CHAPTER 22

Plantation Slavery in the British Caribbean

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Introduction

A large number of people—planters; merchants in the West Indies, Africa and Britain; and ordinary white people working in the West Indies or in Britain—were invested in the success of the remarkable plantation societies established by Englishmen in the seventeenth-century eastern Caribbean and perfected in the western Caribbean by the mid-eighteenth century. These plantations were the marvels of the age. They were factories in the fields, based on a form of exploitative labor relations that drove enslaved laborers close to death but which resulted in the production of highly desirable crops, notably sugar, that were greatly desired in Britain and which brought fortunate owners vast wealth. They presaged a future age of industrialization while being a kind of culmination of the capitalist agriculture that had been a feature of English rural life since the early seventeenth century—West Indies planters were the ultimate in rapacious "improving" landlords. Their efforts, and even more so the efforts of the hundreds of enslaved Africans whom they forced to work without pay in appalling conditions, made British America valuable when it had not been so before. As Barbara Solow notes, "It was slavery that made the empty lands of the western hemisphere valuable producers of commodities and valuable markets for Europe and North America. What moved in the Atlantic in these centuries was predominantly slaves, the output of slaves, the inputs

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of slave societies, and the goods and services purchased with the earnings on slave products."[1]

Yet these marvels were far from being marvelous. Indeed, they represented less the height of civilization and more its nadir. The plantation system of the eighteenth-century British Caribbean was brutal even for an age very used to brutality. The majority of the inhabitants of plantation societies like Jamaica, Barbados, Antigua, and Grenada suffered miserable and shortened lives. They worked in the killing fields of sugar plantations where they worked harder than any other group of people in the eighteenth century and for less rewards. While their owners became some of the richest people in the British Empire, enslaved people were reduced to the lowest standards of living of any group so far studied for the eighteenth century. They were starved, brutalized, and traumatized. The men were whipped frequently and harshly for any indiscretion and the women were sexually violated by white managers. Mid-eighteenth-century Jamaica, to take one West Indian colony as an example, may have been, as historian Charles Leslie wrote in 1739 "a Constant mine, whence Britain grows prodigious riches," but that wealth accrued to vicious tyrants whom Leslie thought excessively cruel. He claimed that "No Country excels them in a barbarous Treatment of Slaves, or in the cruel Methods they put them to death."[2]

An informed critic in 1746 declared that Jamaican slaves were the worst-treated slaves of any colony and that nowhere else were slaves so completely at the mercy and caprice of their masters. The violence of the plantation system and the tensions that were aroused by living as oppressed people in a society of constant tension amounting to warfare was made manifest in the relatively rare but violent and ruthlessly repressed slave revolts that punctuated life in the Caribbean. As had been predicted by the critic writing in 1746, enslaved people in various parts of Jamaica exploded into rebellion in April and May of 1760 in what has become known as Tacky's revolt—a massive slave revolt, intended to "extirpate" whites from the island and transform the island into an African principality. Whites acted with extreme ferocity to the people who had dared defy them. An eyewitness account of what happened to one rebel who was captured describes how "the Rebel, who was caught by our negroes yesterday, was taken to prison today, and they held a trial over him and burned him alive. He was found guilty of murdering 2 children two days before."[3]

This chapter examines the eighteenth-century British Caribbean plantation system as both a remarkable wealth-generating machine and as a monstrous invention. It might have produced sugar so as to satisfy Europe's sweet tooth but it was a malign institution for the workers enmeshed in it. It may have led to some improvement in the material conditions of Europeans living in Europe and made the islands seem like the jewels in Britain's imperial crown but it did so at the expense of the majority of the inhabitants of these islands. The violence of the systems and the contradictions it spurred had lasting consequences for the inhabitants of the British Caribbean, mostly the descendants of enslaved people, as seen in the continuing impoverishment of its people

and even more in the lasting trauma that slavery inflicted. Indeed, Frederick Hickling has posited that European colonialism engendered schizophrenia in the descendants of the enslaved, often manifested in "difficulties in managing their own impulses and in managing interpersonal relationships," contributing to a range of societal problems affecting West Indians as individuals. "Psychopathology in formerly colonised and oppressed people," he asserted, "can take a form that reflects continuing problems with their identity arising out of the ambivalence and anomie fostered in their collective and personal history." Such a statement supports a historical truism, that slavery is at the essence of British Caribbean history and that the ubitiquousness of slavery in the region meant, as the sociologist Frank Tannebaum famously declared, "Nothing escaped the influence of slavery: nothing and no one."[4]

Rise of the Plantation System

Slavery has a long history in the Caribbean, going back before Columbus to the Tainos and Caribs, both of whom were slave owning people, even if their form of slavery, which was for social and ritualistic purposes with little economic value attached to it, was very different from the slavery that was developed in the Caribbean following in the wake of the Columbian encounter from 1492. Slavery accompanied colonization directly and was quickly associated with race—first, with indigenous people, and then, when that form of slavery proved ineffective, with people of African descent. Slavery only became truly world-significant, however, once it had been adopted and adapted by the English and French in the mid-seventeenth-century Lesser Antilles and determined as essential in developing tropical agricultural enterprises devoted to producing sugar—a crop well known in Europe from cultivation in the medieval Mediterranean and in the Canary Islands.

