

Dolace McLean

**A REVIEW OF MADISON SMARTT BELL'S
*THE STONE THAT THE BUILDER REFUSED***

(Pantheon Books 2004.)

• • •

Haiti is definitely in need of more literary histories that celebrate the grandeur of its illustrious achievement of being the first free Black republic in the western hemisphere. It is only fitting then, that Madison Smartt Bell chooses to release the final part of a trilogy that glorifies this daring accomplishment during the bicentennial celebration of Haiti's successful revolution against slavery and freedom from French colonial rule.

The Stone that the Builder Refused is truly a masterpiece of literary history that draws its readers into the world of complex social and familial relationships against the detailed backdrop of military strategies and battles between the Haitians and the French for the old colony of Saint Domingue. In 1801 Toussaint, the "gilded African" as he was called by Napoleon, presented a new Constitution that abolished slavery in the colony and made him Governor-General for life. He also sent former slaves back to the plantations for better hours with remuneration and established a leadership that was backed by a powerful army.¹ These historical facts are the central ideas upon which Bell builds his grand narrative that blends reality, fiction and myth to flesh out the history of

¹ C.L.R. James. The Black Jacobins. (Vintage, 1989). P. 243.

how a former slave became the powerful First Consul of the prosperous “pearl of the Antilles.”

In this novel Bell personalizes the two historically decisive battles at Ravine à Couleuvre and La Crête à Pierrot that eventually led to the surrender of the Haitian armies. Bell skillfully details the violence of the bloody battles waged in the plains and the mountain regions throughout the country. The French generals, Leclerc and Rochambeau, are depicted in their full arrogance of beliefs that they can easily put down a “nigger insurrection” and return the prized colony to French rule. Equally compelling are the portrayals of the brave Haitian generals in Toussaint’s army, cowardly Christophe, the wily Sans Souci and the relentless Dessalines, as they wage a determined struggle against the French using soldiers and laborers .

In this novel Dessalines emerges as the Toussaint’s rival and successor general for control of the military and eventually Haiti itself. Although Dessalines is not fleshed out as a character, any good history of the Haitian revolution reveals that he was totally resistant to any capitulation to the French and as such preferred an all out fight for freedom or death. Toussaint, on the other hand, wanted to negotiate with the French to rid Haiti of Leclerc and stem the devastating losses suffered by both sides. With an intelligent regard for the duplicitous behavior of the French, Bell spends only a few pages to deal with their ignoble rejection of peace by arresting Toussaint and his family. The rest of the novel really is history as Bell recreates scenes of Toussaint’s final humiliating days in exile in his French prison.

The portentous nature of French refusal that leads to a truly independent Haiti is mirrored in the title of the book. The title of the novel, The Stone that the Builder Refused, is attributed to a line from Bob Marley, a quote that is Biblical in its origins and refers to Christ as the rejected stone that becomes the bedrock of a revolutionary new faith. Indeed, this seems to be the trajectory of the story where Toussaint takes on mythic proportions as a revolutionary savior of the Haitian people and the avatar of freedom for enslaved people everywhere. His arrest and deportation, far from ending the revolt in Haiti, fostered stronger ties between warring Black and mulatto factions and crystallized their mutual goals for an independent nation.

To polish off the trilogy Bell brings back the usual cast of characters with a few new members thrown in to heighten the dramatic tension of the novel. Readers meet some soldiers and random white persons who moved in creole French circles. There are still the holdout members of the white planters and aristocrats such as the coquettish Isabelle Cigny, the rogue trader Tocquet, the voodoo priestess Claudine Arnaud and the military chameleon Captain Maillart. The mulatress, Nanon, who figures prominently in the storylines of the first and second books, All Souls Rising and Master of the Crossroads, recedes in the background as the faithful and loving wife of the ever-in-war, but gentle and indestructible doctor Antoine Hébèrt. Dr. Hébèrt is one of the few figures who makes it out alive in all three novels despite many a brush with death. The doctor is remembered fondly by Toussaint for his loyalty, and even Dessalines, who has an avowed hatred of whites, treats the doctor as “Li nèg”, a true citizen and therefore an honorary Black, and spares the doctor the massacre that he visits on the remaining French in the colony at the novel’s end.

Adding dimension and depth to the cast of adults and children, however, are two re-appearing characters that make the story of the life of the revolutionary leader complete. They are Toussaint’s sons, Placide and Isaac, who are escorted back to the island on the orders of Napoleon Bonaparte. Bell does an incredible job of finally humanizing the military strategist and statesman when he presents the tender and powerful reunion scene between Papa Toussaint and his sons.

