

## **Whiteness and the Redefinition of Race and Subjecthood in Jamaica in the Context of an Enlarged British Empire after the Seven Years' War**

**Trevor Burnard**

The Seven Years' War, the first global war, in which France and Britain competed for world supremacy, partly in Europe but also in their various possessions in North America, the Caribbean, Asia and Africa was, as is well known, a crucial event in Atlantic and world history. The Duke of Newcastle, the British minister in charge of government when the conflict started with the defeat of Major-General Edward Braddock on the Monongahela in 1755, had hoped to confine the conflict to the interior provinces of North America but his hopes were in vain. Conflict spread to Europe, encompassed India, settled briefly upon Africa, and ended up involving not just Britain and France but also, to its cost, Bourbon Spain. Between 1759 and 1762 it also involved the Caribbean. British forces emulated forces elsewhere in the British Empire by seizing possessions held by both Spain and France during four years of remarkable triumph. The war was a resounding success for Britain. The strength of its military arms overwhelmed those of France and Spain, showing up major structural weaknesses in the organisation of both empires.<sup>1</sup> The Seven Years' War inaugurated a major expansion in the scope of European interest in their overseas empires, especially in the Atlantic World. As one recent chronicler of part of the conflict states "the scale of the war around the Atlantic, the degree of metropolitan involvement in colonial affairs brought about by the exigencies of war and the extent of Britain's

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<sup>1</sup> For France, see John R. McNeill, *Atlantic Empires of France and Spain: Louisburg and Havana, 1700-1763* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985); Jonathan R. Dull, *The French Navy and the Seven Years' War* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005) JOHN: add. For Spain, see Stanley J. Stein and Barbara H. Stein, *Apogee of Empire: Spain and New Spain in the Age of Charles III, 1759-1789* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003)

territorial gains at the peace of 1763 were to transform the British Atlantic empire.”<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately for Britain, the extent of her triumph proved its undoing, as its empire had major structural weaknesses that the acquisition of new territories only compounded. As several generations of historians have chronicled, the conclusion of the momentous conflict did not so much resolve old imperial issues as create new ones.<sup>3</sup> The most obvious consequence of the Seven Years’ War was the humbling of Britain in the twenty-five years of conflict that led to the creation of the United States.<sup>4</sup> Just as importantly, France was able to reconfigure its empire from a continental to a tropical domain and was able, in supporting the rebellious proto-republicans of the Thirteen Colonies, to wreak revenge on its victorious opponent of the 1750s and 1760s.<sup>5</sup> Most importantly of all, the Seven Years’ War began the loosening of traditional ties throughout the world that culminated in the French Revolution and a global age of revolutions that saw the birth of the modern world. As Christopher Bayly argues, the Seven Years’ War hastened the crisis of old regimes in Europe and, in subsequent European revolutions, deepened the crisis of old orders in America, Asia and North Africa before feeding back these global crises into European convulsions.<sup>6</sup> In this respect, the Seven Years’ War was as crucial in advancing modernity as the intellectual currents of the Enlightenment that shaped the ideas and values of the Europeans participating in global conflict.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> P.J. Marshall, *The Making and Unmaking of Empires: Britain, India and America c.1750-1783* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 86.

<sup>3</sup> Jack P. Greene, “The Seven Years’ War and the American Revolution: The Causal Relationship Reconsidered,” in Peter Marshall and Glyn Williams, eds., *The British Atlantic Empire Before the American Revolution* (London, 1980), 85-105.

<sup>4</sup> Fred Anderson, *Crucible of War: The Seven Years’ War and the Fate of Empire in British North America, 1754-1766* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986), 745-46.

<sup>5</sup> Colin G. Calloway, *The Scratch of a Pen: 1763 and the Transformation of North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 168.

<sup>6</sup> C.A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World 1780-1914* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 86.

<sup>7</sup> Roy Porter, *Enlightenment: Britain and the Creation of the Modern World* (London, 2000).

