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'Probable Prospects': Richard Hill and Black Activism in The Archive of the Anti-Slavery Society

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This is the fourth in a series of posts by researchers drawing on the archive of the Anti-Slavery Society, part of the Bodleian's We Are Our History project.

Afro-British writer, politician, and activist Richard Hill was born in 1796. Hill was born in Jamaica but spent much of his youth in England, where some of his earliest efforts on behalf of Abolitionism and the rights of free Black people in the British Empire took place when he agreed to act as an agent of the London Anti-Slavery Society in 1830. A series of several letters exchanged between Hill and the Society's President and Secretary are among the Bodleian's collection of the Society's papers. These letters, exchanged over a period of just over two years, allow us to trace Hill's experience of traveling to Haiti on behalf of the Society. The Society sent Hill to ascertain the condition of this first and only new Republic created by formerly enslaved people who had fought and won a war to become a free, independent nation. Reading Hill's correspondence with Thomas Pringle can help us gain a greater understanding of Black British anti-slavery activism in the early nineteenth century and what Haiti's unique sociopolitical history meant for Black organizers like Hill, who hoped to establish Black freedom in the British Empire. The letters also give us unique insight into the day-to-day successes and struggles of a nineteenth-century Afro-British activist as Hill worked to earn a living in precarious circumstances while remaining committed to developing his career.

Hill was born in Jamaica in 1796 to a white English planter father, and a mixed-race Black Jamaican mother. At the age of five, he was sent to England, where he lived with his father's family in Lincolnshire. An activist throughout his life, Hill would be heavily involved in pushing for the rights of free Black Jamaicans and emancipation for all before dedicating the rest of his career to the development of post-emancipation Jamaica, especially in the area of education. He was an avid essayist, publishing non-fiction writing throughout his life on such varied subjects as his international travels, Jamaican history, and natural history, while he also occasionally published poems in British and Jamaican periodicals. He died in 1872.

In 1830, at the age of 34, Hill was seeking out career options while also exploring ways to fight for full emancipation in Jamaica. These interests turned Hill's attention to Haiti. The early years of Haitian independence were also a time of fierce debate in Britain about what the establishment of a free Black Republic might mean for Black resistance in Britain's own colonies. Pro-slavery interests moved to discredit Haiti, hoping that the Republic could be framed as a disastrous project and proof of their insistent claim that Black freedom would only doom the colonies to failure. Meanwhile, Abolitionists fired back that Haiti was making remarkable strides in building a new country in the wake of a prolonged and bloody war. They insisted the young country ultimately demonstrated a good example of why Britain needed to take a radically different approach to Black liberation than France had taken when the latter tried and failed to re-enslave Black Haitians under Napoleon Bonaparte.

Map of Haiti from 'Notes on Haiti made during a residence in that republic' by Charles Mackenzie (London, 1830), volume 1, facing page 1. Out of copyright.

Examining Hill's letters in the Anti-Slavery Society collection at the Bodleian, we see Hill's journey to Haiti beginning in France, where he tried unsuccessfully to start his voyage to Haiti on a French ship. While in France, Hill also immersed himself in French culture, paying special attention to French schools for children, believing that French-style education in Haiti would be key for developing stability in the country. From the Rue Bergère in Paris on 30 January 1830, Hill wrote to the Society:

'I spent the last week in visiting the establishments here for the education of the people, not merely to see and know what has been effected in France for elementary and moral instruction, but to ascertain which are the facilities which the public institutions of this Country afford to the Haitians for extending or perfecting their existing establishments. I consider no institutions more important for accelerating the march of civilization than infant schools.'[1]

Hill was therefore grappling with a complicated question at stake in his own native Jamaica—what might Britain owe to formerly enslaved people after emancipation? What should be the ideal relationship between metropole and colony after the violence and trauma of slavery? Hill would be at the centre of finding practical solutions to some of these questions just a few years later, after the 1833 legal abolition of slavery in the British empire. Hill would fiercely oppose Britain's proposed solutions for appeasing planters' outrage at the end of slavery, especially the five-year transition period in which enslaved people were still forced to work for the planters before emancipation would take place in practice.[2]

Although his time in France was apparently fruitful insofar as it allowed him to develop insights that would be important throughout the rest of his career, France turned out not to be the ideal place from which to launch his journey to Haiti. Unable to secure passage onboard a ship bound for Haiti, Hill made his way back to England, but this meant dealing with another pecuniary complication. Hill's father had left the family in some debt upon his death in 1818, leaving Hill somewhat struggling to provide for his widowed mother and sisters. Hill's mother and one of his sisters seem to have departed for Jamaica shortly after the death of Hill's father, but Hill's sister Jane stayed behind, possibly because of the ill health Hill mentions in his letter. Hill's

role as a caretaker in his family comes alive when he wrote from England on 5 April 1830 asking for the Society to portion off a part of his allowance for expenses on the trip for his sister:

