*Daddy Sharpe*
Fred W. Kennedy
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Kingston, Jamaica, Ian Randle Publishers

Reviewed by Hugh Hodges, Trent University

Samuel Sharpe was the leader of a slave rebellion, the 1831 'Baptist War,' which, though it failed in its immediate objective, undoubtedly accelerated the pace of the emancipation movement in the West Indies. Today he is recognized as a national hero in Jamaica and stands as a symbol of a people's unyielding resistance to bondage. Oddly, there has never been either a full-length biography of the man (but then very little is, in fact, known about his life), nor a novel that takes the Baptist War as its theme. *Daddy Sharpe* betrays some understandable anxiety about being the first of both. On the one hand, in an effort to be true to the available facts, the story incorporates, whenever possible, carefully referenced direct quotations. On the other hand, it takes, as Fred Kennedy himself puts it, "full poetic license" (vi), fictionalizing the narrative for "literary purposes" (vii). The result is not, mercifully, either of the things one might reasonably fear in this situation—a postmodern exercise in undecidability or a self-consciously 'postcolonial' subversion of official, colonial history. *Daddy Sharpe* is rather a disarmingly unselfconscious attempt to reconstruct, as realist narrative, the life and times of its titular hero.

It begins with Sharpe, awaiting trial in gaol, receiving permission to write the memoir which, along with letters and journal entries from other people, will constitute the bulk of the book. Beginning with his childhood, Sharpe tries to explain the circumstances that led, despite his own pacifism, to armed insurrection.

The narrative is highly readable and the reality it presents is, with some reservations, persuasive. Admittedly, the voices in *Daddy Sharpe* do not always ring entirely true: the novel's plantation slaves speak in a version of *Patwa*,[1] much closer to Jamaican Standard English than anything that would have been used at the time, and the novel's basic conceit—that it is written testimony from Sam Sharpe himself—creates some impossible situations in which Sharpe writes in *Patwa*. In this, Sharpe anticipates Claude McKay by almost a hundred years and the tentative acceptance of *Patwa* as a written language by more than a hundred and fifty. The conceit also means that Kennedy cannot represent the full, profane richness of the people's language. Virtually every character in Sharpe's memoir ends up sounding a bit prissy, rarely uttering an expletive saltier than "Fie on it!"

[1] *Patwa* (or *Patois*): Jamaican creole.

The choice of tone and register in *Daddy Sharpe* seems to be directed partly by the anticipation of a certain audience: Jamaican youth (Fred Kennedy has been a teacher in Jamaica for over thirty years). There are places, in fact, where the book is distracted by the responsibility of being educational and forfeits its dramatic power as a result. When Sam Sharpe is first led into the courtroom where he is to be tried, for example, Kennedy faithfully gives us the names of all of the jurors, but fails to give any description of them or the room that would make the scene vivid, present and psychologically real. Generally, however, *Daddy Sharpe* has to be credited with effectively teaching some very difficult history and doing so without resorting to moral simplifications or convenient revisionism. For example, the book acknowledges the complex and ambivalent reality of the Maroons in pre-emancipation Jamaica. Remembered today as freedom fighters, the Maroons ensured their freedom for many decades by colluding with the planters as slave catchers and were, indeed, slave-owners themselves. A less principled history lesson might have left these awkward details out.

The book also does a very fine job of dramatizing the missionary churches' ambivalent role in the emancipation movement. The fundamentally liberating message of Christianity gave strength and focus to the anti-slavery movement on both sides of the Atlantic, and certainly inspired Samuel Sharpe, who was a deacon in the Baptist church. However, in Jamaica, the missionaries undermined their credibility with the slaves by being too willing to compromise their own message of liberation (and their own consciences) by preaching obedience to temporal authority. The book nicely captures the bewilderment of the missionaries when the enslaved refused to accept this self-serving distinction between physical and spiritual liberty, and their desperate back-pedaling when the enslaved insisted on having both.

The book is, perhaps, less attuned to the role African religion played both in the uprising and in the slaves' day-to-day lives. It makes some reference to *obeah*,[2] the secretive work of medicine men, and to an African funeral that Sharpe remembers from childhood, but it makes no attempt to represent the ongoing importance of Myal or the other creolized African religions practiced by the slaves. This is a pity because Myal was a vitalizing factor in all of the Jamaican uprisings from the Tacky Rebellion (1760) to Morant Bay (1865) and it was certainly at work in 1831.[3] Its existence was also one of the reasons the Baptist church found ready converts (or seeming converts) among the slaves: there was much in the Baptist faith that resonated with and was easily accommodated to

[2] *Obeah*: To quote the *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage*'s neutral definition, "A set or system of secret beliefs in the use of supernatural forces to attain or defend against evil ends."

[3] Robert Stewart, *Religion and Society in Post-Emancipation Jamaica* (Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1992), p. 137. See also Barry Chevannes, ed., *Rastafari and other African-Caribbean Worldviews* (New York: Syracuse U, 1994) and Dale Bisnauth, *History of Religion in the Caribbean* (Kingston: Kingston Publishers, 1989).

Myal practice. Indeed, Christian missionaries were often worried that the so-called Native Baptist churches were becoming more African than Christian. *Daddy Sharpe* gives the impression that the young Sam Sharpe was spiritually a blank slate when he first heard the Christian message. Historically, this was almost certainly not the case; thematically, it underestimates the extent to which resistance to slavery was informed and driven by the slaves' own spiritual and cultural resources, and not by Christianity or by the white missionaries.

But this is a quibble. If a student's only knowledge of Jamaica between 1815 and 1832 came from *Daddy Sharpe*, he or she would not be badly served. For this reason alone it deserves to find a place on school reading lists.