It is somewhat surprising, then, that relatively little attention has been paid to the Seven Years' War and its consequences in the part of the world that was perhaps most "precociously modern," the Caribbean. The Caribbean was the first area in the New World to experience colonialism and was battered by colonialism more than perhaps anywhere else and for longer than anywhere else. As Abbé Raynal commented disapprovingly in the mid-eighteenth century, "the labours 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."<sup>8</sup> In short, the West Indies was at the forefront of globalisation in the first global age and thus should be considered important in the first global war. Its history in this long period of colonialism is dramatic and often dismal, framed as it was by a number of severe traumas of global significance, such as the extirpation of the Amerindian population; the degradation of the tropical environment; and the triple threats of slavery, sugar and the imposition of the plantation system. If, as Philip Morgan notes, the results of these traumas left it as a diminished and regressive world where enslavement gave a nightmarish quality to quotidian existence, it was also a pioneer of modernity, an area of vital fusions between peoples brought, often unwillingly, from all over the world. It was, as Morgan states, "a generative front, a cultural frontier, a gathering place of broken pieces."<sup>9</sup>

Contrary to a literature inspired by abolitionist campaigns of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century that demonised Jamaica as a regressive,

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<sup>8</sup> Abbé Raynal, as cited in Michael Duffy, *Soldiers, Sugar and Seapower: The British Expeditions to the West Indies and the War with Revolutionary France* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 6.

<sup>9</sup> Philip D. Morgan, "The Caribbean Islands in Atlantic Context, circa 1500-1800," in Felicity A. Nussbaum, ed., *The Global Eighteenth Century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 52-64, quote from 64.

backward society, it was a society, in fact, that was in the forward battalions of modernity.<sup>10</sup> That modernity was manifested in a multiplicity of ways. It can be seen in the heterogeneity of populations in the two islands and in the uneasy fusion of the cultures that these populations brought with them to the Americas and which resulted in new kinds of Creole and American identities. It can be seen in the acquisitive individualism and marketplace orientation of planters and merchants, focused on making as much money as they could and spending it in as agreeable ways as they could, without concern about the social consequences of how that money was gained or spent. As Bayly puts it, in his book on the origins of global modernity, slave plantations were probably the most advanced form of economic specialisation before the Industrial Revolution – “the violence and cruelty of the slave trade and of the exploitation of slaves cannot obscure the fact that this was a flexible, financially sophisticated, consumer-oriented, technologically innovative form of human beastliness.”<sup>11</sup> The violence of the plantation and the dehumanisation of its victims were distressingly modern, foreshadowing the violence and dehumanisation of others that has so disfigured the histories of the last two centuries. The modernity of the two societies can also be also in how the subject peoples of colonialism – Africans, for the most part – reacted to European attempts to reduce them from humans into beasts and in how they developed their own forms of anti-colonial agency that subverted but did not entirely derail the visions of colonial order that were imagined and planned by their masters and mistresses. It can be seen also in the radically new relations of gender and class that shaped social, economic and political interactions in the two

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<sup>10</sup> The best exposition of abolitionism’s pact with embryonic social sciences in which slavery was implicitly and explicitly discounted as opposed to the rational progress of science is Seymour Drescher, *The Mighty Experiment: Free Labor versus Slavery in British Emancipation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002). See also David Brion Davis, *Slavery and Human Progress* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984).

<sup>11</sup> Bayly, *Birth of the Modern World*, 40-41.

colonies and which prefigured changes in class and gender relations in other parts of the world, notably Europe and America. It can be seen, above all, in the development of new racial classificatory systems following Tacky's Revolt in Jamaica in 1760. This was an event that was sufficiently traumatic for white colonists to abandon simultaneously their previous social definition of racial categories in favour of a more explicitly biological racism. Whiteness became a more important social category than it had before; "passing" from black to white became much more difficult as people's racial characteristics were more rigorously recorded; and both societies transformed themselves from places that had a degree of racial fluidity in their social structures to societies with an almost caste-like rigidity about racial classification. This subjugation of people of colour through ideologies of biologically explicit racism had a long legacy into the modern world, influencing colonial attitudes to race in places as diverse as nineteenth century Australasia and South Africa and twentieth century South-east Asia.<sup>12</sup>