'I have in England a sister whose sole dependence in the untoward state of my late father's affairs has been to share with me in the little I have hitherto possessed for my current expenses—On my departure from England she will be totally unprovided for—I had seriously meditated taking her with me as a point nearer her home. It was an alternative against which I could not contend if I was unable to provide for her, but her condition of health does not permit me to do this.'[3]

Acknowledgement of mixed-race children born to white planter fathers and Black mothers in Jamaica was relatively rare during this time, but Hill and his sister were among the few who were both acknowledged by their father and brought to live with him in England during their early childhood. Their father ensured that they had a good education, and they were allowed to inherit his estate—even when that estate came with financial worries.[4] Upon the death of his father, Hill became the patriarch of a family made all the more vulnerable by the complications of race. Upon returning to Jamaica, he would face legal checks on civil rights for Black people, but if he stayed in England, he would struggle to earn a living or establish himself in a profession, as we shall see.

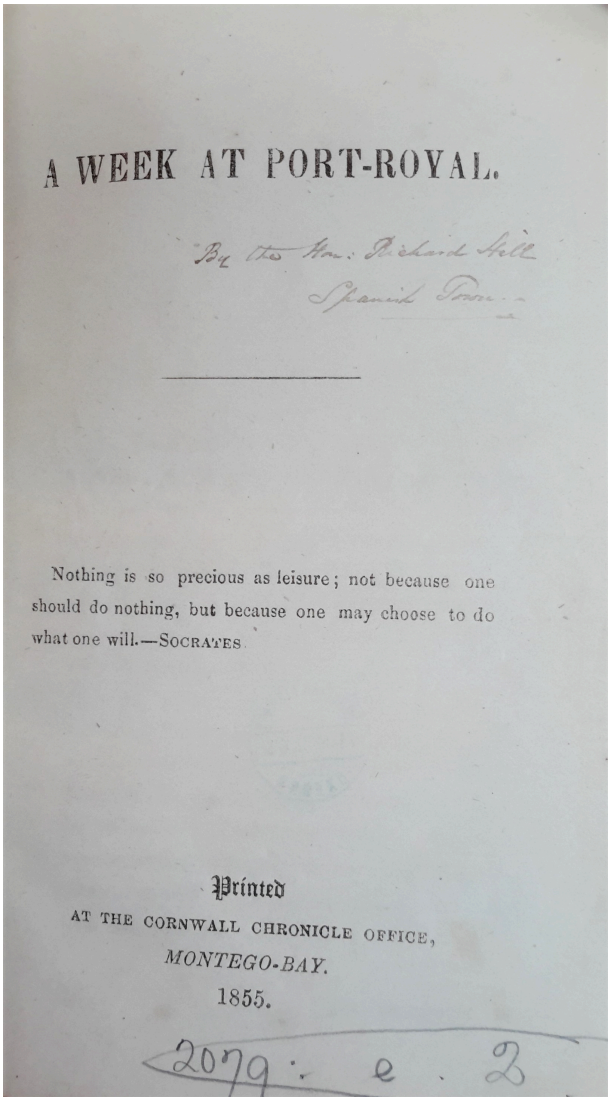
Hill needed to make a career for himself somehow. Choosing professional activism allowed him to satisfy his appetite for learning and traveling and put him in contact with influential people like Pringle who were working to make real differences in British politics. However, this also meant depending on the Society more than Hill would have liked. Before boarding a vessel bound for Haiti, Hill asked the Society in one of his letters to support his sister with £5 per month taken from his own allowance for expenses, explaining:

'it must be obvious that there are times when the monthly amount will be necessarily more than I require, because in a great variety of cases I can only provide for my wants by the hospitality of the Country. The Society may depend that in drawing for my current expenses therefore I shall endeavor to bring the sum on these occasions as much below the monthly average as I can, the Society's pecuniary interests being equally mine.'[5]

From these words, we get a picture of Hill's vulnerability in promising to save money from his expenses before being sure what those expenses would be once he arrived in Haiti. Hill was likely used to doing without certain comforts in order to be able to provide for his family, and he clearly expected this dynamic to continue while working on behalf of the Anti-Slavery Society.

His letters sent from Haiti show us that Hill needed all the financial support he could get. As he explains in a letter dated 22 January 1831, for example, he ended up needing more horses than he had originally planned in order to travel throughout the country.[6] Exercising extreme frugality on the trip turned out not to be as straightforward as Hill had earlier assumed.