Until the late nineteenth century, the essential characteristics of Caribbean slavery, started by the Spanish but made more effective and brutal by the English in the tiny island of Barbados, were settled, with the region being largely dependent on the institution of the plantation as its principal form of organizing society. It coincided with the Caribbean becoming, for the only time in its history, a place of world importance. As Abbé Raynal, the eighteenth-century French philosopher, declared about the plantations of the Greater Antilles, "the labors of the colonists settled in these long-scorned islands are the sole basis of the African trade, extend the fisheries and cultivation of North America, provide advantageous outlets for the manufacture of Asia, double perhaps triple the activity of the whole of Europe. They can be regarded as the principal cause of the rapid movement which stirs the universe."[5] It was a center of modernity and of modernization, not least in how it shaped and changed the peoples who came together, often in conflict, from different cultural backgrounds. The anthropologist, Sidney Mintz, saw the Caribbean as a place of precocious modernity, as could be seen in its embrace of creolization, which he described as a tremendous creative act. It

led to a hybrid culture within developing and new patterns of globalization.[6] It made the people of the Caribbean distinctive. The modernization came out of the sugar plantation, which the Trinidadian writer, C.L.R. James considered "the most civilizing as well as the most demoralizing influence in West Indian development." It modernized the planter but it modernized even more the enslaved population who, James contended, "from the start lived a life that was in essence a modern life. That is their history – as far as I am able to consider, a unique history."[7]

Sugar, introduced by the Spaniards to the Caribbean in the early sixteenth century, was a modern crop and induced a modern set of responses. It started off as a food item that was very expensive and a sign of luxury that could be indulged in only by the very rich, such as Elizabeth I of England (1536–1603), whose addiction to marzipan ruined her teeth and who showed how much Europeans desired sweet things. The massive production of sugar on British Caribbean slave plantations quickly reduced the price of sugar so that it became an everyday item of consumption. That reduction in prices in itself caused difficulties for the enslaved workers who grew it. A long-run fall in sugar prices in the second half of the eighteenth century accompanied by a sharp and ever-increasing rise in slave prices made labor costs much greater just as production needed to be increased. It meant that plantations had to become more efficient, which is exactly what happened. The average productivity of a slave working in sugar as measured by pounds of sugar per worker doubled between 1750 and 1810 in the British Caribbean. That efficiency came in many ways but mostly came out of the skins of the enslaved, who were driven harder than before in order to produce more than before. We can see the results of such hard-driving, and the ways in which sugar production and hence Caribbean slavery was tied to modernizing tendencies in agricultural production, in a sharp decline in enslaved reproduction rates. These rates can be taken as a proxy for how hard enslaved people were worked and especially for how that work fell unevenly among genders, with women increasingly doing the hardest work in growing and harvesting sugar cane. In both Barbados and Jamaica in the years between 1751 and 1775, the rates of natural decrease in the enslaved population increased markedly—from 2.8 percent per annum in Barbados between 1726 and 1750 to 4.8 percent per annum between 1751 and 1776 and from 2.5 percent per annum to 3.4 percent per annum in the same periods in Jamaica. If we combine these figures with those of the newly established sugar islands of the Windwards, acquired by Britain in 1763 after the end of the Seven Years' War, where natural decrease was an astounding 11.3 percent per annum, we can see that the direct consequences of making sugar a staple in ordinary peoples' lives in Europe was the increasing oppression of sugar workers. No other crop produced by Europeans was produced under conditions of such stress and strenuousness, with the demands on workers increasing over time.[8]

The problem with sugar, however, was a problem with labor. Neither indigenous nor European labor, for a variety of reasons, was suitable for sugar

cultivation on the scale needed to be profitable. The response was to turn to African labor, relatively easily got from West Africa, where there were sellers of humans eager to make a profit from their own country people's misery. Few voices were raised against the use of enslaved Africans to make sugar. Bartolmé de las Casas, for example, famous for his denunciation of sixteenth-century Spanish genocides and enslavement of indigenous Caribbean people, had no problem with African slave labor. He argued in 1516 that Spain should import black (and indeed white) slave labor to lessen the burden on the indigenous. Africans became increasingly available in the English Caribbean from the mid-seventeenth century with the development of the Royal African Company (which lasted less than fifty years from its incorporation in 1662 before being replaced by private traders, who proved better at providing the West Indies with the quantities of enslaved labor they thirsted for). African were less susceptible to the diseases that afflicted Europeans. They arrived in the islands disoriented and denuded of any rights, allowing planters to treat them in any way that they wished.