This topic is an important one for Jamaican and West Indian history and has been the subject of work that both John Garrigus and I have done in the past in our explorations of the nature of the society of Saint Domingue and Jamaica in the third quarter of the eighteenth century. What I want to focus on today, however, is how white West Indian claims to whiteness themselves were contested by metropolitan Britons in a changing imperial situation after the Seven Years' War. This contestation, of course, was deeply ironic, given how significant whiteness as a way in which people could be defined and classified was becoming in the West Indies. The

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<sup>12</sup> Ann McGrath, ed., *Contested Ground: A History of Australian Aborigines under the British Crown* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1995); T. Keegan, *Colonial South Africa and the origins of the racial order* (London, 1996); Saul Dubow, *A Commonwealth of Knowledge. Science, Sensibility and White South Africa, 1820-2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002).

aftermath of the Seven Years' War was crucial in making manifest this paradox in imperial racial thinking.

Imperial thinkers both before and after the American Revolution failed to learn the lesson of that conflict in regard to respecting settler rights and instead argued for more intensive oversight of imperial matters, especially when colonial actions clashed with a new trend toward an aggressively authoritarian benevolent humanitarianism. Three matters, in particular, preoccupied British politicians and officials. First, they faced the reality of a remarkably multiethnic and polyglot empire. To what extent should new subjects, brought under British control as a result of territorial expansion, enjoy the same rights as natural born subjects? The departure of two million free whites with the creation of the United States and the incorporation of many more millions of Indians made the British Empire ever more an empire of conquest and annexation, involving rule over an increasing number of non-British peoples.<sup>13</sup> Second, as antislavery became increasingly associated with British identity,<sup>14</sup> abolitionists interested in imperial matters had to think about how a post-revolutionary empire could be created where slavery no longer existed. How could the institution of slavery be dissociated from prevailing assumptions about the purposes of empire, when slavery seemed so intrinsic to colonial prosperity? Third, Britons, tormented by the loss of the American colonies in a period when the public

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<sup>13</sup> Stephen Conway, *The British Isles and the War of American Independence* (Oxford, 2000), 333 and C.A. Bayly, "The British and Indigenous Peoples, 1760-1860: Power, Perception and Identity," in Martin Daunt and Rick Halpern, eds., *Empire and Others: British Encounters with Indigenous Peoples 1600-1850* (1999), 19-41; Bowen, "British Conceptions of Global Empire, 1756-1783"; P.J. Marshall, *'A Free though Conquering People': Britain and Asia in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1981); and Elizabeth Mancke, "Negotiating and Empire: Britain and Its Overseas Peripheries, c. 1550-1780," in Daniels and Kennedy, eds., *Negotiated Empires*, 235-66.

<sup>14</sup> Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 354, 359-60.

increasingly embraced imperialism,<sup>15</sup> wanted to ensure that imperial authority was enhanced so that over-proud colonists would never again frustrate metropolitan governments' attempts to impose their definitions of empire upon all subject peoples under their control.<sup>16</sup> As Christopher Bayly has observed, British colonial policy after the American War for Independence, in a period of generally expanding state power in Europe, was "a systemic attempt to centralise power within colonial territories, to exalt the executive above local liberties and to remove non-European and non-British from positions of all but marginal political authority." Bayly believes that these measures represented an "attempt to establish overseas despotisms which mirrored in many ways the politics of neoabsolutism and the Holy Alliance of contemporary Europe."<sup>17</sup>

Neoabsolutism was one of two ways in which imperial thinkers began to re-conceptualise empire after mid-century. The demographic and economic growth of empire as a result of the great gains of the Seven Years' War encouraged a few men to think, for the first time since the late seventeenth century, about the direction of British imperialism. None of these visions of empire came to anything, primarily because they emanated from men who even if part of agencies of state connected with imperialism wrote their plans either from below or outside the state's bureaucratic structures and without official endorsement. But they are suggestive nevertheless about currents of reform percolating in government from the 1750s and the role of the

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<sup>15</sup> Kathleen Wilson, *The Sense of the People: Politics, Culture and Imperialism in England, 1715-1785* (Cambridge, 1995) and Bob Harris, "'American Idols': Empire, War and the Middling Ranks in Mid-Eighteenth Century Britain," *Past and Present*, 150 (1996), 111-41.

