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Andrew Hunter, *It Was Dark There All the Time: Sophia Burthen and the Legacy of Slavery in Canada*. Fredericton, New Brunswick: Goose Lane Editions, 2022. 328 pp. ISBN-10: 1773102192

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In *It was Dark There All the Time: Sophia Burthen and the Legacy of Slavery in Canada* (2022), Andrew Hunter, seeks to detail the life of Sophia Burthen Pooley, a woman who was enslaved in Canada and primarily owned by Mohawk chieftain Joseph Brant. Hunter seeks to demonstrate the role that Transatlantic Slavery played in pre-Confederation Canada and its continuing impact on contemporary Canadian society. The content of the book is largely based upon an interview conducted by Benjamin Drew, an American from Boston who travelled to Canada in 1855 to interview people who had experienced slavery. Drew interviewed Sophia Burthen Pooley in the Queens Bush, a place Hunter describes as an all-Black settlement around the Guelph-Kitchener area of the province of Ontario. While the original interview offers unique insight into Sophia's experience as an enslaved woman, Hunter's book does not shed further light on personal details of Sophia's life.

Due to the scant information existing about Sophia – unfortunately, a norm for most enslaved people who were strategically deprived the ability to document and represent their own experiences - Hunter's book instead offers a wide-ranging discussion of slavery in Canada and seeks to contextualize Sophia's experience through a detailed examination of the cities and towns she

passed through during her journey from New York to Canada and throughout her lifetime, as well as the significant figures she encountered. Hunter also addresses the legacy of whiteness and colonialism in Canada, often referencing his own familial history and experiences.

The book contains twenty-five chapters, each of which are titled either with a quote or a vague reference to an aspect of what is discussed within the chapter. The organization of the book is primarily linear when discussing Sophia's story, however, it becomes nonlinear when various events surrounding Transatlantic Slavery and the Colonial era are discussed.

While the book is noble in its intention to bring light to the life and experiences of Sophia Burthen Pooley, it ultimately does not add significant new information to that already provided by Drew in his historical interview. However, Hunter's contribution to the regrettably scant literary canon regarding slavery in Canada is exhaustively researched and admirably wide-ranging in its scope. Hunter's book succeeds as a reckoning with Canada's role in Transatlantic Slavery and as a reclamation of histories of black people in Canada which counters the predominantly white (and false) narrative that dominates Canadian history. However, Hunter's book ultimately fails in its primary goal of uncovering further insight into an enslaved woman's life. Further, considering *It Was Dark There All the Time* in relation to his sources and the available literature within the field, Hunter's text expands the regrettably limited scope of books about enslaved women in Canada, providing a sensitive and timely appeal to

reckon with the legacy of slavery in Canada.¹ However, considering the availability of biographical texts about enslaved women in the United States, such as *Sojourner Truth's America* (2009), and the limited, but essential books regarding slavery in Canada, such as Charmaine A. Nelson's *Slavery, Geography, and Empire in Nineteenth Century Marine Landscapes of Montreal and Jamaica* (2016), Hunter's book could have drawn more from these earlier, relevant, extant sources on temperate climate slavery in the American North and other parts of Canada. Additionally, *It was Dark There All the Time* does not contribute a significant amount to the field of Canadian Slavery Studies because it does not provide new insight regarding details of Sophia's life and is not ultimately suited for an academic audience.

Hunter contextualizes Sophia's experience within the British Empire, in which An Act for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, passed in 1807, ended the international trade and made it illegal for British vessels to continue shipping human cargo across the Atlantic. However, this did not alter Sophia's enslaved status, as the sale of enslaved people within specific colonies was not prohibited. Hunter further details how Britain continued to trade and manufacture materials and products and, ultimately, profit from a global economy dependent on slave labour (11-13). This historical information is relevant and useful, unlike Hunter's focus on the etymology of the word, *burthen* (11-13).

