Lawrence Scott, *Dangerous Freedom*. Papillote Press. London and Trafalgar, Dominica, 2021. 276 pp. ISBN: 9781999776862.

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Lawrence Scott is a major fiction writer from Trinidad and Tobago; his first book, the beautifully haunting and structurally daring novel *Witchbroom*, appeared in 1993 to much acclaim. Seven books and many prizes and honours later (two wonderful collections of stories, along with four other distinguished novels and one non-fiction book; he was also recently made a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature), Scott is now considered one of the most important and finest living writers from the Anglophone Caribbean, if not the entire region. His maturity and sophistication about colonial and post-colonial matters, which academics and less able fiction writers frequently treat with political bombast and grandiosity, make him something of a quiet sage in our time, a time in which academia worldwide is failing, gutted by its own blustering that's so often lacking in an appropriate style. If you want an immediate example of the tone of Scott's prose on these difficult topics before my selections, recall the poignant calm and gravitas with which Abdulrazak Gurnah delivered his Nobel Prize Literature lecture online in December 2021. If you don't understand why Gurnah delivered his address that way, then your freedom is a danger to all, yourself included.

Despite Scott's accomplishments more needs to be said about the merits of his work, especially as shown in his latest book, the novel *Dangerous Freedom*, which is a triumph of narrative form and based on historical events and people. As a Commonwealth writer, he deserves to be considered among the necessary fiction writers of that world, a world that, prior to the creation of the Commonwealth of independent nations, is responsible with much of Europe and all of the Americas for many of the socially malevolent destructive consequences of the last five-hundred-plus years of human history. This means it's not enough for Scott to be labeled just a Caribbean writer, far less a Trinidadian writer, even if the modern world began in the Caribbean with the advent of the Atlantic Slave Trade. When a fiction writer of Scott's stature addresses the crimes of one empire, in this case the British a few decades before their Emancipation Act of 1833, the involvement of other colonial empires worldwide, and in other times (pre-Columbian), is clearly implied — Dutch, French, German, Russian, Venetian, Ottoman, Japanese, among others.

But the legacy of the Atlantic Slave Trade and its attendant crimes in London and beyond (including the southern USA and West Indies) is the focus of this novel, and its epigraph by Adrienne Rich shows that the problems this Georgian, London-set novel engages still remain a profoundly dangerous force of history, especially in the USA today; they're problems we may never erase, for their values and influences have shaped the entire world. There isn't a place on earth that hasn't been touched by the Atlantic Slave Trade's dehumanizing effects in some way. From the bloody-minded conquistadors of the Portuguese and Spanish empires, whose descendants right now (mainly with the cooperation of the Jair Bolsonaro government in Brazil) are rampaging across the Amazon forests, raping, bombing, stealing from, and killing its indigenous peoples, slaughtering its endangered wildlife and burning the forest for mining and cattle ranching to feed the ever-increasing mouths of World Capitalism's children, to the racial hatred tearing apart American society and the sinister encroachment and part ownership of our lives by high-tech companies working with corporate empires.

Dido Belle (later Elizabeth d'Aviniere) is the mulatto great niece of England's Lord Chief Justice Mansfield, one of the most powerful men after the Georgian King. Her mother, Maria Belle, an African-born slave from Pensacola, Florida by way of the West Indian islands was the lover of John Lindsay, a naval officer, and also his property, as was their daughter. As a child Dido is taken to Kenwood House in north London, where she spends almost thirty years of her life. She is educated mainly through geography and literature — philosophy, poetry, Cicero, Horace, Pope, among others, which is all warmly encouraged by Lord Chief Justice Mansfield. She is granted freedom by Mansfield in 1783, marries John d'Aviniere, has three sons, one of them dies quite young, while the other two with the assistance of their mother and Mr. Bridges, a tutor, learn about their grandmother, Maria Belle; the child catchers roaming London and kidnapping black/mulatto children to sell them back into bondage in the Americas even though they are officially free, the geography of the British Empire, literature, and the basic lessons in math and grammar required of all school children. By this time, Elizabeth d'Aviniere has begun her memoirs, writing of her experiences and of her mother, who is a marvelous character and a truly voiced West Indian woman. This is another forte of Scott's writing, capturing the music of Caribbean voices, how it plays off the tropical sea and light, our history.

> "*Dearest Child*
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> *I must write at once and send you this letter which the kind captain of the ship Orion I travel on to Pensacola tell me he will personally see is delivered to you safe my darling. It's a while since I see him in the harbour. You too small to remember this place. It change in the last ten years. The house your father build and you come to live in with myself and your father as baby and little girl was still here when I arrive but in terrible repair with storms and the daily sea blast. The grain of salt is everywhere. I am bound by agreement with your father to build a house so is build I build and that first house blow*

> *down and I must build again. Each year a mighty storm lash the coast. People in the islands call the god Hurucan. You not going remember that. No protection even from Santa Rosa Island. Now I build with new timbers I buy from the Creek and Choctaw traders. All along the street is cottages the British build in building this same town of Pensacola. I build with the same timber clapboard and brick. It go be a strong house. So when you come you go see what a good house I build for you and me… You know your father never thought it safe for you to be here. But I will keep you safe when you come… I sit and watch the world entering into the emerald bay with those tall ships. One day I will se you waving from the deck and I will be here standing waiting for you. You will know me my darling. I am your mother.*" (244-45)