The key moment in the development of the plantation system that came to maturity in the eighteenth-century British Caribbean occurred in Barbados between the 1640s and the 1660s. In this period, rich planters in Barbados borrowed money from London merchants to establish sugar mills and to import thousands of enslaved Africans. They did this so enthusiastically that Barbados went from being an island where the majority of the population was white to one where the majority of the population was black. The move made the people who made the move to the large integrated plantation in Barbados very rich. The large integrated plantation was a new development. It was a modern agricultural estate with dozens to hundreds of slaves in which all aspects of the production of tropical goods for European markets was performed within the same physical space. It provided economies of scale through the size of the enslaved population that allowed for great profits. Barbados was ideally suited for this change. The shift occurred during an export boom when prices for sugar were very high and the prices of African captives relatively low. Land was relatively easy to develop in a small, flat, island, even though cutting down the hardwood forest was very hard work. It meant that by the 1670s Barbados was as settled as southern England with Governor Jonathan Atkins declaring that "there was not a foot of land in Barbados that is not employed even to the very seaside."[9]

Sugar made white Barbadians rich. Through the "sweet negotiations of sugar," Richard Ligon argued in 1657, Barbadians had "in a short time … [grown] very considerable," both in "Reputation and Wealth."[10] By 1680, Barbados was the richest, most highly developed, most populous, and most congested colony in English America, with a thriving sugar industry and 50,000 inhabitants, including 30,000 slaves. Its socio-political model of organization—highly exploitative and materialistic, an economy concentrated around slavery and sugar, with a highly stratified social structure, great disparities in wealth and styles of living, and with a ratio of numerous blacks to

few whites—proved highly adaptable, moving eventually throughout English America, to the Carolinas and to Jamaica and the Leeward Islands. By the early eighteenth century, everywhere in the British Caribbean was similar to what had been established in Barbados by 1680.

This move, however, was slower than might be expected, given how successful the large integrated plantation system was as in generating wealth for owners. Despite having a white population that was 50,000 in the 1770s and thus just 2 percent of the total white population in British America, the British West Indies produced under a third of the total wealth of British America in 1774. Average wealth was £1000 per white person, over ten times as much as the average wealth of white people in other parts of British America and in England and Wales. What this meant at an individual level can be seen in the wealth of the richest people in Jamaica who were much wealthier than people even in the richest colony of British America, South Carolina. The total wealth of the ten richest men dying in Jamaica in 1774 was £246,872 compared to £101,308 for South Carolina.[11]

It was not until at least the 1690s and really until the 1720s when Jamaica became dominated by the large integrated plantation system and took over from Barbados the title of the wealthiest British colony in the Caribbean. Sugar was a demanding crop that required good management, a strong dose of luck, and large investments of money. All of these were hard to achieve, especially in the demanding early days of plantation agriculture. The most difficult thing about sugar planting was that it involved the disciplining of African slaves, many of whom had been warriors in Africa, were very often rebellious and willing to use violence, and who showed themselves to be the enemies of the people who were trying to manage them. As Henry Drax argued in his 1670s Barbadian slave-management manual, "Many Negroes will be apt to Lurk and Meech from their Work, without great care be taken to prevent it." Punishment, Drax, argued had to be immediate and exemplary: "If att any time you take Notice of a fault that you design to punish let itt bee Emediately Executed Espetially on Negroes. Many of them being of the houmer for awoyding punishments when threatened."[12]

Many white people preferred to do other things if they could than to undertake such unpleasant disciplining. And other options existed, such as being a small farmer, engaging in privateering, working in commerce in the pirate's town of Port Royal, or turning to work on the ocean. Over time, however, land became more expensive and poorer whites began to be excluded from many opportunities except from working on plantations. In addition, many ordinary whites had been soldiers or had worked in the Atlantic slave trade and were used to violence being exerted against them and violence being used by them toward others. They were prepared to accept the bargain that wealthy plantation owners offered them: giving up the chance for landed independence in return for working for high wages that gave ordinary whites the opportunity to themselves become slave owners. Plantations worked because white men were increasingly prepared to use violence against the enslaved people

they controlled and were well rewarded for doing this. Solving the problem of managing enslaved labor enabled the large integrated plantation to become the standard form of organization everywhere in the eighteenth-century British Caribbean.