Even with these complications, Hill's time in Haiti was quite productive overall based on the information we can glean from his letters to Pringle. He was particularly interested in Haiti's natural history, which comes alive when he wrote from Cape Haitien on 29 November 1831, asking for the Society to assist him in getting geological specimens shipped safely back to England. Hill was anxious that his meticulous labelling system would be disrupted if the samples were seized and examined before being exported. Snippets like this give us another glimpse into Hill's day-to-day life on the trip, hinting at the hours of labour that would have been required to gather, organise, and label geological specimens of interest. This information also indicates that Hill was attuned to the potentially important political implications of the island's natural history—Hill hoped that in learning about Haitian geology, he would also learn more about the kinds of natural resources that might come into play as Haiti established its economic future.



A WEEK AT PORT-ROYAL.

By the Hon. Richard Hill
Spanish Town.

Nothing is so precious as leisure; not because one should do nothing, but because one may choose to do what one will.—SOCRATES.

Printed
AT THE CORNWALL CHRONICLE OFFICE,
MONTEGO-BAY.
1855.

2079. e. 2

'A week at Port Royal', 1855, Richard Hill's description of the natural history in the area. 522.11 r. 2 Click to enlarge.

Hill remained invested in studying the natural world throughout the rest of his life and career, and his later writings indicate a strong appreciation for biodiversity. He took a particularly strong interest in birds, working with Philip Henry Gosse to compose a 400-page volume titled *The Birds of Jamaica*, which was published in 1847. Hill also wrote shorter articles such as his 1863 piece 'Notes on the Mimidae of Jamaica' for the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia in order to share his ongoing discoveries about the nature of Jamaican biodiversity with other enthusiasts of ornithology.

Questions of diplomacy were also central to Hill's entire mission in Haiti. Hill's letters shed light on his developing skills as a Black British statesman who was determined to facilitate and nurture good Anglo-Haitian relations, especially if this diplomatic relationship would further the cause of Abolition in the British Empire. Hill was particularly disgusted with what he saw as attempts by corrupt politicians from both inside and outside Haiti to exploit the vulnerability of the young nation as it was still recovering from war. In a letter dated 14 April 1830, for example, Hill wrote to Pringle about Scottish diplomat Charles Mackenzie, who had earlier that year published *Notes on Haiti*, and portrayed the country in a way that Hill deemed unfairly negative and inaccurate, especially since Mackenzie came from a slave-owning family. Hill wrote to Pringle:

the two positions of Mr Mackenzie cannot be both true, viz that the Haitians are irredeemably idle and that their numbers are small and daily wasting by demoralization, because the value of the trade [is] much too great to represent a small population without industry.'[7]

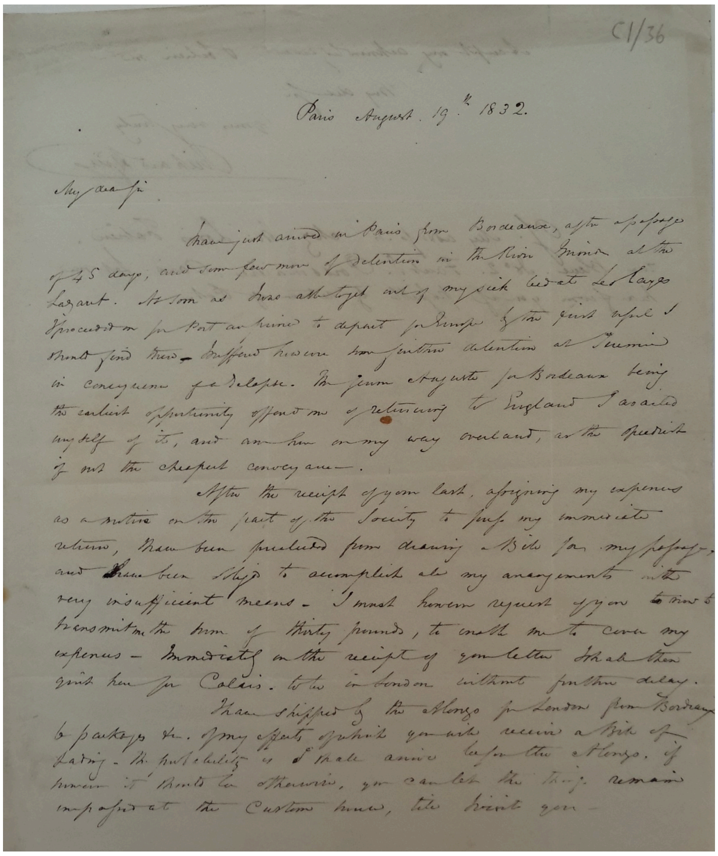
Hill had high hopes of protecting Haiti's image from racist discourse that would insist on sensationalising economic instability in the country after the war, especially because the same kinds of stereotypes used to undermine Haiti—claims that economic struggles were the result of laziness and 'demoralization', for example—would have been levelled at Hill himself and other Black Jamaicans for as long as Hill could remember.