Hunter offers the etymology of words, related and unrelated to Sophia, throughout the book to little effect in regard to his subject's life and experiences. While the nautical relationship of the word *burthen* and Sophia's journey by river from New York to Canada is evident, Hunter's line of questioning, musing upon queries such as, "Where did this name come from? Who burdened them with a name pointing to a past filled with journeys in the holds of various vessels, in bondage? How far distant in Sophia's ancestry is the Middle Passage?" are all conceptually worthwhile in relation to Transatlantic Slavery as a whole, they do not come remotely close to being answered within Hunter's book (11-13). Sophia's surname of *Burthen* likely belonged to an owner of her ancestors, as was the custom and, as Nelson informed Mr. Hunter, "Slaves rarely had a surname," (11-13).

In his attempt to uncover the root of Sophia's surname, Hunter essentially wastes numerous pages, a pattern which occurs throughout the text. Indeed, it seems Hunter encountered numerous dead-ends in his attempt to better identify aspects of Sophia's life and ancestry and had no option but to fill the pages of his book with these ultimately failed inquiries. While asking questions, whether they can ultimately be answered or not, is essential to any form of research, the number of unanswered questions throughout Hunter's text feels excessive. An interesting insight in the first chapter, garnered from Nelson's assertion that "slaves often believed they were older than they were," is Hunter's takeaway that time would have progressed more slowly for enslaved persons, denied the

possibilities engendered by freedom (11-13). Therefore, a certain anachronism between the time experienced by enslaved people and free people becomes apparent and is a highly interesting notion that lends deeper insight into the mental and emotional state and lived experience of enslaved persons, such as Sophia.

Personally, I would have appreciated more significant attention being paid to this anachronism, rather than the etymology of the word *burthen*. Hunter includes excerpts from Drew's interview, including Sophia's recollection of transport in which she recalled that they (the kidnapper), "tied their handkerchiefs over our mouths, carried us to a vessel, put us in the hold, and sailed up the river. I know not how far nor how long—it was dark there all the time. Then we came by land," (11-13). This portion of the interview is incredibly affecting and visceral, transporting the reader to absorb Sophia's experience and palpable distress. However, Hunter does not build upon the excerpt in a measurable way, rather, he offers that "taken as cargo, the sisters are literally burthen now, not just a trace of their ancestors carried in an obscure name," offering little to expand the reader's knowledge of Sophia and only offering a bookend to his investigation of etymology of the word *burthen* (11-13). For instance, while scholars have written about the inter-island Caribbean trade in enslaved people, little is known about how frequently, when, and why enslavers and kidnappers forcibly relocated the enslaved between regions in the American North and Canada. Hunter missed an opportunity to explore this facet

of Pooley's life.² Hunter asserts that enslaved young women “had little opportunity for regular interaction with other black women, and endured a cultural isolation rarely experienced in the American South,” (14). This information allows the reader to consider what Sophia's daily life as a young woman must have been like socially, and the loneliness that she must have encountered after being separated from her sister. However, this information stems from Margaret Washington in *Sojourner Truth's America* (2009), which suggests Hunter's strong choice of source material, rather than newfound insights from his primary sources on Ontario Slavery. *Sojourner Truth's America* considers numerous facets of Sojourner Truth's life from her religious heritage to her experiences of slavery within contexts of labour, domesticity, and patriarchy. Organized chronologically into three distinct eras of Truth's life, Washington's text succeeds in providing insight into Truth's life beyond what previously existed, surpassing Hunter's work as a biography. Overall, Hunter's source material is well-chosen, spanning literature written by his contemporaries to archival sources, namely *The Refugee* and the 1851 census of Peel Township in the province of Ontario. Hunter offers effective context for Sophia's experience by detailing how she inhabited both Canada and the United States which were, and remain, deeply connected to slavery and the systemic destruction of indigenous peoples within their lands (15).

