

‘WI LICKLE BUT WI TALLAWAH’: WRITING JAMAICA INTO THE ATLANTIC
WORLD, 1655-1834

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We are in the middle of a rich flowering of scholarship on the history of Jamaica during slavery. In this article, I survey 34 books published between 2014 and 2020 which make a substantial contribution to Jamaican history. They range over time from 1655 and the English conquest of Jamaica until the 1831/2 Christmas rebellion that precipitated the end of slavery in the island in 1834. Two books, both of which view Jamaica in a comparative aspect, deal with Jamaica over the whole period with a further book looking comparatively at Jamaica before the American Revolution. Three examine Jamaica in the seventeenth century while seven mainly deal with Jamaica after the end of the slave trade in 1807. Most - 23 of the 34 – are concentrated in the eighteenth century, 13 before Tacky’s Revolt of 1760-61, which seems to be for many historians a significant marker that divides Jamaican history, and 10 within the years of revolution and abolitionism in the late eighteenth century. All these books are listed at the end of this article.

The copious number of books published on Jamaica in such a brief period show that the study of the island during the time when it was a vital part of a developing world capitalist economy and when it practiced perhaps the most brutal form of slavery ever seen in an Atlantic slave society is testament to historians’ discovery or rediscovery of the importance of Jamaica in the world. That Jamaica is part of world history in this period in ways that it was not later on is one reason why so much academic attention and attention of a

particular kind has suddenly resulted in a veritable avalanche of books and a host of specialist journal literature.¹

The books under review are various in subject matter, time period and themes but they have much in common. What most distinguishes them is that the authors are concerned with showing how important seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Jamaica was in the making of the modern world, locating Jamaica either within the new conceptual framework of Atlantic history or within the traditional area of imperialism. The island did not have had a praiseworthy history – indeed most writers take pains to demonstrate how dysfunctional, brutal and exploitative the history of Jamaica has been. James Delbourgo stands in for everyone when he describes early eighteenth-century Jamaica as experienced and depicted by the naturalist physician and wealthy collector, Hans Sloane, as an island ‘full of English debauchery’ which was a ‘hybrid of profit and savagery designed simultaneously to enlighten and beguile.’ It was a place of contradictions which, Delbourgo insists, needs to be seen as ‘part of the militarized expansion of European capitalism in which naval empires fought rapaciously to seize natural resources from indigenous peoples through violent means such as slavery.’ (p. 86)

And the tone evident in recent historiography is ironic and perhaps tragic. Eighteenth-century Jamaica is an island whose importance was built upon an institution which no-one could defend and ruled by a white culture that was founded upon violence against an enslaved majority that struggled not that successfully to attain cultural autonomy. It is a story of great if malign power heading after the abolition of the slave trade into decline and then after emancipation into global irrelevance. Louis Nelson argues that settler Jamaica

¹ One indication of how important early colonial Jamaica has become is that a leading journal in early American history, *The William and Mary Quarterly*, devoted its April 2019 issue to four articles about Jamaica.

peaked in 1750 when Jamaica's 'wealthiest planters and merchants were all still working to build Jamaica into the tropical front of the British Empire.' By 1800, however, 'the island was governed by a white West Indian Creole elite, less committed to refinement than to personal leisure and hospitality to other whites.' Their personal derelictions meant that Jamaica by the end of the eighteenth century had 'faded in the British imagination, abandoned by the wealthiest, mocked by the motherland, and overtaken in evocative power by India.' (p. 9)

Indeed, there is a clear timeline in the recent literature which sees Jamaica reaching a peak of sorts around the Seven Years' War with the next half century seeing the white planter class at its height before being toppled from their imperial ascendancy as the Haitian Revolution and British abolitionism turned their world on its head. The reconceptualization of Jamaica as globally important begins from the start of English settlement in the failed imperial project that was Oliver Cromwell's Western Design of 1655 – a failed campaign which Pestana argues kickstarted a more intrusive form of English/British imperialism based around slavery, plantations, commerce and war.

She insists that these beginning years before 1660 should be not thought of as a pointless period of military tyranny with no lasting messages for later Jamaican history. Instead, she sees this period as vital not just in the history of Jamaica but in the history of Cromwell's Protectorate and in the making of a more deliberative and powerful British Empire. The very earliest history of English Jamaica, she argues, laid down some fundamental themes that shaped later history, even if it predated sugar, slavery and piracy. She especially challenges Richard Dunn's powerful argument from 1972 that the seventeenth-century Caribbean was a brutal and dysfunctional place that inspired in the metropole and in other English colonies a distaste for its excesses and philistinism. As

Pestana argues, before sugar, Jamaica was a beachhead in the Spanish Caribbean for English colonization, reshaping decisively the region's geopolitical balance.

Pestana's insistence that between 1655 and 1660 there were other options for Jamaica's future rather than what actually happened is a common theme in recent historiography. That the course of Jamaican history could have been different from its eighteenth-century concentration upon sugar, slavery and the relentless pursuit of wealth is a theme that emerges in many books. Barber, for instance, agrees with Pestana about the distinctive character of the seventeenth-century Caribbean and how this period should not just be folded into the narrative of eighteenth-century plantation Jamaica. She argues that 'the dichotomy of the Stuart Caribbean was that it fitted neither the British imperial narrative, nor the American narrative of independence which gave rise to 1776.' She sees it as a licentious and libertarian colony full of disputatious people living in challenging environments.