Even as Hill was often committed to defending and celebrating Haiti, he was also highly critical of the corruption he witnessed among the country’s emergent ruling class. While Hill was in Haiti, a group of influential families attempted to create a law that would put extreme limitations on foreign merchants trading in the country while increasing their own personal wealth, with one version of the proposal requiring foreign merchants to give up half their profits to ‘a certain number of youths of influential family.’[8] Hill was horrified that the corruption of a small group of elite individuals risked undermining the country’s vulnerable economy, with profits for a select few coming at the expense of the majority of Haitian people’s prosperity and comfort. He was happy to report that the legislation was not successful.

This and other observations on Haiti give us a picture of Hill as quite invested in Haitian life and politics, determined to return home ready to share his perspective on why Haiti’s example was full of promise for anyone fighting for the Abolitionist cause in Britain. By August 1832, Hill had left Haiti, making his way back to England via France. In October 1832, he sent Pringle a sketch of the Haitian Revolution which he had agreed to prepare for publication, with the promise to transcribe his notes ‘respecting the present state of commerce and agriculture’ included in the same letter.[9] He would continue to advocate for a positive conception of Haiti in the British imagination well after his departure from the country.

Getting home also proved to be trickier than Hill had anticipated.

A letter sent from Paris dated 19th August 1832 indicates that Hill had been ill during his journey from Haiti to France and finds Hill panicked that the Society had not responded to his requests for more funds. He explains: ‘I have been precluded from drawing a Bill for my passage and have been obliged to accomplish all my arrangements with very insufficient means.’[10] He asks for thirty pounds to cover expenses to make his way from Paris to Calais, then on to London.


C1/36

Paris August 19th 1832.

My dear Sir

I have just arrived in Paris from Bordeaux, after a passage of 45 days, and some few more of detention in the River [illegible] at the Lazaret. As soon as I was altogether out of my sick bed at Les Cayes I proceeded on for Port au Prince to depart for Europe by the first vessel I should find there — suffered however some further detention at [illegible] in consequence of a relapse. The [illegible] Augusta for Bordeaux being the earliest opportunity offered me of returning to England I availed myself of it, and am here on my way overland, as the speediest if not the cheapest conveyance.

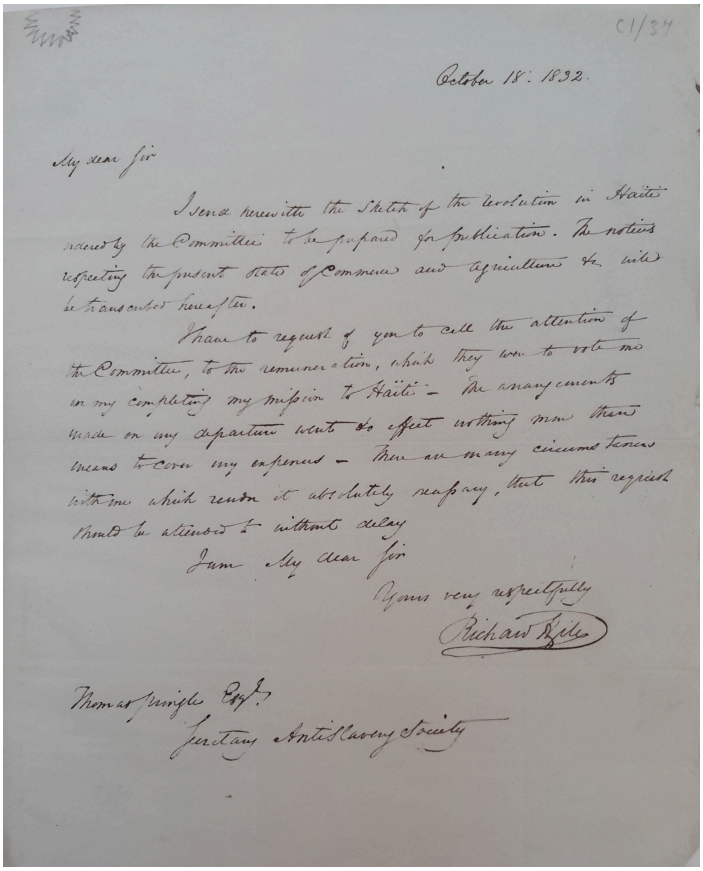
After the receipt of your last, assigning my expenses as a motive on the part of the Society to press my immediate return, I have been precluded from drawing a Bill for my passage, and I have been obliged to accomplish all my arrangements with very insufficient means. I must however request of you to now transmit me the sum of thirty pounds, to enable me to cover my expenses — Immediately on the receipt of your letter I shall then quit here for Calais. to be in London without further delay.

