

CELEBRATING BLACK HISTORY MONTH

By Vibert Lampkin - Speech made on February 22, 2010

I have had a bit of difficulty choosing what I would speak about today.

Black history was not a subject taught in Guyana where I was born and received my formal education. In elementary school we learned a bit about the history of Guyana and how Sir Walter Raleigh thought that he had found Eldorado, the legendary city of gold – in fact he never did.

In high school we were taught English history about the kings and queens of England. The reason was quite simply because our examinations were set and marked by the Universities of Oxford, Cambridge and London. And I was not interested in how many wives Henry VIII had and how he came to dispose of them.

When I got into the higher forms of high school, and had to study Latin at the higher levels I had to read Roman history, which I found interesting. Since this event has been advertised as a ‘celebratory and learning event’ I have decided therefore to speak of black history in general and to give a brief synopsis of a few black heroes of whom you may or may not have heard.

Black History Month is a time to recall the history and the roots of black people and to celebrate some of the achievements of black people. It is celebrated annually in the United States and Canada in February and in the United Kingdom in October. I have no knowledge of its recognition elsewhere.

United States historian Carter G. Woodson founded it in 1926 firstly as ‘Negro History Week’ because in those days it was still kosher to refer to non-whites as ‘negroes’. Woodson chose the second week of February because it marked the birthdays of two Americans who greatly influenced the lives and social condition of African Americans – former President Abraham Lincoln and abolitionist and former slave Frederick Douglass.

The recognition of Black History Month has created controversy about its continued usefulness and fairness of a month dedicated to the history of one race. No less a person than Morgan Freeman has said that the concept is “ridiculous”. He said on 60 minutes a few years ago: “You’re going to relegate my history to a month? ... I don’t want a black history month. Black history is American history.” Now I admire Morgan Freeman – he is a great actor. But I think that he has fallen into the American belief that America is the world and thus black history is American history. Black history encompasses much more than American history. Indeed it may come as a surprise to many to learn that America did not receive the largest number of slaves from Africa – Brazil did.

On the other hand there is an Asian Pacific American Heritage Month celebrated in May to commemorate the contributions of people of Asian and Pacific Islander descent in the United States. In 1978 Congress passed a joint resolution to commemorate the first week of May as Asian American Heritage Week and in 1990 Congress voted to expand this to a month long celebration and permanently designated May as such in 1992.

Hispanic Heritage Month was approved by President Lyndon Johnson in 1968 and was expanded by President Ronald Reagan in 1988 to cover the 30-day period from September 15 to October 15. It recognizes the contributions of Hispanic Americans to the United States and is a celebration of Hispanic heritage and culture.

Jewish American Heritage Month was first recognized as recently as May 2006. After resolutions were unanimously passed by the House of Representatives in December 2005 and later by the Senate in February 2006, President George W. Bush announced in April 2006 that the month of May would be Jewish American Heritage Month in recognition of the 350 years of Jewish American contributions to America.

I will also remind those critics of Black History Month of the African proverb: Until lions write their own history, the tale of the hunt will always glorify the hunter.

It is not possible to speak of Black history without speaking of the issue of slavery, which enters human history with civilization. Hunter-gatherers and primitive farmers have no use for slaves. They hunt and kill, farm and grow enough food for themselves and their families. There is no economic value in owning another human being, which means another mouth to feed. But once people start to live in towns and cities, there is a real benefit in a reliable source of cheap labour on farms and plantations. These were the conditions that led to slavery and every ancient civilization has used slaves. It did not start in the middle ages. It could be traced back to the 18th century BC. The Code of Hammurabi who ruled Babylon from about 1790 BC speaks of slaves. The Code speaks of three social classes, the third of which were the slaves who were allowed to own property. The Greeks and the Romans also had slaves in the centuries before Christ. And though the vast majority of slaves was from Africa, there were also white slaves.

But modern history is more concerned with the Atlantic slave trade which brought Africans, mainly from West and Central Africa to the colonies of North America, South America and the Caribbean to work as unpaid labour on sugar, coffee, cocoa and cotton plantations, in gold and silver mines, in rice fields or in houses to work as servants. The shippers were in order of scale, the Portuguese who took their slaves to Brazil, the English who took their slaves to North America and the Caribbean, the French, the Spanish, the Dutch and the North Americans. Historians estimate that between 9.4 and 12 million Africans arrived in the New World. Approximately 8 million Africans were killed during their storage, shipment and landing in the New World. The amount of lives lost remains a mystery but may equal or exceed the amount actually enslaved. These figures would indicate the total number of deaths at around 16 million – a tad more than the 6 million Jews murdered by Hitler and his henchmen during the Second World War. Thus African scholars refer to the slave trade as the Maafa, meaning ‘holocaust’ or ‘great disaster’ in Swahili or African Holocaust or Holocaust of Enslavement.