This context could have been implemented to even greater effect by comparing the stories and trajectories of both Sophia and Joseph Brant,

paralleling the indigenous and black experience in Canada, and how an indigenous man came to own a black girl. Hunter continues contextualizing Sophia's experience by indicating that enslaved children worked from as young as four years old, were punished and constantly exposed to loss, trauma, and violence, as were their parents (15). He offers Sojourner Truth's recollection that her mother "saw most of her children sold away," highlighting the anxiety and anguish of separation experienced by enslaved children like Sophia (15).³ This disturbing but necessary information allows the reader to better understand and empathize with Sophia's experience, connecting the reader to Hunter's subject in a meaningful way. Hunter offers further and useful historical context, centring Canada as a platform for European colonial enterprise. He again relies upon his strong choice of source material, citing Natasha L. Henry from her book *Emancipation Day: Celebrating Freedom in Canada* (2010), indicating that "very few Canadians are aware that at one time their nation's economy was firmly linked to African slavery through the building and sale of slave ships, the sale and purchase of slaves to and from the Caribbean and the exchange of timber, cod, and other food items from the Maritimes for West-Indian slave-produced goods," (17-18). This information allows the reader to better understand the erasure that has occurred in regard to Sophia's story and, hopefully, to internalize Canada's continuing participation in the process of natural-resource extraction and in the dismemberment of communities. Further, the reader is supplied with the necessary facts to recognize the Transatlantic

Slave Trade as the foundation of the British Empire and, therefore, of Canada, and that the wealth which this human traffic provided for the infrastructure of modern Canada is a result of slavery. By allowing the reader to connect past to present, Hunter creates a necessary contextualization and relatability to the material. By referencing Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route* (2007), Hunter highlights how the practice of slavery within indigenous cultures is often misrepresented to minimize chattel slavery's existence as a purely European invention, and how the adoption of chattel slavery and the enslavement of African peoples by indigenous peoples is a result of European colonization, not indigenous traditions (17-18). This distinction is significant, because Sophia was enslaved by Joseph Brant, an indigenous man, and Hunter does well to mention the origin of this form of slavery in Canada. Hunter also cites A.J. Williams-Myers' assertion that "prior to the mid-twentieth century writers simply refused to acknowledge the significant role of the African in the economic development of the region," which again links Canada's history of slavery to the present economic status of the nation (17-18). Through the aforementioned reference material, Hunter provides strong contextualization and background information for the reader. However, this information is ultimately stymied as Hunter does not build upon Sophia's personal story or reveal further details of her life in a significant way as the book progresses.

Hunter's writing is perhaps most effective when he implores his audience, namely his white readers, to acknowledge that they are implicated within the history of slavery and should embrace the discomfort they may feel rather than continuing to feign ignorance of a disturbing legacy that still benefits white members of society. As a call to reshape the narrative and reckon with the history of slavery, Hunter's book is successful, however, in its primary purpose to expand the present understanding of the life of Sophia Burthen, it is unfortunately lacking. In chapter seven, "On the 'North' River," Hunter discusses influential nineteenth-century American painters, namely members of the Hudson River School, commenting on their romanticized, spiritually evocative depictions of the American landscape and their portrayals of indigenous people as primitive while erasing the existence of enslaved people within their works (76). While such paintings are problematic in their inherent support of Manifest Destiny, inciting increased expansion and further conquest, their relationship to Sophia is vague at best, and discussion of the Hudson River School spanning several pages does not seem necessary in a book about the life of an enslaved woman in Canada. The chapter continues by discussing *Moby Dick* and Sojourner Truth, both of which offer a modicum of background information and are interesting diversions, but again, do not seem entirely relevant.

A further diversion is Hunter's letters to Sophia which appear in each raising questions and offering her apologies. However, these letters do not

ultimately offer keen insight and are not intensely evocative. Rather, all of the information in this chapter and each of the previous chapters could have been condensed across few pages that actually centre on Sophia and her personal story.