The Atlantic Slave Trade

Most enslaved people entered slavery in the British Caribbean through the Atlantic slave trade. Indeed, without the slave trade the enslaved population would have decreased to nothing, as rates of natural population decrease remained very high throughout the eighteenth century. The slave trade, which brought 2,000,400 enslaved people to the British Caribbean in the eighteenth century, of whom 119,766 were immediately shipped to Spanish America or British North America, was the lifeblood of an enslaved population, which was just 591,000 in 1800. The levels of people arriving in the slave trade increased before the American Revolution, from 12,723 per annum in the 1740s to 34,833 in the first half of the 1770s, before falling away almost completely during the American Revolution and then re-establishing itself in the 1790s at an average of 21,039 arrivals per annum. The enslaved population was thus largely made up of arrivals from Africa. The percentage of new enslaved populations each decade that were comprised of births increased gradually over time, from 16.4 percent in the 1700s to 29.1 percent in the 1760s and to 31.4 percent in the 1790s. Nevertheless, the majority of eighteenth-century West Indian enslaved people were not born into slavery but were brought there through the horrors of the Middle Passage.

For such an important trade, we have few eyewitness accounts from the perspective of those who endured its horrors about how the slave trade operated and what it felt like to be trapped in it. The most famous account in English is by Olaudah Equiano, and he may not have actually been an African transported across the Atlantic but may have based his account on what he heard from others. In his 1789 autobiography, Equiano claimed that he had been born as an Igbo in present-day Nigeria or Benin in 1745 and then been captured and taken to Barbados around 1756. Equiano describes poignantly the fear that enveloped him as he was forced aboard a slave vessel where he was surrounded by strange white men. These white men acted with "brutal cruelty" and themselves were treated brutally. He noted how a white sailor was "flogged so unmercifully … that he died in consequence of it." Equiano was so despondent and terrified that he prayed "for the last friend, Death, to relieve me." On arrival in Barbados, Equiano worried that these tormentors would kill the captives and that they "should be eaten by these ugly men." But the slave trade was not intended to be a death trap (though perhaps 10–15 percent of captives died en route from Africa to the Caribbean) but to provide laborers for the real killing fields, which were West Indian sugar plantations. Equiano described how he and his fellow captives were washed, made

to jump, and then taken ashore to a merchant's yard where "we were all pent up together like so many sheep in a fold, without regard to sex or age."[13]

The imagery Equiano used, of people being treated like animals, is important. One reason why enslavers could treat the enslaved so badly is because they did not see them as being people akin to themselves. The "horrible comparison" of Africans being bestial and not fully human was made all the time. In the seventeenth century, the English writer, Richard Ligon, noted of slave sales in Barbados right at the beginning of the English experiment with slavery that planters bought slaves much as "Horses in a Market; the strongest, youthfullest, and most beautiful, yield the greatest prices." When listing their property, slave owners treated "Negroes and livestock" as one category, often giving similar names to each category, so that an enslaved man named, possibly for comical effect, as Caesar, might find himself in charge of looking after a horse of a similar name. Africans were not quite the same as animals and Europeans accepted that they were similar to themselves as being part of God's creation, with biblical orthodoxy being that all humans came from the single creation of Adam and Eve. Europeans considered Africans to be inferior forms of humans. White West Indians came very close to considering Africans to be a different species that they were entitled to have no feelings for. The characterization of Africans in the earliest slave code, that of Barbados in 1661, as "an heathenish, brutish and an uncertaine dangerous kinde of people" showed the prevailing belief that these were people separate from Europeans and able to be treated in ways that would not be possible for Europeans as they were people of a "barbarous, wild and savage nature" which "wholly unqualified [them] to be governed by the Laws, customs and Practices of our nation."[14] In the eighteenth century, the Jamaican historian, Edward Long, speculated that Africans were a different species, somewhere intermediate between the Great Apes and Europeans. He argued that orangutans were attracted to Africans as a way of bettering themselves in the same way that Africans, he thought, were oriented to seeing Europeans as desirable mates.[15]

Violence did not end when the voyage to the Caribbean ended. Captives were transformed into slaves through a process of sale that dehumanized those involved. As ships neared port, captives were prepared for sale through being primped and polished so that they might get the best prices. William Butterworth described on the *Hudibras* that arrived in Grenada in 1787 captives were rubbed with palm oil to make their skin gleam and "those whose age or grief had rendered grey hairs were selected, when, with a blocking brush, the silvery grey hairs were made to assume a jetty hue."[16] Occasionally, enslaved people were sold by means of a "scramble," when buyers rushed a ship grabbing hold of desired captives "with the ferocity of brutes." More often, however, showing how valuable enslaved people were (averaging in the 1770s £50 apiece, which was equivalent to a good salary for an ordinary white man), enslaved people were sold to merchants and then moved to a merchant's yard where they were sold in small lots to individual planters.