That disputatiousness proved to the undoing of many Caribbean people as they became incorporated into the imperial project which picked up steam under the late Stuarts in the 1690s after the Glorious Revolution. That decade was a crucial one in Jamaica's history, as has been emphasized in John McNeill's prizewinning book on disease and war in the Greater Caribbean,² in Richard Dunn's argument that the Glorious Revolution initiated a decisive break in the history of the West Indies from North America by the new and powerful West India planter and merchant elite accepting a bargain in which their prosperity and security was underpinned by the acceptance of strong imperial authority,³ and which is also important in Mark Hanna's account of Atlantic piracy in which imperial reforms of 1696

² J.R. McNeill, *Mosquito Empires: Ecology and War in the Greater Caribbean, 1620-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

³ Richard S. Dunn, "The Glorious Revolution and America," in Nicolas Canny, ed., *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, vol. 1 *The Origins of Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 463-65.

were crucial in ensuring that piracy would be made illegal in Jamaica, thus ensuring the triumph of a vision of plantation Jamaica that was dominant until the end of slavery.

The rise of the large integrated plantation producing sugar within a vibrant Atlantic economy in which the slave trade was a vital component and in which enslaved people endured a militarized form of government, as Rugemer argues, resting on violence and extreme brutality supported by a strong state and imperial troops, made the eighteenth century different from the seventeenth century. How this society came about, what its principal features were, and who benefited most, from it has been heavily studied. Jamaica took over from Barbados after 1720 the title of the jewel in the imperial crown and exercised a power within the British Empire – an empire devoted to slavery where, as William Pitt the elder put it, planters were lauded as being as important to empire as the landed interest of Britain, was to domestic politics – that it never achieved before or has had since. Jamaica was at the centre – not the periphery – of an Atlantic world whose culture it did much to shape because its sugar-derived wealth was vital for British prosperity.

As the historian Edward Long argued in 1774, 'The sovereign of Great Britain holds an interest in Negroes ... for his revenue is very greatly benefited and supported by the produce of their personal labour.'⁴ Jamaicans became powerful people in Britain. The Irishman Hans Sloane used the profits he made from a sugar estate that he controlled through his marriage to a wealthy Jamaican widow to make a fortune in Britain that he turned into cultural capital, becoming President of the Royal Society in 1727 and founder of the British Museum, to become an utter pillar of the establishment in his long life, as Delbourgo illustrates in a wide-ranging book. Gauci's biography of the wealthiest mid-eighteenth-century Jamaican planter, William Beckford, demonstrates how Jamaican

⁴ Edward Long, *History of Jamaica* ... 3 vols. (London: T. Lowndes, 1774), II: 87.

money could be turned into political power. Beckford was a genuinely transatlantic figure, very important in the Seven Years War and in the politics of the imperial capital, London. He used his immense wealth to establish himself as the defender of the historical liberties of Englishmen, including the right to enslave.

The irony of the empire's largest slaveholder yelping about liberty was not lost on people at the time and is just as ironic today. Works on Jamaica in its mid-eighteenth-century heyday make clear that Jamaican 'success' as a major imperial asset came at considerable cost, especially to the 90 percent of the population who were enslaved and who toiled relentlessly in the killing fields that were Jamaican sugar plantations. Scholars approach this topic obliquely, as we still await a comprehensive study of Jamaican slavery in the period before abolition. The best account is by Dunn, although his meticulously and deeply researched social history of Mesopotamia, a large sugar estate, deals mostly with Jamaica in the period of abolition and emancipation. His early chapters, however, show a Jamaican slave system that was extremely brutal, confirming contemporary understandings that being an enslaved worker on a Jamaican sugar estate was among the worst fates that could befall a man.

And it was even worse if one was a woman. They formed the majority of workers on sugar estates and had their health destroyed as a consequence. Turner takes up the theme of enslaved female health and how it affected their reproduction for a later period in a rich study of competing imperatives between imperial officials, planters and enslaved women about how the bodies of such enslaved women could be made to serve the interests of empire in slavery during the period of abolition, following the end of the American Revolution from the 1780s to the 1830s. She shows, as does Dunn, that while enslaved women had few weapons at their disposal to shape their lives and the lives of their children, they used the tools they

had, notably an ability to control to an extent their own reproduction, to fashion a degree of agency in how they lived their lives.

Turner is especially interested in using the 'body' as a conceptual frame, exploring how abolitionists perceived and represented young female black bodies and how they legitimized their power over such bodies through attempts to control women's reproductive rights. She shows that such claims were fiercely contested, sometimes by planters who were more interested in short-term profit from the bodily exploitation of women as workers rather than caring too much about them as mothers. Vasconcellos, in a succinct and well-written survey of children and slavery after 1788, notes how the pressures of abolitionists that slavery be ameliorated and that reproduction and the care of children become a planter priority led to a brief period when Jamaica planters came to see enslaved children and economic and social investments in order that slavery might be allowed to survive. When their attempts to keep slavery alive failed, however, planters returned to the pre-amelioration view of the eighteenth century that children were liabilities more than investments.

Harris, drawing heavily from Diana Paton's work on the body and punishment, follows Turner in taking a female-and body-centred approach to enslaved and emancipated women's lives and shows that the survival of corporal punishment in Jamaica (well past when most nations had abolished it) can be traced to jaundiced attitudes developed during slavery about the need to control unruly female black bodies. Each author shows that key events in female lives – pregnancy, childbirth, motherhood, the constraints of patriarchy – were zones of conflict from the 1780s onwards. As Turner argues, 'divergent claims on enslaved women's ability to procreate defined the power struggles in the closing decades of slavery.' (p 10) Enslaved women's reproductive bodies were vital to reform the project that abolitionists formulated to ameliorate the harshest conditions under which enslaved women

laboured. But while sugar dominated, such visionary plans never eventuated and, as Dunn shows, enslaved women's family lives remained handicapped by female ill-health and by enslaved mortality.