Chapter eight, "The White City," discusses the city of Albany and its art museum at length. However, the number of pages spent on this topic seems disproportionate to the very brief time that Sophia was known to have spent in Albany. Hunter does, however, keenly address the sobering reality that Sophia and her sister were the only children on their vessel when they passed through Albany, offering the reader insight into what must have been a traumatic and stressful experience for the sisters, having lost their parents and any conception of family and belonging they may once have had (97-98). Regrettably, Hunter does not mention the threat of sexual assault which, given the matrilineal order of slavery and the use of rape as domination and for breeding, was certainly a threat to Sophia and her sister. However, Hunter does assert how the sisters were constrained by whiteness, through physical restraints and the structures of colonial society. This passage is pertinent to Sophia's story and offers insight into her personal experience, but Hunter then diverges and begins a lengthy discussion of Revolutionary War battles that previously occurred in the Hudson River Valley and, for no apparent reason, offers an examination of the city of Boston that extends into chapter nine, "On the Mohawk Trail."

As chapter nine progresses, Hunter discusses Joseph Mallord William Turner's 1840 painting *Slave Ship* (Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhoon Coming On), mentioning that Turner and Sophia were both born in 1775, and that this was a "sign," (99). While Turner's *Slave Ship* which references the horrors of the Middle Passage is one of the most significant paintings from the era relating to the Transatlantic Slave Trade, it holds little relevance to Sophia who was trafficked within North America and does not enhance the reader's understanding of her experience. Hunter discusses seemingly irrelevant information at length, from the existence of abolitionists in Boston to Captain William Turner's role in Metacom's War (1675-1678) to a brief mention of the author's own ancestors in Scotland and Ireland being displaced by the British. While Sophia would have passed through Albany and eventually Massachusetts as she was forcibly transported to Canada, this information does not act as a substitute for what the author does not know: Sophia's actual experience during her travels.

In Chapter eleven, "In the Longhouse," Hunter presents a useful investigation of the life of Thayendanegea/ Joseph Brant, and details how Brant encountered enslaved black people from a very young age and witnessed black soldiers (117). Hunter further explains how Brant must have understood the lowly status imposed on black people brought into his homeland and how Brant subsequently adapted to the colonial norm in which people of African descent were enslaved (117). Notably, Hunter asserts that indigenous people knew the

power and numbers of the colonizers as their own populations had been devastated by the war, disease, and transformation of the natural environment that had occurred since the arrival of European settlers (117). This understanding is essential to the reader in understanding Brant's mindset and why he may have been inclined to engage in colonial practices, such as slavery. Furthermore, Hunter addresses how indigenous communities were committed to maintaining their status as equals to whites, to be treated as independent nations, and not become subservient, which again offers keen insight into Brant's psyche and environment. Hunter also astutely mentions Brant's aspiration to reach the status of his mentor, Sir William Johnson, which included owning enslaved people who would be in service in a grand home like Johnson Hall (118). This provides the reader with insight into another iteration of whiteness in Canadian society and how its ideals entered indigenous culture to the ultimate detriment of black people.

This unique and disturbing result of colonial rule, wherein one subjugated group takes on the role of subjugator, is intensely interesting in its social and political outcomes. While Hunter offers the necessary background information and strands of keen insight, the book would have benefited from a deeper exploration of the relationship between indigenous people and black people in Canada, especially in the period of Sophia's enslavement. Further, Hunter describes areas of indigenous settlements and their histories for several pages, but none of this information relates directly to Sophia except for the fact that

she passed through these areas. Hunter also discusses his own travel to these areas, which causes this portion of the book to read more like a personal memoir than a biography of Sophia (124).