This sorting process meant that enslaved people tended to be sold in groups of mixed ethnicities or as individuals, diluting the ethnic identities of plantations. Planters expressed a preference for enslaved people from the Gold Coast, commonly called the Koromantee, and it does seem that in Jamaica the influence of Koromantee slaves was extremely strong, as shipments from the Gold Coast were predominant in the second quarter of the eighteenth century when the large plantation system was becoming fully formed. The nature of the slave trade to the island, however, meant that the slave population of Jamaica (and other West Indian islands) was remarkably ethnically heterogenous. Buyers may have wanted to buy slaves from the Gold Coast but demand was so high that they took whatever enslaved people they could. The African population was very mixed, as Hans Sloane, the doctor and fellow of the Royal Society, found when he visited a sugar plantation in the middle of the island and watched a dozen Africans make music that was variously from the Angola, Papaw, and Koromantee regions of Africa.

Jamaica circa 1756

If we want to see the plantation system of the British Caribbean at its height, we can look at Jamaica circa 1756, on the eve of the Seven Years' War. We have a mass of material from around that year which can be used to flesh out the social and economic characteristics of this plantation society at the height of its importance. We also have the diaries of a small-time overseer, Thomas Thistlewood, working on a sugar estate in the southwestern frontier of the island. These diaries provide vivid testimony into how plantations worked and the almost constant war that existed between masters and enslaved people. By 1756, the large integrated plantation described above was fully in place as the dominant part of a diverse economy, alongside a flourishing trade in British manufactured goods and in slaves that existed between Kingston and Spanish America.

By 1756, Jamaica was the jewel in the imperial crown with the richest and wealthiest planter ruling elite in British America, men who at the top end left estates of over £100,000 which was a level of wealth that only the richest aristocrats and London merchants had in Britain. Dr. Patrick Browne, writing in that year, declared Jamaica "not only the richest, but the most considerable colony at this town under the government of *Great Britain*."[17] Some of the greatest fortunes were made virtually from scratch. Thomas Thistlewood gossiped that "old Philip Haughton died worth 400 thousand pounds currency had 70 thousd: Sterling in the bank at home yet about 20 years' worth about 10 thousand currency." Total wealth was £10,338,236 in 1754 for a population of no more than 10,000 whites and 120,000 slaves, with the value of the latter amounting for about 40 percent of that wealth. Most of the whites were migrants from southern England and, increasingly, Scotland. Blacks were probably about evenly divided between native born slaves and African-born slaves, with about 60 percent working in sugar cultivation.

A fierce political dispute between Governor Charles Knowles and the Jamaica Assembly provides some very useful data on social and economic patterns in the island, including a singular record for any eighteenth-century British colony, a 1754 record of landowners. Knowles commissioned this survey because he felt that a few "mighty-men" resident in Britain held "vast Tracts of Land" under uncertain title. There were certainly some absentee "powerful princes" with vast landholdings, such as the London merchant and imperial politician, William Beckford (1708–1770) who owned over 20,000 of the 1,684,198 acres patented in Jamaica. Nevertheless, absentees were not as prominent as Knowles thought. Over 90 percent of land was owned by resident Jamaicans, generally male (nine in ten people) and almost all white. Three broad patterns existed. In the frontier regions of newly developing sugar monocultural areas of the northwest and the far east, there were both high mean and median levels of landownership. In the older settled parishes around Kingston and St. Jago de la Vega, mean and median levels of landownership were lower and more landowners were female. The third kind of landownership was not noted in the list, which was the substantial urban holdings in Kingston, where private real estate was valued at a conservative £500,000 with further money in public buildings. The richest landlords in Kingston made substantial sums from their real estate. The Pereira family, for example, made over £2000 per annum from 39 urban rentals. Rural property could be very valuable and increasingly valuable over time, which encouraged engrossment of what was termed "ruinate" land. Sugar estates were land-hungry. Edward Long estimated that a sugar plantation with 300 slaves producing 300 hogsheads of sugar per annum for net profits of other £5000 would require 900 acres of land, of which 88 would be woodland, and 200 acres in sugar cane.[18]

One particularly valuable document from this period comes from the parish of St. Andrews, an old settled parish near Kingston that was partly a prime sugar producer and partly the center of a developing coffee industry. It was a place where leading Kingston merchants, such as Edward Manning (d. 1756) and Zachary Bayly (d. 1769), invested their mercantile profits into gardens and sugar estates. Manning owned 610 slaves, a proportion of whom were employed in estates in St. Andrew, while Bayly owned 2010 slaves, most of whom were in the northern parishes of St. Ann and St. Mary but some of whom worked in St. Andrew. The census of land use in St. Andrew in 1754 is especially useful in showing both the primacy of sugar and also the diversity of crops in the parish.

