). During a visit to Saint Paul’s Church, Shadwell, on the London waterfront, he had asked the parson whether the church was built of brick or stone. “Of neither,” came the reply, “but of cast-iron.” An old apple woman who overheard the conversation added, “Would to God the Parsons were of Cast-Iron too.” Wedderburn considered this to be an excellent idea: “Finding that the routine of duty required of the Clergy of the legitimate Church, was so completely mechanical, and that nothing was so much in vogue as the dispensing with human labour by the means of machinery, it struck me that it might one day be possible to substitute a cast-iron parson.” It could be oiled and kept fresh in a closet, to be rolled out on Sundays. In fact, the idea had broader application, as it might also be possible to make a clockwork schoolmaster to teach the sciences. This invention Wedderburn called a “techni-catholicautomatoppantoppidon.” As a postscript, he suggested
making a cast-iron king and cast-iron members of Parliament, and was promptly jailed for his blasphemy. He understood machinery, politicians, and the source of all wealth: “Slaves and unfortunate men have cultivated the earth, adorned it with buildings, and filled it with all kinds of riches. And the wealth that enabled you to set these people to work, was got by hook or crook from society.—Pray, was ever a solitary savage found to be rich? No; all riches come from society, I mean the labouring part of it.”

If Wedderburn viewed the capitalist side of history as expropriation, he saw the proletarian side as resistance. He had had the history of resistance burned into his consciousness at an early age, and it was this history that he most wanted to impart to workers in England and the Americas. This autodidact who called himself a “poor disinherited earth-worm” reached back to antiquity and brought history forward to his own day: jubilee was central to it, as were radical Christianity, peasant rebellion, slave revolt, mob action, urban insurrection, military mutiny, and strike. Within Wedderburn’s own lifetime, these were the sources of proletarian power and the elements of revolution, the means by which he and others would “convert the world from a charnel-house to a paradise.”

Wedderburn and Campbell belonged to a tradition in which the memory of struggle was maintained through oral tradition, passed along by mnemonic devices governed by strict canons of secrecy. One of the values of the *Axe Laid to the Root* lay in Wedderburn’s willingness to bring this knowledge into print in order to expand the understanding of workers in both Jamaica and England. He worked to establish common origins, connections, and parallels between the struggles in these two parts of the world, starting with the primitive Christians. The beginning, like the end, of Wedderburn’s history was thus communist, a pattern set by the “Christians of old” who had “attempted this happy mode of living in fellowship or brotherhood.” An interim heir to this tradition had been Wat Tyler, the leader of the Peasant’s Revolt in England in 1381, who had opened the prisons and negotiated with the king to abolish serfdom before being assassinated by the magistrates of London. The resistance and the treachery were both important for the maroons and other rebels in Jamaica to remember.

The English Revolution also occupied a central place in Wedderburn’s
thought. In the year of Despard’s conspiracy (1802), Wedderburn elected to place on the title page of his *Truth Self-Supported* lines from 1 Corinthians 1:27: “God hath chosen the foolish things of the world, to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world, to confound the things that are mighty.” Wedderburn also made a place in his pantheon for the “primitive Quakers.” Of sugar production in the West Indies he wrote in seventeenth-century diction:

> The drops of blood, the horrible manure  
> That fills with luscious juice the teeming can  
> And must our fellow-creature thus endure,  
> For traffic vile, th’ indignity of pain?

He understood that the imperialism and slavery visited upon Jamaica by Cromwell after 1655 had been made possible by the defeat of the radicals, whose battle had then been carried on, overseas, by the maroon ancestors of Elizabeth Campbell. The colonization of Jamaica was closely linked to England’s greedy rush into the slave trade.

Although Wedderburn never directly mentioned Tacky’s Revolt in his writings, he was undoubtedly influenced by it. Living his early life in Westmoreland and Hanover Parishes, where much of the fighting had taken place, he would have heard surviving veterans tell the tale. Wedderburn carried on one of the ideas that came out of the revolt, the argument first expressed in print by J. Philmore, that slaves had the right to deliver themselves to freedom by rising up and slaying the tyrants. One of Wedderburn’s handbills of 1819 asked, “Can it be Murder to Kill a Tyrant?” to be followed by discussion of the allied question “Has a Slave an inherent right to slay his Master, who refuses him his liberty?” One of the spies who attended the meeting reported that at the end of the debate, “Nearly the whole of the persons in the room held up their hands in favour of the Question.” Wedderburn “then exclaimed well Gentlemen I can now write home and tell the Slaves to murder their Masters as soon as they please.” Another spy was sure that the meeting had a double meaning: those assembled “avow their object to be nothing short of the assassination of their Rulers & the overthrow of the Government of England.”

