

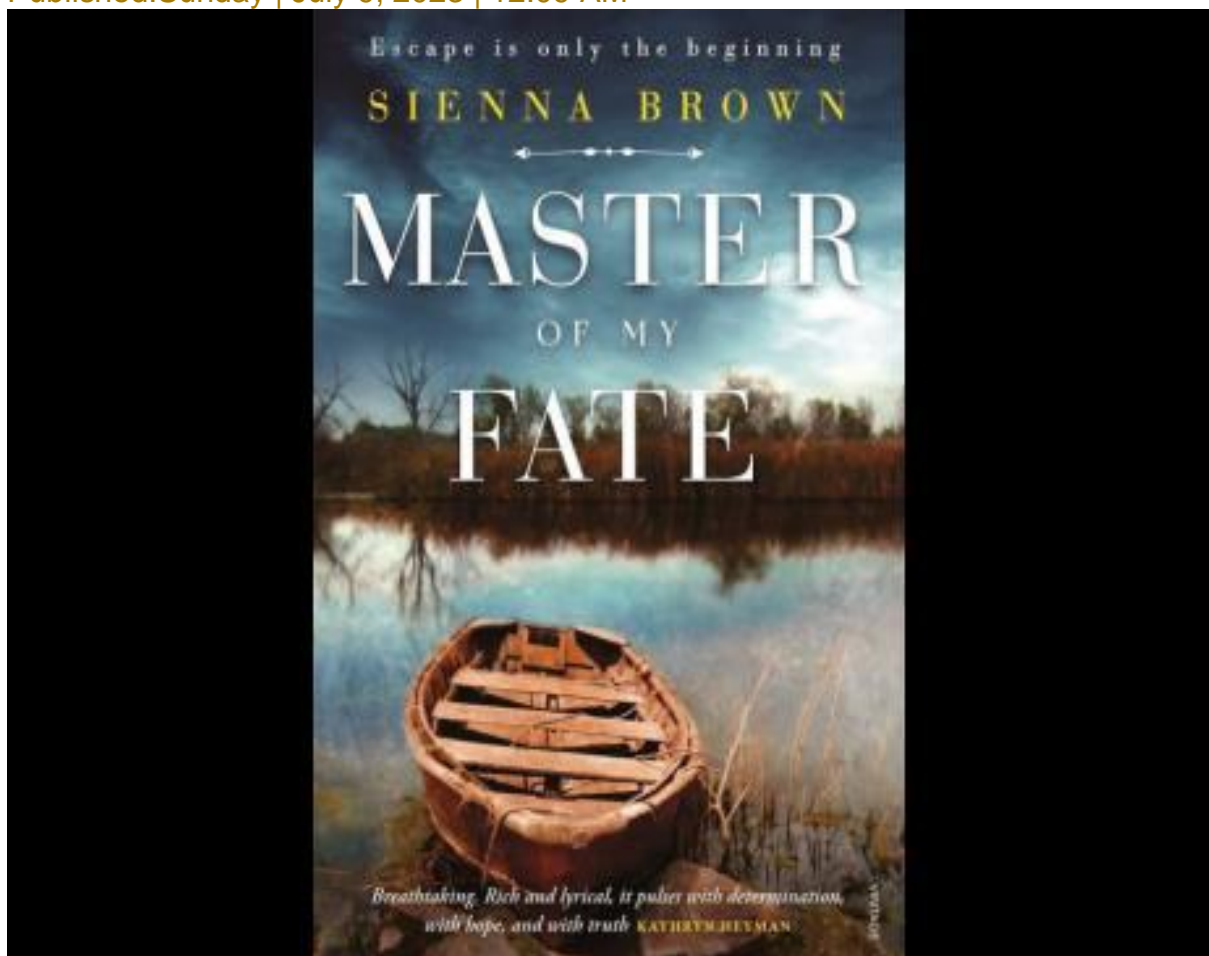
The Gleaner Jamaica WI Established 1834

REPARATION CONVERSATIONS

Sienna Brown | Trials and tribulations of William

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After many years away I made it back to Jamaica, home to the ancestral whisperings that compelled me to write *Master of My Fate*, a historical fiction based on an enslaved man, William Buchanan, who endured chattel enslavement on Ginger Hill, St Elizabeth, and his journey to becoming his own master, through to eventual freedom in colonial New South Wales (NSW). The Centre for Reparation Research graciously invited me to share this extraordinary tale, during a seminar, which I have summarised for readers:

It starts with Australia. The First Fleet sailed into Botany Bay on the January 25, 1788 with many convicts on-board, under the command of Captain Arthur Phillip. He declared the land of Australia to be a British penal colony, a land that was actually inhabited by the First Nations people who had lived there for over 60,000 years.

