



THE SWEET TOOTH WITH A BITTER AFTERTASTE

Combining historical research with thought-provoking performance art has brought the physical and emotional turmoil of British colonial slaves to life.

Life on 18th century Caribbean sugar plantations was brutal. Human life was nothing but a commodity. Transported across the notorious 'Middle Passage' from Africa to the Caribbean, many of the enslaved people destined for such exploitation died before reaching their destination. Those who made it were worked to an early death.

Christer Petley, Professor of Atlantic History, has dedicated his recent research to trying to understand that system by studying Simon Taylor, the owner of Jamaican sugar plantations and one of the wealthiest and most influential slaveholders of the 18th century British Empire.

Born in Jamaica, Taylor was educated in Britain before returning to Jamaica to take over his late father's fortune to build his own sugar plantation business.

Christer has recently published his book *White Fury*, which tells Taylor's story through the many letters he wrote to friends, family, business connections and political allies in Britain. By the time of his death in 1813, Taylor was one of the wealthiest men in the British Empire, with an extraordinary fortune of £1 million built on the backs of the enslaved men, women and children who laboured on his sugar estates. He 'owned' 2,248 slaves when he died.

But he died an enraged and bitter man, due to the abolition of the slave trade in 1807, hence the book title *White Fury*.

Christer explained: "The book reflects the story of someone who was once quite optimistic about the future, but by the end was apoplectic with fury and rage. The tone of the letters changes quite markedly."

"Taylor's income and fortune was based on slave labour, so when that came under scrutiny and attack he was gobsmacked – he could not understand how this trade, which was so good financially for Britain, could be questioned."



Further elaborating on Taylor's perspective, Christer added: "To a slaveholder like him, some people were slaves, and some were masters, and that was the way of Taylor's world. He had also lived through the American Revolution and remained fiercely loyal to Britain, so when he was presented with abolition he was furious – he had been loyal to Britain, so why wasn't Britain being loyal to him?"

"There is a complete failure in Taylor's letters to recognise the arguments of the abolitionists. Slavery was not only built into Taylor's business model but also into his sense of how the British Empire should be."

Creating Sweet Tooth

Christer's research has been brought to life through London-based vocal and movement artist Elaine Mitchener. Through her work exploring her family's links back to the Caribbean, Elaine came across Christer's research.

Under the working title of *Sweet Tooth*, Elaine used Christer's material to develop and shape a piece of performance art exploring the issues of slavery and the longstanding connections between Britain and the Caribbean.

"It was good to use some of the material I had developed in my research," said Christer. "In *Sweet Tooth*, Elaine reads from the sources I used for my own work."

Elaine added: "Christer was invaluable for being able to state, 'this is how it was' and 'this is what happened'. We had to face some difficult facts and find a way to convey them and communicate it to everyone."

Elaine and Christer, along with three other performers, ran a workshop and performance at the Turner Sims concert hall to further develop *Sweet Tooth*. Elaine then had a



residency at Aldeburgh Music, which was when *Sweet Tooth* was most fully developed, with Christer as the historical consultant.

In 2017, *Sweet Tooth* was premiered in Liverpool and has since been performed in Southampton and London, and has since been performed in Southampton, London and at the 2020 Borealis Festival in Bergen, Norway. The full audio has also been broadcast on BBC Radio 3.

"*Sweet Tooth* tells the story of the experiences of slaves from the Middle Passage being transported across the Atlantic, to being on plantations and trying to make sense of that bewildering new experience and of their brutal treatment on each step of that journey," explained Christer.

Elaine added: "One of the key things from reading and talking to Christer about this period was the feeling to never feel comfortable. Enslaved people were never comfortable. Even when they were allowed to

entertain themselves, there was always a fear it could all change."

But Christer is also at pains to emphasise how it is more than just a tale of torture and defeat. "Drawing upon some of the archival material I used for *White Fury*, there is a section of the piece where enslaved people are listed—their names read out—which is really powerful," he said. "And the piece ends on a strong note of rebellion and resistance."

Elaine also staged a chapter from *Sweet Tooth*, called *[Names]*, at the John Hansard Gallery in Southampton as part of the 2019 Being Human Festival. The sound installation featured Elaine's recital of names and given monetary values of some of the thousands of enslaved African men, women and children who were recorded as part of Taylor's 'property' when he died.

"These people, part of my ancestry, existed under the very worst conditions imaginable to profit a country that they would never see," said Elaine. "Somehow their spirit was not broken and they created their own Afro-Caribbean culture."

"These were people. Those weren't even their names. Their names were taken from them and they were given a name as a convenience, so that their owner could remember who they were. I thought about what that means in terms of our identity. There was a 'Cuba', who was a girl and who was valued at £100, and I'm wondering 'what happened to her?'. What happened to Adam? What happened to Appa, who was 'sickly' and 'of no value'?"

"So when Christer gave me those names I had to do something, I had to honour those people."



1 Elaine Mitchener performing *Sweet Tooth*

2 *White Fury* by Christer Petley

3 Professor Christer Petley