The Haitian Revolution, the first successful workers’ revolt in modern history, made a deep impression on Wedderburn. Even though he
warned his brothers and sisters in Jamaica against the kind of bloodlet-
ting that had transpired in Haiti, he knew that rage was an inevitable re-
sponse to terror and exploitation, and he was not unwilling to use it in a
war of nerves against Jamaica’s rulers, advising them, “Prepare for flight,
ye planters, for the fate of St. Domingo awaits you.” Wedderburn also
took note of the defeat in 1798 of the United Irishmen, but he scorned
their military tactics at the Battle of Vinegar Hill: maroons and rebels in
Jamaica, he explained, “will not stand to engage organised troops, like
the silly Irish rebels.” Jamaican rebels did not depend on technology
(they used “billhooks” as weapons), nor on the transport of troops by
turnpike, nor on the logistics of food supply.

The rising of hundreds of slaves in Bussa’s Rebellion to deliver them-
selves from bondage in Barbados was surely part of the Wedderburn’s re-
port on the “Insurrections of the Slaves in some of the West India Is-
lands” at a meeting in 1819. Speakers at the rally made the connection
between slavery in the Caribbean and bondage in England, proposing
the abolition of both. After this event and the Peterloo Massacre of 1819,
Wedderburn called for the arming of the English proletariat. Some were
ready, like the Halifax weavers who in 1819 carried a banner that read,
“We groan, being burdened, waiting to be delivered, but we rejoice in
hopes of a Jubilee.” One outcome of the proposal for armed struggle was
the Cato Street Conspiracy, in which the idea was to attack the cabinet
at dinner and kill particular tyrants: the lord chancellor, the lord of the
treasury, the secretary of war, Castlereagh at the Home Department, the
chancellor of the exchequer, the master of the mint, the president of the
India Board, and the Duke of Wellington. This action would then spark
other attacks in London, at the Mansion House and the Bank of En-
gland, and insurrections in the north. Wedderburn might have taken
part if he had not been in prison, convicted of blasphemy. In any case,
the events of 1816 made Wedderburn see that slave revolt and urban in-
surrection could produce a great jubilee, the apotheosis of resistance,
which would be inaugurated by a work stoppage that would “strike terror
to your oppressors.” By 1820, jubilee had become international and pan-
ethnic: it was part of the self-activity of the proletariat, associated with
insurrectionary prophecy and deeds. It became the basis of the general
strike, as articulated by William Benbow.62
Wedderburn’s conception of the proletariat arose from the experiences of a life spent in the port cities of Kingston and London. James Kelley would write in 1838 that in Wedderburn’s native Jamaica, “sailors and Negroes are ever on the most amicable terms.” Slaves, he noted, had “a feeling of independence in their intercourse with the sailor. . . . In the presence of the sailor, the Negro feels as a man.” In the island’s demography, “coloured births were most common amongst slaves employed on wharves.” R. R. Madden recorded these unions with understanding. In the sailing districts of East London, “every cove that put in his appearance was quite welcome: colour or country considered no obstacle. . . . All was happiness—every body free and easy, and freedom of expression allowed to the very echo. The group motley indeed;—Lascars, blacks, jack tars, coal-heavers, dustmen, women of colour, old and young, and a sprinkling of the remnants of once fine girls, &c., were all jigging together.”

Everyone knew Tom Molyneux, the black American sailor and heavyweight boxing champion. Othello was performed by African American sailors in Dartmoor Prison in 1814. London, certainly, and other parts of England, Scotland, and Ireland as well, were already motley, or free and easy, by 1820. The authorities watched the combinations carefully, but they could not control them. In the Americas, New Orleans at Congo Square (1817) and New York at Catherine Market (1821) were two spots among many where all jigged together.