The parish contained 68,877 acres, of which 24,703 were undeveloped, 19,000 were in woodland, 13,000 in pasturage, 3443 in sugar, 804 in coffee, 398 in ginger, and 76 devoted to cotton production. A further 7332 acres were devoted to provisions. There were 155 proprietors, 147 of whom were men. The most valuable properties were 24 sugar estates, on which 45 percent of the parish's 7947 enslaved people worked. Sugar was easily the most profitable commodity produced, worth £51,159 of total plantation revenue of

£67,135. Sugar and rum accounted for 87 percent of plantation revenues with coffee worth £6419 or 10 percent of total revenues.

The other area of wealth in Jamaica in 1756 was in trade with Spanish America, although this was in decline from the 1740s and about to collapse as the Seven Years' War started. It was the second biggest trade in the dynamic town of Kingston, next to the Atlantic slave trade, which resulted in about £120,000 per annum passing through the hands of Kingston merchants. A French observer commented that "the greatest wealth of Jamaican wealth was Spanish trade to areas like Portobello, even in times of war."[19] Such a statement was overstated but trade was large, especially in the years between 1713 and 1739, when Britain held the asiento, or the right to supply Spanish America with slaves. Spanish trade brought Spanish bullion—over £500,000 per annum in the 1730s. Unlike other British American colonies, where specie was in short supply, Jamaica had enough hard cash to give it considerable advantages in commercial trade and in the Atlantic slave trade.

All this wealth, however, was maintained only through a vicious slave system in which the people who produced wealth were systematically exploited and abused. Edward Long tried in his 1774 History of Jamaica to argue that Jamaican planters were humane and enlightened. The truth was quite different as can be seen in the unvarnished testimony of Thomas Thistlewood, who in 1756 had been a slave overseer on a sugar estate for nearly six years and who managed his enslaved charges with a mixture of suasion and extreme brutality. The latter was more evident than the former in 1756, a year of drought and harsh conditions in Westmoreland, where more enslaved people escaped, usually only briefly, from Thistlewood's control than in any other year he was employed at Egypt estate. Thistlewood responded to what he saw as enslaved recalcitrance with fury. He whipped his slaves regularly, with most male slaves being whipped at least once in that year and several being whipped more frequently.[20]

He also devised an unusually disgusting and degrading method of punishment, "Derby's dose," which he employed in January and May toward Derby and in July toward a slave called Port Royal and a female slave, Phillis, and again in August and October, making seven slaves in total having experienced this treatment. Derby's dose involved defecation. For Port Royal in July 1756, Thistlewood "made Hector shit in his mouth, immediately put in a gag whilst his mouth was full & made him wear it 4 or 5 hours." The punishment is usually regarded as a sign of Thistlewood's sadism, which it was, but it also occurred for another reason. The slaves forced to endure such punishment had been caught eating sugar cane, mainly out of hunger, as provisions were extremely low in this year and the provision grounds slaves worked did not produce enough to provide enough food for slaves to do the work they were required to do. Thistlewood was trying to prevent his slaves from destroying the crop which provided him with his salary.

What Thistlewood's diaries for 1756 reveal was how little protection enslaved people had from white overseers with almost total freedom to treat

enslaved people as they wanted. White managers were frightened by the disparities in population, which meant that they were always hugely outnumbered and thus could be attacked at any moment, as had happened to Thistlewood in 1752, when a runaway called Congo Sam had attacked him. His enslaved charges had left Thistlewood alone to deal with the attack. Moreover, white managers felt compelled to produce large crops that could provide owners with substantial incomes and therefore prioritized the production of sugar and other commodities over looking after enslaved people. Thomas Thistlewood acted capriciously. He seemed to do so for a purpose, which was to keep enslaved people disoriented and dependent on the person who oppressed them. Thistlewood not only whipped his enslaved charges frequently and sadistically; he preyed on enslaved women sexually, having sexual relations with 22 women on a plantation with 29 adult women, almost all of which relations we can categorize as rapes, or at least coerced sex.

Managing a sugar estate was hard work and required a hard man. Thistlewood was at his most sadistic in the 1750s when he worked at Egypt sugar estate and it was in these years that he faced the most concerted opposition from enslaved people. The period between 1754 and 1756, when crops failed and when slaves could not support themselves saw Thistlewood at his fiercest. He whipped slaves so much that on 24 March 1759 he wrote, "My pocket Whip is broke and wore out." Thistlewood did provide help to his slaves in protecting them from other enslaved people intent on stealing their property. He played one enslaved person off another by giving them small privileges such as money and time off, and allowed some short-term freedoms to do their business off the estate. Thistlewood may have tried sometimes to follow the recommendations made by wealthy planter, Richard Beckford, in 1754, in a manual of slave management that Thistlewood copied into his diary, in which Beckford advised that it was in "the Interest of every Master to treat his Slaves with Justice and Benevolence that their lives may be render'd as cosy as their Condition will permit." The realities of slave management in difficult times, as in 1756, however, meant that physical coercion was crucial. Planters and enslaved people lived on a knife edge of their cold war breaking into actual conflict. Thistlewood followed up his copying of Beckford's recommendation to be merciful with a chilling poem about a slave rebellion in which enslaved people with "a Sense of Injury" who hated their punishments and who had "a general Rancour and hatred of ye person that inflicts it" were always liable, as happened in 1760 in a major slave rebellion adjacent to Thistlewood's estate, to erupt in a "bacchanalian Frenzy" of "Blood and Vengeance."