In the early years, convicts were allowed to find their own lodgings in what had become a small port town of about 250 residences. That was up until Lachlan Macquarie became governor. Having decided that convicts had too much freedom, he ordered Hyde Park Barracks to be built. Now a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the Barracks sit in the heart of downtown Sydney.

As fate would have it, I got a job working as a tour guide at the Barracks. There, my research uncovered that in 1836, William Buchanan clanked his way through the Barrack's gates in chains, along with 31 other men from the West Indies.

Now the prevalent idea had been that only European convicts had been transported, an idea enhanced by the white Australia policy of 1901, so finding William was a revelation. Further research found Stella, William's mother, and siblings, James, Sammy and Eliza, who were listed on an 1817 slave register belonging to a Cargill Mowatt, in Saint James. And those names would morph into the characters whose lives would become the bedrock on which the fictional story of Master of My Fate rested. However, Stella disappeared from the records, and it took ages to find why.

BROUGHT THIS ABOUT

In a previous trial, a Maroon man by the name of Robert McKellar was heard saying that although he was guilty of the deed, it was the Mowatt 'negroes' who brought this about – the implication being that Stella and William were involved – and after his confession, they were then both put on trial for the murder. Only Stella was found guilty. William was declared innocent, and maybe he was forced to watch as his mother was hanged by the neck until she died. It was the demise of Stella that plunged me further along the historical timeline that would eventually lead me to the 1831-32 Emancipation war led by Samuel Sharpe.

After Massa's death, the paper trail led me to a bill of sale dated July 27, 1825 of William, his siblings, along with 18 other enslaved Africans being sold to a George

Longmore Esquire who owned the Ginger Hill Estate in St Elizabeth for the sum of £1,655. For the next seven years, William, and his siblings were enslaved at the Ginger Hill estate which the records show was destroyed during the 1831-32 war, which is where William and Sam Sharpe's timeline intersects. Much has been documented and written about Sam Sharpe and the war by scholars, such as Mary Turner, Verene Shepherd and Ahmed Reid; so, I'll keep the focus on William's engagement. Using extensive chapter notes from Mary Turner's brilliant *Slaves and Missionaries*. I ordered copies of trial transcripts from the Kent Archives. I was elated when one of the trial transcripts gave details of what happened at the Ginger Hill Estate where William – leading a small band of rebels – meets Sharpe who was seen riding in on horseback at midnight, followed by a multitude of rebels with torches ablaze, before setting fire to the main buildings. As Sam Sharpe rode away, the rebels fired off volleys of gunfire around him in celebration. William was captured, and his trial was held in the courthouse at Black River, which I visited several years ago and was thrilled to see it still stands.

TRANSPORTED

Like many of the other freedom-fighters, William was convicted and sentenced to be executed, but instead up until 1834, he'd been languishing in a workhouse in Saint Elizabeth, until his name appears among others in a letter ordering that he be transported.

This now takes us into the beginning of William's experience outside the world of Jamaica. According to Barry Higman, William would have perhaps first been transported on a clipper mail ship from Black River to London. On arrival, records have him being on the *Justia* hulk, one of the many hulks that were moored all up and down the Thames River. There William was transferred to the convict ship the *Moffatt* and four months later, the *Moffatt* finally arrived in Port Jackson, NSW with 396 convicts on-board.

And that's when, William walked through the gates of Hyde Park Barracks to have his name recorded in the indent book, for me to discover him 170 years later. Essentially now under English law, he was a free man, but still considered a convict and condemned to a life sentence of hard labour. Within two months, William

managed to escape with fellow Jamaican James Smith, becoming known as bushrangers. Their patch was along where the Old South Head Road in Sydney still runs today.

Eventually, William and James' luck ran out. They were captured on Friday, August 18, 1837, found guilty of bushranging and sentenced to work in leg irons for three years. In 1845, he received a ticket of leave which meant he could be hired out as a convict labourer outside of Sydney and ended up in rural NSW. His Ticket of Leave also indicates that he received a conditional pardon. So at 49 years old, William was finally FREE.

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