Sailors were, to Wedderburn, a leading revolutionary force; indeed, he was familiar with Masaniello’s Revolt of 1647. Many of his comrades had dockside or seafaring experience. The Irish Cashman had worked as a fisherman and a sailor and been nine times wounded; the account of his wages at the conclusion of the wars was described by a friend to the Black Dwarf (March 19, 1817), as follows:

*Four years’ pay*, at the rate of one pound per month, was due to him from the owner of a transport, in which he served; that *seven months’ pay*, at the rate of three pounds ten shillings per month, was due him from a ship in which he afterwards served; from another ship, *five months’ pay*, at five pounds ten shillings per month; that he afterwards served on board the Sea-horse and Maidstone frigates; that he was entitled to prize money from the Sea-horse, but
lost all his papers in a schooner, in which he was taken in an action off the coast of America, and carried to Philadelphia; on which occasion he was wounded, and under the surgeon’s hands for a long time.

His father was killed at sea, and his mother had to beg for bread, as the pound a month that he requested be sent her from his wages never was. His hanging in March 1817 for participation in the Spa Fields Riots, when a gunsmith shop was looted, occasioned cries of “murder” and “shame.”

William “Black” Davidson, born in Kingston, Jamaica, in 1786, had also been a sailor, as well as a cabinetmaker, a secretary to the shoemakers’ trade union, and a teacher in a Wesleyan Sunday school. Almost six feet tall, he was admired for his courage and his strength. At a demonstration he protected one of the symbols of hydrarchy, a black flag with skull and crossbones and the words “Let us die like Men and not be sold like Slaves.” He was hanged after the Cato Street Conspiracy, as was Arthur Thistlewood, who “had much of the air of a seafaring man.” A city constable testified that during the Spa Fields Riots, the black American sailor Richard Simmonds was “harranguing the mob for half an hour; during the whole time he was the most active man among them.” Apprehended a week later on an outward-bound East Indiaman, he explained that several blacks and mulattos had been involved in the riots; for this reason, city authorities had arrested strangers and detained both “foreign and black sailors.”66 Other men with maritime experience in Wedderburn’s wide circle included the Irishman John “Zion” Ward and Richard Brothers. (Indeed, Wedderburn wondered whether Brothers’s fate of being confined in a madhouse might also be his own.) Government spies noted the prominence of sailors and salty language at Wedderburn’s Hopkins Street Chapel.

Wedderburn was but one link in a long chain of Atlantic antinomians. By 1802 he had already ascended “from a legal state of mind, into a state of Gospel Liberty.” He had experienced “a deliverance from the power or authority of the law, considering himself not to be under the power of the law, but under Grace.” Once in this state, he was free: “Being thus secure, he was enabled with boldness to examine the various doctrines he heard
advanced at different times.” He denied the power of Parliament to make laws that would contravene divine sovereignty in the ownership or distribution of land, and he insisted that there was godly legitimacy in resistance to oppressive laws. He asked his half-sister, “Oh Elizabeth, who first sanctioned the inhuman traffic, canst thou take away my guilt? No, cried a voice from some invisible being, the people should have resisted inhuman laws when proposed.” In *High-Heel’d Shoes for Dwarfs in Holiness*, written from his dungeon in 1820, he argued for the “armour of grace, the sword of the Spirit, and the shield of faith, to enable us to overcome the world.” Wedderburn may have helped in the 1810s and 1820s to encourage antinomian thinking among Afro-Protestants in Jamaica. To the Native Baptists (sometimes thought of as “Christianized obeahs”), conversion “meant not embracing a strict code of Christian morality but being above morality.” It followed, wrote Mary Turner, that John the Baptist “replaced Christ as the savior figure.” Wedderburn distinguished himself from conservative Baptist and Methodist missionaries by asking, in discussion on Hopkins Street, “Which is the greater crime, for the wesleyan Missionaries to preach up passive obedience to the poor Black Slaves in the west Indies,” or to extort their money?67