Violence

The viability of the British West Indian plantation system was maintained by violence, manifest in the quotidian horrors that enslaved people had to endure. That violence was always prevalent but was especially obvious in the plantation system in its foundational or frontier stages, when the work of establishing

plantations was particularly hard; when the ratio of white managers to enslaved laborers, the majority of whom had entered the plantation system direct from Africa, was low; and when restraints on planter behavior from the state were virtually nil. The violence in the plantation system was pervasive and structural. It is easy to stress the psychotic aspects of master–slave relationships. There is obviously some truth in the relentless anecdotes of planter cruelty, where sadists like Thomas Thistlewood flourished. These punishments were intended not just to hurt but to demean. Orlando Patterson, the eminent Jamaica-born sociologist, has written about the eighteenth-century history of his homeland, declaring it "uniquely catastrophic," full of out-of-control whites operating with "near genocidal cruelty." He stresses that the horrors of enslaved life were made worse by the chaos of white life, with white Jamaicans "screwing themselves stupid … smoking too much … drinking too much."[21]

But violence was not just an expression of sadism and a sign of how frightened planters were, and a predictable result of what happens when humans are allowed to exercise absolute tyranny over other people. It was also a means of cowing enslaved people and forcing them into obedience. The utility of violence as a means of managing recalcitrant enslaved people is seen most clearly in the violence meted out to enslaved people who challenged directly the system they were trapped in.

An example of violence being used as a deliberate tool of slave management can be seen in an extraordinary letter written by Caesar, a "key" or privileged slave who was a driver on the Rozelle estate in Clarendon in Jamaica. The letter was written in 1780, a year of great deprivation in Jamaica, when the island was assailed by a devastating hurricane on top of near-famine as a result of disruptions to provisions from North America as a result of the American Revolution. Caesar dictated his letter through an anonymous scribe and addressed his concerns to his owner, Sir Charles Ferguson, who was an absentee owner living in Ayrshire, Scotland. Even more extraordinarily, he later turned up at the doorstep of Ferguson to make a complaint direct to the owner. In his letter of 1780, Caesar told Ferguson of "the falling out" that had happened between the overseer and him. Caesar related how he had taken it upon himself to "push" enslaved laborers to work harder as he thought they were "idling away their times." It was the wrong decision to make because the slaves were under the control of a white carpenter who strongly resented Caesar taking on authority at his expense. The carpenter complained to the overseer and, according to Caesar, all hell erupted. The overseer, "without speaking a Word took and screwed my two Thumbs together and put me in the Stocks, after giving me two hundred lashes."

Worse was to come. The overseer confiscated Caesar's provision grounds so that he had no means of feeding "my wife Child Mother or Sister." He hit Caesar so hard "that I spit blood for three days." He put him in the stocks, gave him another 200 lashes, and then gave his wife and children 300 lashes each for giving him food. The most severe punishment in Caesar's opinion was that he "Ordered me to the field being a thing I was never brought up

to." The overseer then "ordered the Negroes to eat my Hogs and fowls Goats etc. which I thought very hard" and burned his house to the ground. As a result of this unrelenting abuse, seemingly designed to teach a black man that he could not countermand what white men ordered, Caesar ran away. His letter pleaded for mercy. He also noted that the overseer had stolen Caesar's property and had refused to pay him £135 sterling for horses and plantains. Caesar was clearly an enslaved man of means, the owner of wine glasses and silver knives. This fact is in itself surprising but not atypical—most slaves lived on the edge of destitution but a few privileged enslaved people were able to amass wealth for themselves. But such capacity for making money did not protect Caesar from violence It probably had the reverse effect, encouraging white supervisors to put him in his place. His owner took no notice of his plea for mercy, filing the letter as "Letter& Accnt. From Caesar a runaway Negro of Rozell 1780."[22]

Escaping Slavery and Slave Resistance

It was very hard for enslaved people to escape slavery in the eighteenth-century British Caribbean. One method of escape was through running away and forming Maroon communities. That was impossible in Barbados, where the flatness of the island militated against enslaved people setting up communities that whites could not access and destroy and where the Barbadian militia were quite effective in keeping enslaved people under control. It was easier in Jamaica, where from the conquest of the island in 1655 by the English, runaway enslaved people had formed communities practicing marronage in the dense and mountainous interior of the island. Maroons were formidable foes. The imperial government threw vast resources into a never-ending war to try and crush them, with the war becoming especially violent and intense during the 1730s. The Maroons resisted white incursion very successfully. Their repulsion of white efforts to subdue them led the Jamaican government to sue for peace. In 1739 the Maroons and the British signed a treaty which gave Maroons autonomy in return for Maroons acting as an internal police force against runaway enslaved people. This alliance, which lasted until the Second Maroon War of 1795–1796, worked for both sides, though not for enslaved people. It formed the basis of internal security for half a century.