Otherwise, however, enslaved people are not the principal objects of attention in most studies of eighteenth-century Jamaica in the period when its imperial value was unquestioned and slavery accepted as essential by imperialists for British prosperity. There has been no explicit study in the last seven years of enslaved people as workers or of the development of African-Jamaican culture in the period when Burton tells us that cultural creativity was most fertile.⁵ One reason for this neglect emerges from the discussion above of Turner. The end of social history and the arrival of cultural history, with its emphasis on textual representation has made it difficult to look at enslaved life except through the distorting prism of white representations of the black body and it is notorious that such sources are fragmentary, unreliable and that the enslaved are only given voice through the hostile words of their oppressors.

Historians struggle with this problem with only partial success. Brown and especially Ogborn are the most skilled at doing this while Turner effectively mixed quantitative data with a body-centred approach to how that data was used to understand what pronatalism – policies adopted during abolition to encourage female reproduction – meant not just as an ideology but as a practice shaped by enslaved female agency. Some attempts to use the history of representation in which white words describe black actions are more problematic. Newman, for example, is tone-deaf to African cultural heritage in her wide-ranging and

⁵ Richard D.E. Burton, *Afro-Creole: Power, Opposition, and Play in the Caribbean* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997). But see Justin Roberts, *Slavery and the Enlightenment in the British Atlantic World, 1750-1807* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013) and Robert S. DuPlessis, *The Material Atlantic: Clothing, Commerce, and Colonization in the Atlantic World, 1650-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

intellectually sophisticated investigation into white ideas about blood, genealogy and inheritance as ways of developing race-science in the late eighteenth-century British Empire. Black women make an appearance in her analysis as subjects of crude comic relief within patterns of British satirical caricature. After a chapter on 'the blood of the father,' thus ignoring the 'blood' of the black mother, and a white-centred chapter on men's sexual relationships with black or mixed-race women, she provides copious illustrations of comic depictions of grotesque black women in order to examine how British comic texts 'forge an erotically charged, fetishizing racial trope: that of the frighteningly corporeal, hypersexual, black woman whose combination of baseness, insatiability, and accessibility proved irresistible to white males with gross appetites and unrestrained sexual access to the enslaved female body.' (p. 182) It is not so much a wrong picture but one lacking nuance, relying on the worst excesses of white male libertines rather than depictions of blacks from abolitionists that may have been patronizing but which were more attuned to black sensibilities. It shows the dangers of relying on representation alone for describing racial attitudes. Newman's method of outlining racist depictions of blacks ends up close to repeating those racial tropes that have caused black people in the Atlantic world so much harm.

What is stressed now instead of the vital black culture that was a staple of social history in the 1970s and 1980s is the ruthless efficiency of planters, merchants and the colonial regime they developed in the first half of the eighteenth century. Writers are both impressed and appalled at the plantation system they describe. The common appellation is that Jamaica was a society at war, even when actual war was not present, as Rugemer, Brown and Louis Nelson all note. Its social structure was dependent on all-encompassing violence, sanctioned in law, designed to rule traumatized and brutalized enslaved people. The centrality of violence can be seen in all aspects of Jamaican society, including its architecture and as

realized in archaeological surveys, as Delle shows in a Marxist-inflected study of the material culture of the plantation. Louis Nelson's exhaustive and innovative study of Jamaican architecture shows how Jamaica's built landscape shows the military nature of the first half of the eighteenth century with planter houses emulating those in southern Ireland – a colony with similar tensions between a dominant minority and an oppressed majority – in being fortified against attack from their internal enemies (the enslaved and even more the Maroons who controlled Jamaica's interior) and from foreign invasion (Spanish and French).

But Louis Nelson also shows that while plantation houses suggest an anxious and fearful ruling class living in a tropical frontier at war with warrior Africans it was also a country of dynamic commerce with Kingston merchant houses showing a society comfortable with slavery or at least willing to bear the risks of enslaved rebellion while profits from sugar were very high. Overall, Jamaican whites were confident in their future and the future of their island, a colony which was very diverse by West Indian standards, with a vibrant mercantile culture in Kingston, as Louis Nelson and Greene show. Merchants made their money through trade with Spanish America, as Finucane demonstrates, or in slave trading. The latter led to one of the greatest of Jamaican fortunes, that of the slave trader Thomas Hibbert (1710-80). Hibbert was unmarried but had a mixed-race illegitimate daughter. Ordinarily, his fortune would have descended to this daughter, making her the wealthiest heiress in Britain, but as Donnington shows in a sensitive history of the Hibbert family from their origins in Manchester, their successes in Kingston, and their consolidation as a rich and culturally powerful pro-slavery family in London and the Home Counties, her race was held about her, with Thomas's wealth descending to his white relatives.

Where enslaved people do appear is when they protest about their condition through acts of resistance leading to revolts, or to internal wars, as Brown prefers to argue. Sharples,

Brown, Rugemer and Zoellner deal with enslaved resistance, slave conspiracies and with the two major enslaved revolts in Jamaican history – Tacky’s War of 1760 (Brown) and the Christmas or Baptist War of 1831-2 (Zoellner). Sharples looks at slave conspiracies in the entire Atlantic World but Jamaica is a substantial player in that world. He argues that white reactions to potential but unrealized slave revolts show us how slavery was, at its core, a system of fear maintained by violence. That finding is hardly original but what is original about his argument is how slave conspiracies in the Caribbean are linked to wider discourses with African, English and American antecedents, including most significantly fears of Catholic rebellion in England. Colonists did not treat slave rebellions as a new phenomenon but incorporated them within a long tradition of revolt from ‘outsiders’ to established polities, such as Catholic conspiracies against the state in seventeenth-century England.