It must be acknowledged that the slave trade could not have been as successful as it was without the active participation of Africans. Enslaved people were generally obtained through coastal trading with Africans, though some were captured by European slave

traders through raids and kidnapping. Indeed slavery was practiced in Africa before the beginning of the Atlantic slave trade. Slavery and the slave trade were an integral part of African societies and states, which supplied the Arab world with enslaved people for centuries before the arrival of the Europeans.

The abolition of the Atlantic slave trade started in Britain. The fight to do so was long and arduous. It had lasted from the 16th to the 19th centuries. The last known form of enforced servitude of adults had disappeared in Britain at the beginning of the seventeenth century. By the eighteenth century, traders began to import African, Indian and East Asian slaves to London and Edinburgh to work as personal servants. They were not bought or sold and their status was unclear until the case of James Somersett reached the English Court of King's Bench in 1772. Somersett was the property of Charles Steuart, a Customs officer from Boston, Massachusetts, at the time a British colony in North America. He took Somersett to England in 1769. In 1771 Somersett escaped. He was recaptured and imprisoned on board a ship intent on sending him to Jamaica to work on the sugar plantations. However while in London Somersett had been baptized and his godparents issued a writ of habeas corpus. Lord Mansfield, Chief Justice of the Court of King's Bench, ordered that Somersett be produced before the Court, which would determine whether his imprisonment was legal. In his judgment Lord Mansfield said *inter alia*:

...The state of slavery is of such a nature that it is incapable of being introduced on any reasons, moral or political; but only positive law, which preserves its force long after the reasons, occasion, and time itself from whence it was created, is erased from memory: it's so odious, that nothing can be suffered to support it, but positive law. Whatever inconveniences, therefore, may follow from a decision, I cannot say this case is allowed or approved by the law of England; and therefore the black must be discharged.

The Somersett judgment was widely accepted that on English soil, no man was a slave. The second salvo came in Scotland in 1776. After reading about Somersett's case, Joseph Knight, an enslaved African in Scotland, left his master John Wedderburn who brought proceedings to reclaim him. The decision showed that slavery had as little support in Scottish common law as in English.

Nevertheless slavery was still rampant in the British colonial empire. The slave trade to the new world aroused little protest until the 18th century when rationalist thinkers criticized it for violating the rights of man and Quaker and other evangelical religious groups condemned it as un-Christian. However anti-slavery sentiments had little immediate effect on the centres of slavery: the Southern United States, the West Indies and South America. William Wilberforce took on the cause of abolition in Britain in 1787 and led the Parliamentary campaign to abolish the slave trade in the British Empire with the Slave Trade Act of 1807. He continued the campaign for abolition in the British Empire and lived to see the passage of the Slavery Abolition Act passed in 1833 – one hundred years before I saw the light of day.

And where does Canada fit into the history of slavery? Slavery in Canada existed from the earliest times. Some slaves were of African descent while others were aboriginal. Upper Canada, now Ontario, was a pioneer in the movement to abolish slavery. John Graves Simcoe was the first Lieutenant Governor of Upper Canada. Even before he had become Lieutenant Governor in 1791 he had stated his intention to treat persons of African, Canadian or European origin equally. He passed the Act Against Slavery on July 9, 1793 to prohibit slavery in Upper Canada. Because of strong resistance on the grounds that abolition would be a serious economic blow to the colony, he was forced to modify his Act to allow for a gradual elimination of slavery instead. His Act stated that all slaves in the province would remain enslaved until death, that no new slaves could be brought into Upper Canada, and that children born to female slaves would be freed at age 25 which at the time was the average life expectancy for Africans. Further, any children born to this second generation while they were still slaves would be free from birth. Thus Upper Canada became a safe haven for runaway slaves – hence the establishment of the Underground Railway. Governor Simcoe effectively ended slavery in Upper Canada long before it was abolished in the British Empire as a whole – by 1810 there were no slaves in Upper Canada but the Crown did not abolish slavery throughout the British Empire until 1834. At the time, Canada was not yet a country – that did not occur until July 1, 1867 with the passage of the British North America Act. Thus slavery has never existed in Canada as a nation.