Placide snapped upright in the bed, realizing that what he heard was the beat of shod hooves in the drive outside. He jumped into his trousers and in a flash was out the front door – his mother a pace or two behind him. A squadron of cavalry had pulled up in the oval drive below the gallery, and the men were just beginning to get down from their horses.... There was his father, his silhouette plainly recognizable, between the two banners hanging slack against their poles.... When they wrapped their arms around each other, Placide realized he was much the taller. How could that have been so? Then Isaac rushed to join them with an impact that rocked them on their feet. Awkwardly they climbed the stairs, loath [sic] to let each other go.”²

² Madison Smartt Bell. The Stone That The Builder Refused. (Pantheon, 2004). p. 222.

This scene is one of the strongest moments in the book where finally readers get a sense of shy Toussaint, who always covers his mouth when he laughs, as a man capable of great love and gentleness. A few pages later, Toussaint presents his sons with the agonizing choice of joining him in the war against the reinstatement of slavery or supporting France. Ironically, Placide (whose name in English means tranquil) chooses to fight by his father's side while morose and scholarly Isaac (whose name means laughter) chooses not to bear arms against a land of which he has grown very fond.³ In ensuing scenes the enigmatic Toussaint share with Placide his military secrets and his hopes for the outcome of the war, secrets and hopes otherwise a mystery to even his trusted advisers.⁴

Besides Toussaint's sons, there is a plethora of children who run the gambit of racial admixtures that were recognized by the slave system, who freely live, play and experience the war together. In presenting the children as he does Bell subtly references what was one of the greatest aspects of Toussaint's rule: a determined attempt to eradicate the prevalent race prejudice of colonial slavery. The presence of the children who do not recognize race among themselves is a powerful statement against the illogic inherent in any scheme that would assign social value to racial classifications.

Toussaint understood that a successful Haiti could only be a society of equals and sought to create a Haiti where racial prejudice was checked by intimate contacts among Black people, whites and mulattoes. The word "intimate" is not without a double meaning in this context, both referring to socio-political intercourse as well as sexual relations among members of the three groups. In fact, if Bell's fictionalizing points to some truth, Toussaint himself performed a sexualized kind of politics thorough multiple liaisons with white women, moved by "curiosity rather than passion," and aware that in the end such encounters were merely "political."⁵

Papa Toussaint's dalliances aside, his politics of inclusion shows his astuteness in recognizing that racial harmony was the only way to redeem the revolutionary enterprise. Indeed the French insistence racial stratification through force proves to be the ultimate

³ Ibid. at p. 236.

⁴ Black Jacobins, p. 249.

⁵ The Stone, p. 403

undoing of its possession and control of the colony. Later, history teaches that Dessalines as emperor repeats the same costly mistake when he kills all the remaining whites after independence is declared. Two years after independence Dessalines was murdered by political rivals.

For all the fascinating intrigue, personal histories and historical drama that the book presents, occasionally it falls shy of its promised thoroughness. There are some unfinished plot lines and weak narrative techniques that tend to leave the reader feeling somewhat cheated and even alienated from certain character. For example, Elise Tocquet, one of the holdover white women, has an exchange with her daughter Sophie who has a dramatic outburst during a trip with some soldiers to Toussaint's mansion. Nowhere is an explanation given for the girl's behavior, though it interrupts the narrative with a force that promises some revealing resolution, possibly involving a lecherous soldier named Cyprien. That promise is never fulfilled and readers are left wondering at the reason for its placement at that point in the story, indeed in the novel at all.

Additionally, there is a definitely unsatisfying moment when a central figure and personal aide to Toussaint, Guiaou, is inauspiciously killed by one of the young French soldiers who accompanied Placide and Isaac to Haiti. Readers might feel a little cheated at the easy death of such a strong character who single-handedly overpowered his captors when imprisoned in the hull of a ship, who fought hardily and bravely in the first years of the civil war, and who was always able to resist capture or harm. It is this same Guiaou who fought with Riau in Master of the Crossroads for the honor of a woman that they eventually shared. Riau narrates the circumstances of Guiaou's death in a first person narrative that is one of the stylistic features of the novel. While Bell's experimentation with voice is commendable, the first-person strategy renders Riau's character as unreflective and distances the reader from the speaker in those parts of the book where we hear his narration.

However, overall the book is a fascinating read, if for no other reason than that Bell bears out the theme that his title suggests. The stone that the builders refused can refer to Toussaint and his ideas for a free Haiti. In their rejection of Toussaint, the French rejected the dream of a nation that could balance racial factions, could maintain a successful plantation economy that rewarded its workers, and could produce successive

generations who retain Haiti's glory as an independent pearl of the Caribbean. The title, like the theme, is a dedication to ensuing generations to make sure the dream of Toussaint for Haiti comes true – that indeed the rejected stone is accepted and takes its rightful place as the chief cornerstone of a free society now as it should have been then.