The treatment of slave rebellions is increasingly linked to African heritages – Brown and Rugemer both see Tacky’s revolt in the way that Edward Long described it, as a largely African-led Coromantee rebellion, designed to substitute white power for that of African kingdoms built on the model of the Maroons. Rugemer pays much attention to the long early eighteenth-century conflict in Jamaica between Maroons and white settlers in frontier regions, arguing that such conflict encouraged white Jamaicans to envisage their island as a militarized slave society where whites were always at war with barely assimilated and relentlessly hostile enslaved men on plantations and Maroon warriors in autonomous enclaves. Unlike a previous historiography on slave rebellions, which placed them within patterns of black cultural development, the current concern is about how slave revolts can be seen as ‘wars’ and as part of battles over security in a valuable but precarious tropical outpost.⁶

⁶ Michael Craton, *Testing the Chains: Resistance to Slavery in the British West Indies* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982); Michael Mullin, *Africa in America: Slave Acculturation and*

Brown insists, in a sensitive and imaginative study of Tacky's revolt, that war was not 'an anomaly in the regular order,' in Jamaica but 'a way of life ... pervasive and unending, the natural consequences of slavery itself.' He concludes that 'the violence of state-making, territorial acquisition, and strategic competition flowed into the quotidian brutality that typified the social relations of slavery, where the projection of will and the exercise of power were at their most naked and absolute.' (p. 248) Given this emphasis on security and war, Maroons are an increasingly popular study. Both the first Maroon War in the 1730s and the disastrous second Maroon War in 1795-6 (for Maroons but also, as Petley has shown, for the imperial state)⁷ have attracted attention, notably from Rugemer but also from McKee and Chopra, both of whom place Maroons in comparative perspective. McKee sees commonalities between Jamaican marronage and the semi-autonomous character of the Native American Creek nation while Chopra looks at Maroons in an imperial context and looks at how the second Maroon War connected Maroons to Nova Scotia and Sierra Leone, making them negotiate an empire still devoted to slavery even as Britain was becoming an abolitionist nation. War, imperialism, and security – slave resistance and marronage were, as Brown, argues were 'part of a vast transatlantic phenomenon,' continual war in which 'the dispersed and downtrodden could not win their wars against empires and their adherents' as 'all of slave war's essential features – rapacious exploitation, racial subjugation, and the proliferation of wars within wars – would continue.' (p. 249)

This historical picture of Jamaica, one which tends not to focus much on the majority enslaved population, despite the protestations of most writers that the study of slavery should be central to any Jamaican history, follows historiographical patterns very different to those

Resistance in the American South and the British Caribbean, 1736-1831 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992).

⁷ Christer Petley, 'Slaveholders and revolution: the Jamaican planter class, British imperial politics, and the ending of the slave trade, 1775-1807,' *Slavery & Abolition* 39 (2018), 53-79.

made in the past. The ambitions of an earlier generation of historians of Jamaica were to create a social and economic portrait of the island which would provide the empirical basis for further investigations and to place Jamaica within the context of Caribbean history, building on the pioneering work of the first generation of University of the West Indian historians, including Elsa Goveia, Douglas Hall, Woodville Marshall and Roy Augier. Their aim was to provide a usable past for Jamaicans as the island emerged into independence from Britain. These ambitions resulted in the late 1960s and 1970s in a host of important social histories of Jamaica and the West Indies – the last truly formative period of Jamaican historiography before the recent explosion of interest in the slavery period of the island.

Jack P. Greene drew attention to this exciting scholarship in a review article in the *American Historical Review* in 1974.⁸ He reviewed six major books, all of which drew heavily on the 'new' social history movement of the time and which were underpinned by the long traditions of economic history in West Indian writing, especially in the early days of the history department of the University of the West Indies. He connected the scholarship of historians such as Richard Dunn, Orland Patterson, Richard Sheridan and Edward [Kamau] Braithwaite to a previous generation of scholars from Britain and America such as Richard Pares, Lowell Ragatz, as well as the great West Indian historian, Eric Williams and concluded that what was distinctive about the books he surveyed (and to this could be added books published not long after 1974 by the historians Barry Higman, Michael Craton, Michael Pawson and David Buisseret, and an influential article on Creolization by anthropologists Richard Price and Sidney Mintz)⁹ was their commitment to social history and making

⁸ Jack P. Greene, 'Society and Economy in the British Caribbean during the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries,' *American Historical Review* 79 (1974), 1499-1517.

⁹ B.W. Higman, *Slave population and economy in Jamaica, 1807-1834* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976); Michael Craton, *Searching for the Invisible Man: Slaves and Plantation Life in Jamaica* (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press, 1978); Michael Pawson and David Buisseret, *Port Royal Jamaica* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975);

empirical findings about underlying Jamaican social structures, and, in Mintz, Price and Braithwaite's case, cultural patterns. Even more notable than this insistence on expanding the body of what was known about early Jamaica was the desire, especially among scholars either of Jamaican descent like Patterson or based in Jamaica like Braithwaite and Higman, to locate Jamaican history in a Caribbean context, as well as within the broader historiography of colonial British America.

That moment described by Greene did not last. Relatively little attention was paid to Jamaica between 1655 and 1834 in the next couple of decades, with the work of Barry Higman a significant exception.¹⁰ When historians, now almost exclusively based in Britain or America, turned again to the study of early colonial Jamaica, they did so in a very changed historiographical environment. Social history was no longer dominant; it was cultural history which was in the ascendant. If the emblematic works of those analysed by Greene had been Braithwaite's careful and evocative recreation of the social and cultural frameworks of Jamaica in the period of abolition and Dunn's heavily quantitative and elegiac social history of the rise of the West Indian planter elite, then the quintessential book under study here is Diana Paton's wide-ranging cultural history of the African-Jamaican practice of obeah. Paton wanted to show that obeah was 'more than witchcraft and sorcery' and attacked the still current view as being wrong that saw obeah as 'the ultimate signifier of the Caribbean's difference from Europe, a symbol of the region's supposed inability to be part of the modern world.' (p.1)

and Sidney Mintz and Richard Price, *The Birth of African-American Culture; An Anthropological Perspective* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992).