Later in the chapter, Hunter includes an excerpt from Sophia's interview with Drew, which describes the barbarous manner in which Brant's indigenous wife abused Sophia. However, Sophia also recounts that Brant was very angry with his wife, and scolded her, "you know I adopted her as one of the family, and now you are trying to put all the work on her," (129). Sophia's recollection that Brant believed she was an adopted member of his family rather than a slave in the sense of chattel slavery is incredibly telling and deserved greater attention. Hunter examines another portion of Sophia's interview with Drew, wherein she states that "white men sold us," indicating Sophia was still coupled with her sister (130). However, she shifts to the singular when stating "I guess I was the first colored girl brought to Canada, and, I lived with old Brant," suggesting her sister was either sold to someone else, or perhaps had died (130). The fate of Sophia's sister remains one of the most significant voids in her recollections, as well as the book.

In chapter sixteen, "Numbers," Hunter does interesting work, contextualizing Sophia's life within the greater experience of enslaved black women, who were mainly made visible through printed advertising offering their sale or soliciting opportunities for their purchase (163). Further, Hunter indicates that Sophia's only likely significant relationship with other black people growing

up was with her mother, father, and sister, all of whom vanished from her life before the age of ten. This information offers insight into Sophia's experience, the trauma and loss she must have experienced at a young age, connecting the reader to the pathos of her story.

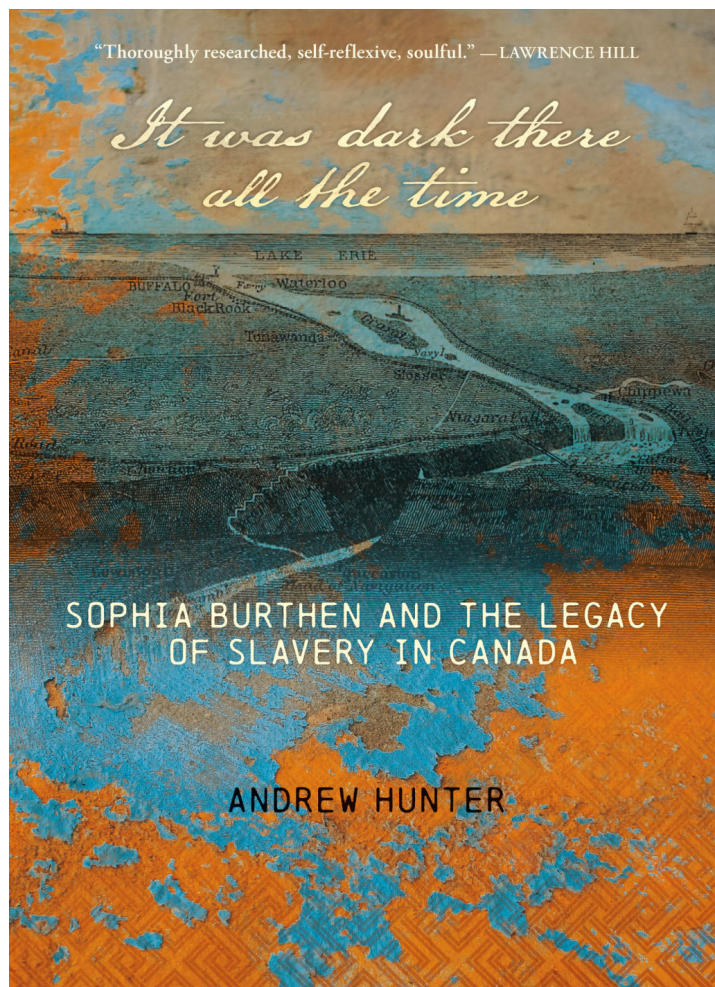
Chapter eighteen, "Decus et Tutamen (An Ornament and a Safeguard)," describes the history of Samuel Hatt, who enslaved Sophia after Brant sold her to him, at length and inadvertently centres the experience of whiteness and the perspective of the slaveholder over that of the enslaved (183). Further, Hunter does not offer a critical examination of Hatt. Rather, he only offers a straightforward biographical history of the slaveowner. Later in the chapter, Hunter includes a portion of Sophia's interview which reveals a startling assertion: "I had no care to get my freedom," then offers insight into what freedom would have meant to Sophia (186). Escaping enslavement meant entering isolation, outside of colonial society in a region where no significant free black community existed. Therefore, while Sophia may not have chosen freedom that does not mean that she chose enslavement. Hunter assists the reader in understanding why Sophia was not intent upon securing her freedom, which further reveals Sophia's state of mind and situation, as well as the landscape of Canada for free black people during this period.