I have shipped by the Alonzo for London from Bordeaux 6 packages &c. of my effects of which you will receive a Bill of Lading. The probability is I shall arrive before the Alonzo. if however it should be otherwise, you can let the things remain unpassed at the Custom house, till I visit you —

Letter from Richard Hill to Thomas Pringle, 19 August 1832. MSS. Brit. Emp. s. 18, C1/36. Click to enlarge.

When we find him back in London two months later in a letter dated 18th October 1832, he is once again worried about money, this time because the Society seems to have disagreed with Hill about the terms of his remuneration for the mission to Haiti.

According to Hill later in the same letter and again in a follow up letter dated 6 November 1832, the Society had promised to compensate him for his mission to Haiti in addition to covering all expenses required for the trip, with the allowance for his sister to come out of the latter sum. Upon his return, though, he found the



C1/37

October 18. 1832.

My dear Sir

I send herewith the Sketch of the Revolution in Hayti ordered by the Committee to be prepared for publication. The notices respecting the present state of Commerce and Agriculture &c. will be transcribed hereafter.

I have to request of you to call the attention of the Committee, to the remuneration, which they were to vote me on my completing my mission to Hayti. The arrangements made on my departure went to effect nothing more than means to cover my expenses. There are many circumstances within mine which render it absolutely necessary, that this request should be attended to without delay

I am My dear Sir

Yours very respectfully

Richard Hill

Thomas Pringle Esq.

Secretary Anti Slavery Society

Letter from Richard Hill to Thomas Pringle, 18 Oct 1832. MSS. Brit. Emp. s. 18, C1/37. Click to enlarge.

Society reluctant to honour that promise. He also found that they were £30 in arrears on the stipend they had promised to his sister. Hill takes the majority of the space in the letter to delineate his expenditures and financial needs very carefully, building a strong case for why the Society should honour the promises they made to him when he agreed to undertake the mission in the first place.

These final letters from Hill in the Bodleian's collection help us access a unique perspective on the Abolitionist movement in Britain, giving us one of a small number of glimpses into the private experiences of Black activists at the heart of the movement. When we see Hill attempting to provide for his sister, hoping his specimens will arrive back in the metropole undamaged, and advocating for himself with the Society that employed him, we see how Black resistance to slavery took the shape both of a grand, dangerous international mission and of everyday frustrations and quotidian hurdles. We may also look at Hill's example and gain a greater understanding of why Black activists like Hill remain relatively obscure today, while figures like Pringle himself have received far more attention by comparison—the Society that employed both men gave a far more important role to Pringle, with far more financial compensation, than they were ever willing to give to Hill. Even still, we can find in Hill a steadfast commitment to fighting for Black rights even when that meant undertaking a long and arduous voyage, surviving on very little money, and dealing with employers who promised one thing and delivered another. His letters provide a wonderful example of a way that the London Anti-Slaver Society papers can shed light on unique and too often overlooked episodes in Black British history of the nineteenth century.

[1] Oxford, Bodleian Libraries, MSS. Brit. Emp. s. 18, C1/30

[2] See Marlene Manderson-Jones, "Richard Hill of Jamaica: His Life and Times 1795-1872." Dissertation. University of the West Indies, 1973.

[3] Oxford, Bodleian Libraries, MSS. Brit. Emp. s. 18, C1/67

[4] See Daniel Livesay, *Children of Uncertain Fortune: Mixed-Race Jamaicans in Britain and the Atlantic Family, 1733-1833*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018.

[5] Oxford, Bodleian Libraries, MSS. Brit. Emp. s. 18, C1/67

[6] Oxford, Bodleian Libraries, MSS. Brit. Emp. s. 18, C1/35

[7] Oxford, Bodleian Libraries, MSS. Brit. Emp. s. 18, C1/33

[8] Oxford, Bodleian Libraries, MSS. Brit. Emp. s. 18, C1/35

[9] Oxford, Bodleian Libraries, MSS. Brit. Emp. s. 18, C1/37

[10] Oxford, Bodleian Libraries, MSS. Brit. Emp. s. 18, C1/36