¹⁰ B.W. Higman, *Montpelier, Jamaica: A Plantation Community in Slavery and Freedom 1739-1912* (Kingston, 1998; idem, *Plantation Jamaica 1750-1850: Capital and Control in a Colonial Economy* (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2005); idem, *Proslavery Priest: The Atlantic World of John Lindsay, 1729-1788* (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2011).

Obeah, she argues, was very much part of a developing eighteenth and nineteenth century 'modernity' that connected the Caribbean to the wider world as 'a *mutual* construction, made in the spaces between the powerful's imposition and the colonized's resistance.' (p. 8) She is intensely interested in how obeah was represented within larger European discourses about African and Caribbean political and intellectual capacity and less worried about discovering what obeah actually was, which was concern for earlier writers on the subject. Instead she sees obeah as providing a window into the cultural history of Jamaica, and focuses on what was the concept of obeah used for in its representation by colonial authority and writers.

Paton's determination to link obeah with discourses of modernity outside the Caribbean is typical of much of the new scholarship on Jamaica, although Paton is singular among the authors reviewed here, except for Tom Zoellner in his popular account of the Baptist War of 1831-2, in being interested in what her study on the representation of obeah means for contemporary Caribbean society and culture. The object of interest for everyone else is not on how this period of Jamaican history fits into Jamaican history as a whole but on where Jamaica fits within Atlantic and imperial frameworks. In short, writers stress how Jamaica is located spatially in the early modern period rather than on what is specifically Jamaican about this temporal period of Jamaican history.¹¹

The Atlantic perspective is particularly important. It is a subfield of early modern history which insists that the lands surrounding the Atlantic have a shared history that transcends national or imperial boundaries. The scholars surveyed here tend to place Jamaica in an Atlantic context, looking especially at the interactions between Africans and Europeans in shaping historical development. Brown, Donnington, Livesay, Rugemer and Walker

¹¹ For a very different approach, see Orlando Patterson, *The Confounding Island: Jamaica and the Postcolonial Predicament* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2019).

explicitly include 'Atlantic' in the titles of their book. Brown and Rugemer are especially successful in highlighting African contributions to Jamaica's Atlantic culture. Atlantic historians tend to distinguish themselves from imperial historians in having a less hierarchical understanding of the relations between Africa, Europe and the Americas, paying less attention to bureaucracy and imperial regulation and more on trade, migration and the exchange of ideas in the culturally diverse transatlantic community. It is often hard, however, to see these distinctions between Atlantic and imperial history as being so clear cut. Indeed, nine of the authors studied here specifically use empire in the title of their books as a way of defining their subject material. In reality, what the current emphasis on transatlantic connections and Jamaica's role in forging a particular kind of capitalist society that operated within the British Empire shows is that Jamaican history has returned to the predilections of the historians writing on Jamaica and the West Indies as part of imperial history who published in the first half of the twentieth century.¹²

The difference can be seen most clearly when we look at three recently published books which are based on assumptions and research done several decades earlier. Dunn, Greene and Monteith have written social histories of Jamaican society, slavery and economy that would have not been out of place in the historiography of the 1970s and 1980s when each book was conceived and partly written, Dunn's comparative history is the product of forty years' work in two very rich archives, including that of the Mesopotamia Estate in the last eighty years of slavery, and has multiple tables on such traditional social history topics as demography. He painstakingly recreated the lives of individual enslaved lives – the only

¹² Trevor Burnard, *The Atlantic in World History, 1492-1830* (Bloomsbury: London, 2020). For early and mid-twentieth historians of the British West Indies, see, inter alia, Lowell J. Ragatz, *The Fall of the Planter Class in the British Caribbean, 1763-1833* (New York: Century Co., 1928), Richard Pares, *War and Trade in the West Indies 1739-1763* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936) and Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1944).

author among those writing recently to have done so at any length, save for Brown's exploration of the leader of the Jamaican slave wars of 1760, the Dahomey-born ex-'Guinea prince,' Apongo. He describes at length the lives and labours of a slave called Sarah Affir and her descendants, highlighting just how horrible working on a sugar plantation was with only little relief being gained from being able to contemplate higher things as a convert to the Moravian religion.

Like Dunn, Greene's portrait of settler Jamaica in the 1750s is based on quantitative sources such as poll-tax lists, censuses and landowner lists that Greene first surveyed in the 1970s. Monteith adds to work from last century done by Verene Shepherd and Veront Satchell at the University of the West Indies, where Monteith teaches, on diverse sectors of the Jamaican economy during the age of abolition to provide a mass of empirical information on Jamaica's burgeoning coffee industry, with lots of details on how working in coffee was very different, and mostly better, for enslaved people than working in sugar.¹³ It is instructive that Monteith is the only author surveyed here who is a member of the history department of the University of West Indies at Mona. One simple explanation of why the study of Jamaica during the period of slavery is increasingly conceptualized as part of Atlantic, American and imperial history is that historians working in Jamaica have moved their attention away from the history of slavery towards the history of Jamaica in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Monteith herself has mostly moved her attention to later periods of Jamaican history, her current book coming out of work she did in the 1980s before her doctorate and research on twentieth century banking in the West Indies.¹⁴

¹³ Verene Shepherd, *Livestock, Sugar and Slavery: Contested Terrain in Colonial Jamaica* (Kingston: Ian Randle, 2009); Veront Satchell, *Sugar, Slavery and Technological Change: Jamaica, 1760-1830* (VDM Publishing, 2010).