In the United States the American Civil War beginning in 1861, which had its genesis over the issue of slavery and caused the South to secede from the Union, led to the end of chattel slavery in America. All the northern states had passed emancipation acts between 1780 and 1804. Emancipation however as a reality did not come to the southern slaves until after the surrender of all Confederate troops in the spring of 1865 when Congress voted for the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution which made emancipation universal and permanent.

Today, of course, slavery of another ilk demands worldwide attention. Child and adult slavery and forced labour are illegal in most countries as well as being against international law. It is estimated that there are 27 million people enslaved worldwide – mainly for prostitution purposes. But that is a subject for another day.

Just to show that Black history is much more than American history let me say that Canada and the Caribbean have produced many black heroes – and I am not even talking about cricketers.

In recognition of Black History Month Canada Post has issued a .57-cent postage stamp in honour of William Hall. He was born in 1821 at Horton, Nova Scotia, the son of former American slaves. When he left school, he worked in shipyards at Hantsport for several years, building wooden ships for the merchant marine. He then joined the crew of a trading vessel and before he was eighteen, had visited most of the world's important ports. He enlisted in the Royal Navy in 1852 and saw two years of service in the Crimean War for which he received British and Turkish medals for his work during the campaign. After the war he was assigned to various ships and finally to HMS Shannon as Captain of

the Foretop. His service on the Shannon led him to service at Lucknow, India, where there was a war in progress. The guns of the Shannon were dragged to within 20 yards of a walled structure being defended by 30,000 men who had inflicted heavy casualties on the British forces from their protected positions. Hall volunteered to replace a missing man on the crew of a twenty-four pound howitzer. The enemy concentrated its fire on two twenty-four pounders, one of which was Hall's. One of the gun crews was totally annihilated. Of the Shannon crew only Hall and one officer, Lieutenant Thomas Young, were left standing. Young was badly injured but he and Hall continued working the gun, firing, reloading and firing again until they finally triggered the charge that opened the walls. Both William Hall and Lieutenant Young received the Victoria Cross in recognition of their gallant conduct at a twenty-four-pounder gun at Lucknow on the 16th November 1857. Hall received his Victoria Cross aboard HMS Donegal in Queenstown Harbour, Ireland, on October 28, 1859. William Hall was the first Black person, the first Nova Scotian and the first Canadian sailor to receive the Victoria Cross, the Empire's highest award for bravery. His naval career continued aboard many ships until he retired in 1876 as Quartermaster. He died in 1904 in Nova Scotia and was buried in an unmarked grave without military honours. In 1937 a local campaign was launched to have his valour recognized by the Canadian Legion but it was eight more years before his body was reburied in the grounds of the Hantsport Baptist Church. The monument there bears a replica of the Victoria Cross and a plaque that describes Hall's courage and devotion to duty.

Hubert Nathaniel Critchlow was born in Georgetown, Guyana, in 1884. After leaving school in his late teens he worked as a dockworker or stevedore. At the age of 20 he began his struggle to win better wages and working conditions for waterfront workers. In 1917 he founded the British Guiana Labour Union, officially the first trade union in the Caribbean. He devoted his life to changing the harsh conditions under which men were forced to work in those days. He is often regarded as the father of trade unions in the Caribbean. He died in 1958. On December 2, 1964 Dr. Cheddie Jagan, then premier of Guyana, unveiled a bronze statue of Critchlow in the compound of the Parliament Building. His work is specially remembered on May 1, which is designated as Labour Day; Workers' Day; or May Day, when leaders of the government and prominent trade unionists lay wreaths at the base of Critchlow's statue. Workers parade through the streets dressed in red and white carrying the banner of their particular trade union in a show of solidarity for workers' rights

Dr. Eric Eustace Williams was born in Trinidad on September 25, 1911, the son of Henry Williams, a minor civil servant, and his wife Elisha, a descendant of the French Creole elite. He was educated at Queen's Royal College in Port of Spain, Trinidad, where he excelled at academics and football. He won an island scholarship in 1932 to Oxford University where he placed first in the First Class of Oxford students graduating in History in 1935 while representing the University in football and went on to earn his Doctor of Philosophy degree in 1938. His doctoral thesis, *The Economic Aspects of the Abolition of the Slave Trade and West Indian Slavery* was both a direct attack on the idea that moral and humanitarian motives were the key facts in the victory of British abolitionism. Despite his extraordinary success at Oxford, he was denied any opportunity