The 'family' support Dido receives at Caen Wood despite the situation she is in, one more of maid than family member but neither quite one or the other (for it's her African skin shade that defines her mostly), in particular when her mother has to leave her and return to Pensacola, promising to send for her, is described with genuine power. Scott shows that class, though not as much as race *then* in the Georgian period, but more so now, as George Lamming often said of it, plays more of a role in British society and its former colonies. But the discrimination Dido endures at Caen Wood is acutely and subtly presented and shows just how sinister and psychologically damaging an experience like that can be. Beth, her white counterpart, somewhat, enjoys all the freedoms at Caen Wood a privileged white and young English woman enjoyed then (Scott has fun, as do we, with the values and expectations of young-lady society at the time, really a kind of evolved and elevated prostitution); Dido is manipulated and treated with acceptance and equal rejection; expected to do the menial tasks around the house and to know her place always in what at first for her is a maze of societal mores. But she learns, she reads, and in one of the finest acts of fictional integrity in the novel Scott shows how change can be made for the better. Lord Mansfield teaches Dido, introduces her to Cicero and other writers and thinkers; he has her read to him and she becomes aware, eventually, of the cases he must judge, one involving the slave James Sommersett, whose narrative as recounted in the press and by other 'freed' slaves in London and those in bondage across the Atlantic inspires and teaches Dido just what is at stake in her life and those of so many who were taken as property from Africa. She learns a lot, too, from listening to Lord Mansfield and his associates discuss the problems of Abolition and the murderous treatment of sick and dying slaves on the ship *Zong*, one of many such barbarisms committed by the slave-trading European nations between the early 1500s and 1900s. But it's Dido's mother who is her first teacher, who first introduces her to the Sommersett case, and to who and what they both are to the British.

Sommersett is a man from Jamaica reputedly, who was sold so many times he fled into the English countryside in a final desperate attempt at — what, freedom? That word is one Scott makes us think about a great deal. No one is really free in the novel. And this is something Lord Mansfield comprehends to a degree, yet he's

so bound to supporting the economic status quo of the Atlantic Slave Trade because of his position. His support for Dido's freedom, however, such as it was permitted at the time, is of paramount importance in the novel. However, what she finally discovers about herself and her mother's letters, which in the end become narrative documents, a book in short, of supreme education, is the ultimate unchaining; for it is Maria Belle, Dido's mother, who, to my mind, is the most significant character in the novel. Her letters, when they alight in her daughter's mind, go on to help abolish the Slave Trade, assisting men like William Wilberforce and Olaudah Equiano in their own efforts.

One of the main themes woven superbly throughout *Dangerous Freedom* is education, the real kind. Scott handles this superbly. Books, their importance, and not for passing exams – still a high priority in Trinidad and Tobago today, hence why much of its staid, legal backwardness and debate – but books for study, enlightenment, pleasure, knowledge and learning how to think about the world and its places and peoples and horrors and natural beauty, are a recurring presence in the novel. Here is Dido, in the garden at Kenwood House, fittingly renamed Caen Wood in the novel:

> "But it was the very beauty, which the weather sculpted, that was a solace to her. The lit up *magnolia grandiflora*, it grew beneath her windows, her greatest friend in the spring. How she loved the sound of those words when spoken by Mr French, the gardener. He walked around the garden naming plants and trees the way Master walked around his library reading the titles on the spines and pulling them out to open on pages from which he would read to her. All the long summer and in to autumn, the vast purple, brown, red, ever-changing prisms of the copper beeches transported her and translated her feelings beyond her state of mind. She took volumes with her from the Bloomsbury library to Caen Wood: Ovid, Cicero, Horace and histories which her Master said she should school herself in. 'In time, Herodotus, Dido, the father of history. He was a great geographer too, which I know will interest you.'
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> It puzzled her at times how he offered her so much freedom in this way and yet she always knew she was not her own person. She was his. She belonged to him. Yet many of his books spoke of liberty.
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> Her mother had told her enough times of the peculiar arrangement concerning the *property* that she was but it was much more her own realization of that fact that puzzled and disturbed her." (105-6)

In other words, books equal freedom.

The novel really moves beautifully overall despite its fragmentary form, which is necessary for Scott's purposes because it clarifies the psychic development of Dido and the way the past plays on human consciousness, chiefly when certain types of stress and trauma are involved; this is also reflected in Elizabeth's memoirs, the writing process as a deliberate kind of trauma whose purpose is to come to terms with the truth of the past by reshaping it for better understanding so as to live with it by mitigating the trauma, for the past goes nowhere; it stays with you, always.

When the letters between Dido, as Elizabeth d'Aviniere, and her mother begin to eventually reveal themselves, the novel achieves one of its singular successes. Scott throughout builds tension skillfully in both the Caen Wood House and the wider psychological world of the Slave Trade, which all plays into the affair of the letters, an essential part of the novel. The thing that struck me about this part of the novel was the secreting of knowledge, the corrupt power that is gained from censorship and lies by people who want to protect and exalt themselves by withholding information because they feel they are superior and therefore better prepared to deal with it. In the West Indies this remains a constant in society, from our banana-republic governments catering to largely parochial electorates, to the leaning, ivory-tower academics who imagine themselves as elites and above reproach. The British were masters of secrecy, perhaps better at it than any other colonial empire, ever. Scott dramatizes this truth masterfully. And he makes a fine case, too, for the withholding of some of the letters, when Dido is a child.

In a very obvious way, *Dangerous Freedom* is a historical novel; but, like the best of them, it speaks resoundingly to our time.