¹⁴ Kathleen Monteith, *Depression to Decolonization: Barclays Bank (DCO) in the West Indies, 1926-1962* (Kingston: University of the West Indies, 2008).

But within these throwbacks to earlier historiographic assumptions are some fresh observations. Greene, for example, insists, contra to the books of Dunn and Patterson which he reviewed in 1974 but in the same vein as Braithwaite, that we should not think of Jamaica during slavery as economically successful but socially monstrous, the very model of a dysfunctional society. It is true that, as Walker argues, Jamaica was 'a brave new world of relentless profit seeking, coercive colonialism and profound exploitation.' (p. 306) But that does not mean, however, that it was a 'failed settler society,' several writers insist, noting the dynamism of white society and, more occasionally, the ways in which enslaved Africans were developing their own cultural and social patterns.¹⁵ Greene makes the argument most explicitly. He argues that by 1750 white Jamaicans had created a complex and distinctive settler society, one in which it was freedom rather than race that was the principal dividing line. (p. 9) How race came to replace freedom as a major dividing line (although at all times race and freedom were never really separate) is a major theme in books on the intellectual history of Jamaica from 1760 onwards, by Newman, Livesay, Seth, and Senior. Greene, however, like Walker, Louis Nelson, Mirvis, and Rugemer, outlines how Jamaica in the mid-eighteenth century was a complex social entity with a powerful transatlantic political class, a firm sense of its Creole identity, with a diverse economic regime that gave space for many free people other than wealthy planters. He insists, moreover, that we need to place Jamaica in its colonial British American context, arguing that while sui generis in some

¹⁵ The concept of a failed settler society is taken from Trevor Burnard, 'A Failed Settler Society: Marriage and Demographic Failure in Early Jamaica,' *Journal of Social History* 28 (September, 1994), 63-82. The idea of a 'failed' settler society is narrower than critics suggest – it is meant to imply only that Jamaica did not achieve the demographic balance in its white population that was achieved in settler colonies in North America. For essays that use this concept in the narrow sense intended see Catherine Hall, 'Gendering Property, Racing Capital,' *History Workshop Journal* 78 (2014), 22-38 and Christer Petley, 'Rethinking the Fall of the Planter Class,' *Atlantic Studies* 9 (2012), 1-17. I have not included in this essay my own work but it should be noted that I am a participant in this historical field, with three recent monographs on Jamaican history.

respects, it was so only in the way that all colonies were distinctive and that what was more important was how Jamaica resembled mainland colonies, notably South Carolina, in its political, social, economic and cultural characteristics, providing a model of social development for other slave-reliant plantation colonies.

That Jamaica needs to be compared to mainland colonies is a constant theme, both in comparative studies, such as those by Rugemer, Sharples, McKee, Chopra, Charmaine Nelson, and Dunn. In his regional history of the Greater Caribbean, Mulcahy highlights the centrality of eighteenth-century Jamaica as a distinct variation of the seventeenth-century Barbadian sugar plantation. And, Mulcahy insists, suggesting Jamaica is less 'lickle' and more 'tallawah,' that what distinguished Jamaica in this period was that it was 'big' – in its large land and slave-holdings, its amount of sugar produced, its extraordinary wealth and just as extraordinary poverty, and in the constancy of its violence against slavery and the resistance to violence that resulted. (p. 83)

Walker, too, and Livesay, following earlier work by Brown, disavow ideas that Jamaica can be seen as a 'failed settler society.'¹⁶ Both emphasize that, despite demographic disaster, free and freed people in Jamaica developed viable family structures which Walker describes as 'remarkably durable kinship networks that became the lynchpin for Britain's ongoing control of Britain ... chart[ing] the trajectory of an island that increasingly steered the course of the British Empire.' Recent work has extended our knowledge of white society, in particular. Walker provides the first comprehensive account of free women (mostly white but also black) in the urban entrepôts of Port Royal and Kingston and as plantation owners in the first half of the eighteenth century. Mirvis provides an equally pioneering account of Jews in the same period. Hanna's Atlantic history of pirates has a considerable section devoted to

¹⁶ Vincent Brown, *The Reaper's Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008).

that group of men and the occasional women in seventeenth and early eighteenth-century Jamaica. Livesay, in a study that is less narrowly focused than it might seem from the small number of people that is part of his database, explores the intersection of race and wealth among 360 mixed-race individuals who were educated in Britain between 1733 and 1833. Distressingly, however, Livesay is indifferent to the black side of his mixed-race subjects, concentrating entirely upon white fathers rather than on black mothers and on how mixed-race rich Jamaicans tried to gain a place within white society.

This attention to diverse parts of white society does not mean that the leaders of white Jamaica are ignored. Indeed, the opposite is true. We have sensitive portraits of a number of prominent members of the white elite. Petley, Delbourgo and Gauci have given us biographies of Simon Taylor, Hans Sloane and William Beckford while Donnigton has sketched a group biography of the Hibbert family, especially the slave trader Thomas, and the proslavery London merchant, George. Petley's brilliant biography of Taylor (1740-1813), a man who made his fortune in Jamaica and who never left it, even though he died feeling betrayed by abolitionists, not only describes the complicated feelings of a patriotic planter whose warm regard for his British heritage was increasingly not reciprocated by a Britain coming to think of planters as evil and retrograde but also captures the many challenges and opportunities available within the plantation economy during the tumultuous years of the French Revolution.