Wedderburn, like almost all of those whom he called, even as late as 1819, “us Jacobins,” had studied the writings of Paine. These made a lifelong impression. “Glory be to Thomas Paine,” he railed at the Hopkins Street Chapel: “His Rights of Man have taught us better” than “that ignorant smock faced stupid fool,” the king. Wedderburn defied the government when he vowed that though Paine’s books “may burn by the hand of the common Hangman,” yet “they cannot burn [them] out of my head.”68 Still, Wedderburn, like Spence, pushed republican revolutionary thought beyond the positions taken by his fellow Jacobin artisanal radicals, who accepted capitalist redefinitions of property and the wage relation and considered *The Rights of Man* to be their manifesto. Mary Wollstonecraft exposed one limit of those positions in *The Rights of Women*, and Spence another in *The Rights of Infants; Or, the Imprintable Right of MOTHER’S to such a Share of the Elements as is Sufficient to Enable them to Suckle and Bring up their Young* (1796). Writing in a female voice, Spence attacked Paine as he shamed the men of the English proletariat: “We have found our husbands, to their indelible shame,
woefully negligent and deficient about their own rights, as well as those of their wives and infants, [and] we women, mean to take up the business ourselves.”

In 1817 Wedderburn debated the question “Is the American Government to be applauded or Condemned for the means they have taken to civilize the Indians by giving them a Portion of Land?” Wedderburn argued that “barbarism was better than Christianity. . . . If there was a God he would prevent Christianity from getting among the Indians give us Nature and we don’t want to know God, we can worship the Sun.” Making allowances for the unsympathetic, unpunctuated reporting of a spy, readers of Volney will recognize his ideas in this passage, for it was Volney who gathered the religions of the world in a semicircle (as Mrs. Campbell had gathered her slaves prior to their emancipation) for a mass debate of religious contradiction, before brilliantly demonstrating that Christianity, once its symbols and doctrines were explained by syncretic filiation, was the “Allegorical Worship of the Sun.” Moreover, the origin of heliocentric theology was the Upper Nile, “among a black race of men.”69 Wedderburn summarized Christ’s teaching in three commands: “Acknowledge no King—Acknowledge no priest. Acknowledge no Father.” Wedderburn’s own bitter, lifelong struggle with his wealthy Scottish father over the issues of paternity and inheritance thus broadened his political vision. The same, of course, was true of his transatlantic experiences of slavery and dispossession, which disinclined him to think of white, male, propertied citizenship as a means to revolutionary ends.70

Wedderburn demanded “in the name of God, in the name of natural justice, and in the name of humanity, that all slaves be set free.” He knew that the most important abolitionists were the slaves themselves, who, like all other Atlantic workers, would of necessity deliver themselves from slavery and oppression by any means necessary. The most important means was direct action, and most emphatically not, he insisted, petitioning: “It is degrading to human nature to petition your oppressors.” Wedderburn was a living testimonial to “the horrors of slavery,” a phrase that served as the title of his autobiography. The power of this link was acknowledged in 1820 by William Wilberforce, who visited Wedderburn in prison and suggested that he write an account of his life for the movement, and earlier by the middle-class abolitionists who climbed up the
A peep into the City of London Tavern, by George Cruikshank, 1817: Wedderburn (at right) confronts Robert Owen. 
By permission of the British Library.

ladder and into Wedderburn’s poor loft of a chapel to hear his denunciation of slavery.71

Like the linchpin, a small piece of metal that connected the wheels to the axle of the carriage and made possible the movement and firepower of the ship’s cannon, Wedderburn was an essential piece of something
larger, mobile, and powerful. He linked through time the communist Christian in the ancient Near East with the Leveller in England and with the Native Baptist in Jamaica. He linked through space the slave and the maroon with the sailor and the dockworker, with the commoner and the artisan and the factory worker; he linked the evangelical with the Painite; he linked the slave with the working-class and middle-class opponent of slavery in the metropolis. He was the kind of person for whom “the idea of abolishing the slave trade is connected to the levelling system and the rights of man.” He linked the trumpet of jubilee in the enclosed commons of England with the “shell-blow” jubilee of Jamaica. He had been a ship’s gunner, and he knew exactly how a linchpin worked. He knew that without human linchpins like himself, Sam Sharpe and the Baptist War in Jamaica in 1831 might never have been possible. Sharpe, writes Mary Turner, “had formulated justifications for action inspired by the ideology that informed the radicals of the English Revolution and their descendants in the antislavery movement.”72 These justifications—and direct actions—helped to bring first the promise (on August 1, 1834) of jubilee and then its reality (on August 1, 1838): an end to slavery in the British Caribbean. Wedderburn lived long enough to witness (and no doubt to celebrate) the first, but not the second.
Chapter Nine