A second way of escaping slavery was through being granted freedom through a legal process of manumission. Unlike the Spanish and Portuguese, the British were reluctant to use manumission, being very unwilling to establish an intermediate group in society between free white people and enslaved black people. Manumission rates were minimal in the region until the second quarter of the eighteenth century. But a free colored class did grow, mostly based on the desire of white men to give favors to their black mistresses and mixed-race children. The great majority of people manumitted were women and children, although occasionally an enslaved domestic man might be freed for conspicuous "good" service. A few privileged enslaved men also saved

enough money to secure their and their families' purchase, though the cost of such manumission was generally beyond most enslaved people. Manumission brought freedom but that freedom was generally circumscribed, as no West Indian community was prepared to accept black equality with even the lowest ranks of white society, such as people in the military. Over time, indeed, freedom became more restrictive, especially as the free people of color community started to be more than just a collection of children of white men and became a community that had a strong sense of its own identity and which married within itself. Whites were seldom prepared to allow free people of color to have the legal rights of white people, meaning that they had little legal protection from being harmed by whites in property matters. They were required to carry documents of freedom with them and had few political rights, except the ability to sometimes serve in the British army and navy. That such service might be considered a form of social mobility shows just how dreadful the conditions of enslavement in the Caribbean were. Life in the army or navy was notoriously hard, even for white people. By the end of eighteenth century, however, substantial communities of free people of color had begun to emerge. We should not overestimate their numbers. In 1786, free people of color made up just 1.3 percent of the population of Barbados and 4.9 percent of free people. In Jamaica in 1800, free people of color accounted for 2.2 percent of the population who were of African descent but 19 percent of the free population.

The final way that enslaved people sought their freedom was through slave rebellion. Such rebellions never succeeded in the eighteenth-century British Caribbean. White military power was too great and maintaining the secrecy necessary for a successful rebellion was very difficult. The great majority of slave rebellions recorded were in fact conspiracies that never came to fruition or which were foiled before implementation. The difficulty of rebelling against planter authority was so great that some islands, like Barbados, had no slave rebellion in the eighteenth century. Antigua had just one slave conspiracy that nearly became a rebellion, in 1736.

But some slave rebellions did occur, despite the handicaps that were faced by enslaved conspirators. Two are especially important. In 1760–1761, an island-wide conspiracy in Jamaica led by an African-born slave, Wager or Apongo, named after his lieutenant, Tacky, came close to destroying Britain's wealthiest colony. It occurred during the Seven Years' War, which the enslaved rebels might have thought a time of weakness in the imperial system. It was not such a weak time, as it meant the British regulars could combine with Maroons to put down the revolt, which they did with difficulty and with maximum force. It was a massive shock to the Jamaican slave system, causing £100,000 in damages, with the deaths of 60 whites, 60 free people of color, and 500 slaves killed in battle or executed in gruesome fashion. It shook white society in Jamaica to its core. The excesses of punishment that resulted from the rebellion shocked Britons who could not believe their country people could

be so barbaric. It may have proved an impetus to an embryonic abolitionist movement.

Thirty-five years later, another slave rebellion occurred, in Grenada, where francophone forces, including many slaves, rebelled under free colored planter, Julien Fedon, against anglophone whites. The result was prolonged war, the devastation of the flourishing Grenadian economy to such an extent that it never really recovered, and the deaths of many thousands of people, most of whom were slaves. The revolt had its own local causes but it was also connected to a wind of change that was on the verge of transforming the Caribbean as a result of the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804). Fedon's revolt showed that the enslaved were not prepared to always put up with their sad lot.[23] When opportunity arose, they were determined to strike for freedom. That freedom was not achieved immediately—it took another generation for emancipation to occur in the British Caribbean. But that it occurred at all shows that by the end of the eighteenth century the seemingly impregnable plantation system was starting to show signs of weakness. That weakness provided some opportunity for enslaved people to contemplate getting away from the plantation's grip and thus achieving freedom. In the nineteenth century, this seemingly impossible dream of freedom occurred with emancipation, accompanied by the decline of the plantation system and the British Caribbean ceasing to be at the center of the world's attention, as it had been when riches from sugar had made white planters all powerful at the expense of a mass of exploited and resentful enslaved people, kept in place by relentless coercion.

Notes

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