In addition, historians have used the extensive diaries of Thomas Thistlewood to capture the day to day grisly reality of slavery as well as Thistlewood's role in the creation of knowledge in such things as botany. Livesay, Zoellner, Brown, Mulcahy and Louis Nelson all make good use of his diaries in their books. Ogborn draws on his diaries with great effect, paying special attention to Thistlewood's copious writings both as a textual recording of

gentlemanly 'plant talk' and also as an entrée into reconstructing, through imaginative readings against the archival grain, the speech acts of enslaved people. Thistlewood is thus a means of understanding illiterate but talkative and often transgressive Africans. Thistlewood is a fascinating study in himself but also one of the only ways we can get to the world of enslaved people and the troubles they faced within a brutal slavery.

If Thistlewood is increasingly ubiquitous as a source to understand Jamaican slavery, then Edward Long, the great if very racist historian of Jamaica in its imperial pomp, is everywhere in the books under study. We await a full biography of Long from Catherine Hall but meanwhile he is well treated as an intellectual influence in numerous books, such as those by Newman, Brown, Senior and Ogburn.¹⁷ Both Seth and Bohls devote separate chapters to a consideration of Long and his views. Bohls takes a new approach to Long, concentrating not on his pernicious views on race than on his aesthetics on how he was determined to place the landscape of Jamaica within the mode of the picturesque and the pastoral. For Long, and for Bohls, what was important was in rejecting ideas that Jamaica was exceptional, either in its brutal slave system, its extremities of wealth, and in the demographic disparities between blacks and whites, in favour of including Jamaica within enlightenment discourses that showed it to be civilized and improved (key, if loaded, eighteenth century terms).

Seth has a more traditional concern in regard to Long's thoughts, which is his role as a crucial conduit between the West Indies and Britain of the developing ideologies of race-science, in which Africans were determined to be not just culturally alien but medically inferior. Seth insists on the West Indianness of Long, situating him within the context of Caribbean as much as European debates over slavery and physical racial difference. Long, he

¹⁷ Catherine Hall, 'Whose Memories? Edward Long and the Work of Re-remembering', in *Britain's History and Memory of Transatlantic Slavery: Local Nuances of a 'National Sin'*, ed. Katie Donington, Ryan Hanley and Jessica Moody, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016) 129–49.

notes, was one of the very few eighteenth-century writers on race-science with colonial experience and who had lived in a slave society. That experience helps to explain why he was ambivalent about whether African inferiority showed that Africans were a separate creation to Europeans (polygenesis). Long never denied enslaved people's humanity while insisting that Africans were naturally inferior people. He took the planters' views that there were striking differences between Creole and African enslaved people that meant that the new environment of Jamaica could transform Africans into docile and well-behaved Creole slaves who could be potential allies against slave insurrection. Seth argues that experience in the colonial context shifted the terms of debate on race as race relations were not just theoretical but lived reality. Long understood that if whites were to survive in a dominant black population meant that they had to make alliances and accommodation. Seth concludes that 'seemingly familiar structures of racial difference were made differently in the centre and periphery.' (p 240)

Geography is vital to theorizing about knowledge systems in Jamaica and in the representation of Jamaica in art, architecture and archaeology. Senior's thoughtful and ambitiously interdisciplinary analysis of depictions of medicine and disease in Jamaica is deeply influenced by her understanding of the location where writers composed their work. Ideas changed when people moved to the Caribbean – a region which Senior considers a laboratory of modernity, where European knowledge was augmented and moderated by encounters of European doctors with African medical practitioners, notably those practicing obeah. She sees Jamaica as a hub of empire, a principal fulcrum of the emerging social and economic system of capitalism in which the plantation was 'a unique site of experimental and hybrid forms of medical discourse.' (p. 194) Plantation life and modernity, she concludes,

citing Vincent Brown, was 'underpinned by capitalist accumulation, the experience of dislocation and a self-conscious sense of the novelty of one's predicament.'¹⁸

And novelty was also in the colonial landscape, as Bohls, Charmaine Nelson and Thomas explore in their strikingly similar studies of representations of place in literature and especially in art. Each writer gives a case study of the pastoral prints produced by James Hakewill in 1825. Hakewill, Bohls argues, 'reimagined Jamaican land according to a metropolitan aesthetic paradigm, she calls the 'planter picturesque,' in which 'picturesquely packaged plantations circulated for British consumption along with refined West Indian sugar.' (pp. 22-23) Hakewill is the perfect subject for an historiography that places a prettified Jamaica into a larger imperial context. Thomas shows that Hakewill pictured an ordered, efficient society in which slavery was present but normalized as similar to English agricultural labour as in contemporary pastoral paintings. The same kind of pictorial transformation occurred in New South Wales where convicts, like slaves, are changed into happy and contented rural workers. The picturesque was deeply embedded within the explosive politics of slavery and designed to expound a powerful proslavery message to metropolitan Britons that even as abolition raged Jamaica was performing vital services within the imperial economy.

As a visual artist, Hakewill was the quintessential eyewitness, giving visual evidence of the harmony and industry of the Jamaican countryside. As Charmaine Nelson argues, he was far from being an impartial eyewitness – Jamaican art took sides in the transatlantic debates over slavery in the early nineteenth century. He erased certain types of enslaved activity and painted plantation settings strategically, the ideological outcome of a proslavery disposition She illustrates that Hakewill's 'representation of this Jamaica was reliant on what

¹⁸ Brown, *Reaper's Garden*, 259

we could call a touristic gaze, one that was capable of attaining distance, creating strategic vistas, which were removed from or could selectively edit out the daily torture of Jamaican slave life.’ (p. 22) The one-sided nature of Hakewill’s bucolic vision of subservient and pliantly obedient enslaved people and self-assured whites is seen best when his paintings were subverted by the French artist, Adolphe Duperly. Thomas juxtaposes Hakewill’s accomplished aquatint of Montpelier Estate in St. James, owned by Lord Seaford, a fiction of a harmonious and contented slave society in a vibrant semi-industrial landscape, with Duperly’s 1833 picture of riotous black rebels confronting massed white troops while the sugar works is on fire. For Thomas, Hakewill’s ‘static stage sets with their calm evocations of place contrast with [Duperley’s] transformation of these into violent historical moments of enslaved resistance.’ (p. 143)