to pursue a career in the United Kingdom. In 1939 he took up an appointment at Howard University in Washington D.C. where he was quickly promoted twice, attaining full professorial rank. His masterwork – *Capitalism and Slavery* – was published by the University of North Carolina in 1944 but it slaughtered so many sacred cows of British imperial history that it was not until 1964 that it was published in the United Kingdom and even then, met a hostile reception. In 1944 he was appointed to the Anglo-American Caribbean Commission and in 1948 he returned to Trinidad as the Commission's Deputy Chairman, which elected not to renew his contract in 1955 after a series of disagreements with the Commission. In a famous speech at Woodford Square in Port of Spain he rechristened that enclosed park in front of the Trinidad courts and legislature, "The University of Woodford Square" and proceeded to give a series of lectures on world history, Greek democracy and philosophy, the history of slavery, and the history of the Caribbean to large audiences drawn from every social class. In January 1956 he inaugurated his own political party, the People's National Movement, which took Trinidad into independence in 1962 and dominated its postcolonial politics. He was Trinidad's Chief Minister from 1956 to 1962 and became Trinidad's first Prime Minister and served as such until his death in 1981. Often called the "Father of the Nation", he remains one of the most significant leaders in the history of Trinidad and Tobago.

Sir William Alexander Clarke Bustamante was born in Jamaica, the son of Robert Constantine Clarke, an Irish Roman Catholic planter, and his wife Mary who was of mixed race. He claimed that he took the name of Bustamante to honour an Iberian sea captain who befriended him in his youth. Bustamante travelled the world, worked as a policeman in Cuba and as a dietician in a New York City Hospital before returning to Jamaica in 1932 where he became the leader of the struggle against colonial rule. In 1937 he became the treasurer of the Jamaica Workers' Union and during the labour rebellion of 1938 he became the spokesman for striking workers. After the revolt the JWU became the Bustamante Industrial Trade Union and he became known as "The Chief".

Bustamante was imprisoned for subversive activities in 1940 and following his release in 1942; he founded the Jamaica Labour Party in 1943. His party was elected to power in 1943 but was defeated in 1955. He was returned to power in 1962 and served as Jamaica's first Prime Minister when the country gained independence in 1962, serving as such until 1967 although in 1965 he withdrew from active participation in public life and real power was held by his deputy. In 1969 Bustamante was proclaimed a 'National Hero of Jamaica'. He died in 1977.

Finally, Norman Washington Manley, QC, was born on July 4, 1893, the son of Albert Samuel Manley, a former slave, who was the illegitimate son of an English trader from Yorkshire, England. Manley's mother, Margaret Shearer, was the daughter of a pen-keeper of Irish descent and his Mulatto wife. Manley was a brilliant scholar and athlete and won a Rhodes scholarship to Jesus College, Oxford. He enlisted and fought in the First World War in the Royal Field Artillery. After the war he returned to Jamaica as a barrister and was one of Jamaica's leading lawyers in the 1920s. He identified himself with the cause of the workers at the time of the labour troubles in 1938 and donated his time and advocacy to the cause. He founded the Peoples' National Party and was the chief political rival of his cousin Bustamante but had to wait ten years and two terms after

adult suffrage came in 1944 before his party was elected to office. After the break-up of the West Indian Federation in 1962, Manley lost the election to Bustamante and gave his last years as Leader of the Opposition, establishing definitively the role of the parliamentary opposition in a developing nation. In his last public address to an annual conference of the PNP, he said:

“I say that the mission of my generation was to win self-government for Jamaica. To win political power for the black masses of my country from which I spring. I am proud to stand here today and say to you who fought that fight with me, say it with gladness and pride: Mission accomplished for my generation”.

Due to respiratory illness, Manley retired from politics on his birthday in 1969 and died later that year, on September 2, 1969. Shortly before his death he was proclaimed a National Hero of Jamaica along with Bustamante.

I must apologise to Regional Senior Justice Greg Regis for not mentioning Sir Arthur Lewis, formerly of the University of the West Indies, who hails from the Island of St. Lucia, also the native land of Justice Regis, and who remains the only West Indian Nobel laureate in economics, a prize that he won in 1979. But time does not permit me to go into his career in depth.

You will notice that I have not mentioned any of usual heroes – such as Harriet Tubman and Martin Luther King of whom everyone knows. So there you have it – a glimpse of black heroes and black history beyond the United States.