In chapter twenty-two, "Hoardings of Amnesia," Hunter includes an image and description of Winslow Homer's *The Fog Warning* (1885) and attempts to relate it to the concept of generational amnesia, which seems quite a stretch,

and then discusses a similar painting by Homer, *The Gulf Stream* (1899) before analyzing a painting of a black woman by Yvonne McKague Housser, *Untitled* (1933) [237]. However, none of these artworks seem remotely related to Sophia in a meaningful way, in theme, content, or time frame. Hunter concludes chapter twenty-four, "Tempus Fugit," by asserting his belief that Sophia was buried at the cemetery in Queens Bush but that he has been unable to find her grave or supporting documentation (271). Hunter's assertion is well-researched and seems accurate, however, it is disappointing that he could not find the grave or substantive evidence to prove his claim; this lack of evidence and inability to expand upon Sophia's personal story is prevalent throughout the book and ultimately limits the contributions of the work.

Overall, Hunter is well-intentioned and obviously spent a great deal of time and effort researching Sophia and the geographical areas she passed through and inhabited. However, her story remains largely untold. The book ultimately becomes a somewhat scattered, but well-researched description of slavery and racism in Canada and Scotland. Hunter concludes his book by imploring white people to commit to shift more than their attitudes and language, and to actively disrupt the systems and institutions which centre and sustain white supremacy, because a shift only in attitude or language is no different than the transition from slavery to indenture to sharecropping or simply modifying the curriculum in the residential school system as opposed to shuttering the institution altogether. Hunter's conclusion is powerful, necessary,

and indicative of how his book is most successful as a reckoning with the legacy of slavery (284-85).



Andrew Hunter, *It Was Dark There All the Time: Sophia Burthen and the Legacy of Slavery in Canada*, book cover (Toronto, Canada: Dundurn Press, 2010).

¹ For instance, although Canada Post and Heritage Minutes recently honoured Chloe Cooley with a postage stamp (2023) and memorial video (2022) respectively, little is known about Cooley's life (especially after she was kidnapped and forcibly taken across the Niagara River from Ontario to New York state), except for what has been documented by men who witnessed her resistance to her enslaver, William Vrooman. See: "Enslaved black Woman Chloe Cooley

honoured by Canada Post and Heritage minutes," Black Maple Magazine, 17 February 2023 (date of last access 18 June 2023) <https://blackmaplemagazine.com/articles/enslaved-black-woman-chloe-cooley-honoured-by-canada-post-and-heritage-minutes/>

² For more on enslaved (im)mobility see: Charmaine A. Nelson, "He 'is supposed to have with him forged Certificates of his Freedom, and Passes': Slavery, (Im)mobility, and the Creolized Counter-Knowledge of Resistance," special issue: *Humanity on the Move in the Era of Enlightenment and Colonisation*, *Global Intellectual History*, eds. Bruce Buchan, Linda Andersson Burnett, and Ingeborg Hovik, vol. 7, no. 2, 14 June 2022.

³ For more on the suffering of the enslaved in Canada see: Charmaine A. Nelson, " 'Ran away from her Master...a Negroe Girl named Thursday': Examining Evidence of Punishment, Isolation, Trauma, and Illness in Nova Scotia and Quebec Fugitive Slave Advertisements," *Unsettling Canadian Art History*, ed. Erin Morton (Montreal: McGill-Queen's Press, 2022)