The last decade has been a protean period in the writing of early Jamaican history, though the authorial centre of this historiography has moved firmly away from its previous location in Jamaica and to an extent Britain to dwell in the United States. Of the authors in this survey, 23 are resident in the U.S.A., 9 in Britain and one in each of Canada and Jamaica. Four have West Indian descent. The study of Jamaica has become part of the mainstream of Atlantic, early American and imperial history in ways that were not true even as late as 2000, when Andrew Jackson O’Shaughnessy’s treatment of Jamaica as part of a British West Indies which was divided from North American colonies primarily as a result of the American Revolution was revelatory for historians of that conflict who had not considered seriously Jamaica as a potential 14th colony that might have joined in colonial rebellion.¹⁹

¹⁹ Andrew O’Shaughnessy, *An Empire Divided: The American Revolution and the British Caribbean* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000). For a traditional historiography on the American Revolution in which Jamaica was barely mentioned, see Robert Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause: The American Revolution, 1763-1789* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982). For how Jamaica is now seen as firmly part of the American

This emphasis on Jamaica as a crucial part of the British Empire during its adherence to slavery reflects a new realization that Jamaica was the jewel in the imperial crown – small in size but very mighty, as noted in the title to this essay. Seeing Jamaica in this way has some at some cost. The planters and merchants, white and freed, who made such great sums of money that they were thought of as a vital imperial interest, at least before the 1790s and whose presence in Britain forced Britons to think hard about the nature of their imperial mission, probably attract too much attention while the enslaved men and women who made this wealth and movement to Britain possible are relatively neglected or, if discussed, are encompassed within writings that were created by those who oppressed them.

It follows from the Atlantic focus of contemporary early Jamaican historiography that a final predominant theme is modernity. Just as the Atlantic Ocean is intrinsically modern, so too is Jamaica before 1834. Indeed, it might be one of the first modern places in world, something we tend to forget, as Christopher Iannini argues, because ‘the importance of the Caribbean to the culture of modernity’ has been ‘obscured by a long history of conscious negation.’²⁰ There have been two reasons why Jamaica has seemed detached from discourses of modernity. It has become a marginal place in the world; its citizens, as we have seen in the Windrush scandal of 2017-8, discriminated against.²¹ Moreover, a Marxist-influenced literature about nineteenth-century American slavery depicted the quintessential institution of Jamaican history – the plantation – as emblematic of cultural backwardness and premodern capitalism.²²

Revolution in accounts that stress the continental aspects of that event, see Alan Taylor, *American Revolutions: A Continental History, 1750-1804* (New York: Norton, 2016).

²⁰ Christopher Iannini, *Fatal Revolution: Natural History, West Indian Slavery, and the Routes of American Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 14.

²¹ Catherine Hall, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v42/n02/catherine-hall/mother-country>.

²² John Clegg, ‘A Theory of Capitalist Slavery,’ *Journal of Historical Sociology* <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/johs.12259>

Yet the eighteenth-century displayed most of the characteristics of modernity, a modernity that Elizabeth Maddock Dillon describes as ‘constitutively entwined with colonialism’ and also connected with the global movement of capital and which, contrary to Foucauldian and Marxist narratives, cannot be removed from the map of modernity because of the central importance of colonial violence.²³ Its modernity was recognized at the time. Abbé Raynal commented in 1770 that ‘the labors of the colonists settled in these long-scorned islands ... can be regarded as the principal cause of the rapid movement which stirs the universe.’²⁴ Its modernity has been stressed in earlier scholarship. C.L.R. James argued that Caribbean modernity emerged from the sugar plantation, which he considered ‘the most civilizing as well as the most demoralizing influence in West Indian development.’ If planters were modern, enslaved people were even more modern, people who, James argued, ‘from the start lived a life that was in essence a modern life.’²⁵

The hybridity of Jamaica made its captive spaces in the eighteenth-century a laboratory for modernity, a modernity defined by colonialism, violence, transgressive sexuality, and racial and other kinds of difference. The problem, however, with seeing early modern Jamaica as a globally connected Atlantic place in which vital aspects of modernity were fashioned is that once Jamaica disappeared from world history, as it did after emancipation, it seems that modernity can be associated only with its vanished planter class rather than with the black population which remained. It suggests that we are interested in

²³ Elizabeth Maddock Dillon, *New World Drama: The Performative Commons of the Atlantic World, 1649-1849* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 267. See also David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

²⁴ Trevor Burnard and John Garrigus, *The Plantation Machine: Atlantic Capitalism in French Saint-Domingue and British Jamaica* (University of Pennsylvania Press: Philadelphia, 2016), 2.

²⁵ C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* 2nd ed. (New York: Vintage, 1963), 292.

Jamaica only as a case study of a place that went through early `what the rest of the world dealt with in the nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries as it integrated into or resisted the European [and American] global order.’²⁶ That would be unfortunate. The residents of a small society like Jamaica might have become peripheral to European empire when once they were at its core and may not have been able to find a way out of colonization, even when nominally independent but that does not make its history any the less interesting for its own sake as much as what it tells us of how a `lickle’ society became `tallawah.’

²⁶ Alan L. Karras, `The Caribbean region: crucible for modern world history,’ in Jerry H. Bentley et al., *The Cambridge World History: The Construction of a Global World, 1400-1800 CE Part 1 Foundations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 411-13.