1. Inventory Book, 1B/11/3, vol. 135, National Archives, Spanish Town, Jamaica.

2. Robert Wedderburn, *The Horrors of Slavery* (London, 1824), republished in Iain McCalman, ed., *“The Horrors of Slavery” and Other Writings by Robert Wedderburn* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991). Wedderburn chooses italic, bold, and upper-case characters from the typographer’s case, breaking with the English conventions of printed expression, because he feels that his own character, or type, requires that English conventions of printing and writing, in addition to those of political thinking, be modified to make room for a voice such as his own. The printing parallels Wedderburn’s unconventional interruption described in Cruikshank’s print *The City of London Tavern* (1817). See page 325.


5. The *Political Register*, July 1809; see also The *Examiner*, September 1810. The punishment was meant to terrorize and to silence. Anna Clark examined the Old Bailey *Proceedings* and concluded that after 1795 the court began to suppress the testimony of women against violence, rape, and beatings. Deborah Valenze shows that this was the period of the devaluation of women’s labor: the violence against them and the silencing of their complaints were means of making their wages subsistence, their work supersubmissive, and themselves an ideal subject for the horrors of the factory. Anna Clark, *Women’s Silence, Men’s Violence: Sexual Assault in England, 1770–1845* (London: Pandora, 1987), 17; Deborah Valenze, *The First Industrial Woman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 89.


8. See his *Truth Self-Supported; or A Refutation of Certain Doctrinal Errors Generally Adopted in the Christian Church* (c. 1802), republished in McCalman, ed., “The Horrors of Slavery” and Other Writings.


12. *Political Register*, October 1809; Malcolm Chase, “From Millennium to Anniversary: The Concept of Jubilee in Late Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century En-


27. Elizabeth Campbell may have been related to the several Campbells among the Trelawny maroons, who after their defeat in the Second Maroon War were tricked into being deported to Nova Scotia. Other maroons lived outside their communities without giving up their maroon status. See Mavis C. Campbell, *Nova Scotia and the Fighting Maroons: A Documentary History*, no. 41 (January 1990) of *Studies in Third World Societies*, 196, 207, 211, 238. The *Jamaica Almanac* of 1818 lists an Elizabeth Campbell of Amity Hall in Trelawny as the owner of fifteen slaves. See the *Inventory Book*, volume 130, page 236 (20 August 1818), and *Index to Manumissions*, volume 1, number 47, National Library (Kingston). The Feurado Manuscript notes the death of one Elizabeth Campbell, aged thirty-three, in 1825, and identifies her as a matron in the Public Hospital in Kingston; see National Archive (Spanish Town).


34. *A Brief Account of the Life, Experience, Travels and Gospel Labours of George White, An


37. Thomas Evans, Christian Policy, the Salvation of the Empire (London, 1816), 19; The Axe Laid to the Root, no. 4 (1817).


40. The Axe Laid to the Root, no. 4 (1817).

41. Lewis, Journal, 39, 179; The Axe Laid to the Root, no. 6 (1817).

42. Campbell, The Maroons. See chapter 4 above.


48. *The Axe Laid to the Root*, no. 4 (1817); Lewis, *Journal*, 405. For suggestions about the “Shariers,” we thank Dr. Kenneth Ingram of the National Library of Jamaica and Professor Mavis Campbell.


52. “Forlorn Hope,” 15; *The Axe Laid to the Root*, no. 5 (1817).


55. *Old Bailey Proceedings*, 15 January 1817; *Political Register*, No. 21 (1817).

56. *The Axe Laid to the Root*, no. 6 (1817); *The Horrors of Slavery*.

57. National Library (Kingston), Nugent Papers, MS 72, Box 3 (1804–1806), fol. 279.


59. Ibid., ibid., no. 5 (1817).

60. *The Axe Laid to the Root*, no. 4 (1817).


**Conclusion**


5. *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery* (1787, 1791), 36–37. In 1934 Samuel Beckett translated an article during the anglophone moment of négritude: “If the race of Negroes should happen to disappear tomorrow, no doubt, their absence would be deprecated by the white man; as transatlantic stokers, as hewers and carriers of water it would be a matter of some difficulty to replace them.” See Nancy Cunard, *The Negro Anthology* (London: Nancy Cunard at Wishart, 1934), 580.