<sup>16</sup> Eliga H. Gould, "American Independence and Britain's Counter-Revolution," *Past and Present*, 154 (1997), 107-41; idem, "A Virtual Nation: Greater Britain and the Imperial Legacy of the American Revolution," *American Historical Review*, 104 (1999), 476-89; Marshall, "Empire and Authority"; idem, "Britain and the World in the Eighteenth Century: II, Britons and Americans"; and Conway, *British Isles and the War of American Independence*, 315-45. Gould, Marshall and Conway each emphasise that these developments predated the American War of Independence to the Seven Years' War and were as connected with annexations in India as with losses in America.

<sup>17</sup> C.A. Bayly, *Imperial Meridian: The British Empire and the World, 1780-1830* (London, 1989), 8.

British West Indies in shaping new ideologies of empire. These imperial re-imaginings took two forms. The first, championed in particular by the quintessential imperial bureaucrat, Thomas Pownall, posited the empire as a unitary polity – a sort of greater Britain – in which all subjects would enjoy the same rights, would be governed by the same institutions and would be held together by the binding character of transatlantic commerce. The other view of empire, held by Wilmot Vaughan, Earl of Lisburne, and ex-colonial governor Henry Ellis, was more neoabsolutist, with each region of empire becoming a separate kingdom, governed by a viceroy, similar to how Ireland was governed (the base model for such an imperial reform), with all the polities or kingdoms united under a common monarch. Granville Sharp, a constitutional reformer as well as early antislavery advocate, who argued in 1782 “*The corruption of Parliament is the real source of all our national calamities,*” was a proponent of the Irish model being extended to other imperial polities. The Irish Parliament, he believed, offered a “*true constitutional mode of connecting British dominions that are otherwise separated by nature.*” What both visions of empire had in common, however, was that they imagined the empire becoming more orderly, less diverse, more centralised and with a narrow gap between metropolis and periphery.<sup>18</sup>

A principal concern behind the proliferation of new concepts of empire following the Seven Years’ War had to do with new problems and especially new people that needed to be incorporated into the British Empire. Several of these problems originated in the West Indies. How, for example, were the French settlers of

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<sup>18</sup> [Thomas Pownall], *The Administration of the Colonies* (London, 1764); Wilmot Vaughan, “A Plan for the Better Government of British America, 1769,” New York Historical Society, MSS; John Shy, *A People Numerous and Armed: Reflections on the Military Struggle for American Independence*, rev. ed. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990), 43-80; Granville Sharp, *A Declaration of the People’s Natural Right to a Share in the Legislature ...* (London, 1774), ii; idem, *The Claims of the People of England*, 2d ed. (London, 1782), 8; Brendan McConville, *The King’s Three Faces: The Rise and Fall of Royal America, 1688-1776* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 220-48.

Guadeloupe and Martinique while they were British possessions and French planters in Grenada after it had been secured to the British to be incorporated into empire? The imperial solution was to allow those French willing to accept British rule to keep their land, to vote and even, if they ceased being Catholic, to become legislators. In Grenada, however, such leniency towards French settlers outraged British settlers, who saw themselves as not just a free but also a Protestant people. In response, they put up a spirited defiance, withholding taxes, refusing to meet as an Assembly and virtually paralysing government.<sup>19</sup>

Incorporating French settlers was one thing; incorporating non-Europeans was something quite different. In North America, colonial officials veered between trying to bring Native Americans into the empire in subordinate polities, with Indians in an awkward position as something less than subjects but more formally attached than allies, and excluding native Americans from empire by erecting barriers beyond which native Americans would be placed, ostensibly to protect them from colonists with ambitious western settlement plans. The result was disaster, with British actions angering native Americans sufficiently to inspire an Ottawa chieftain called Pontiac to wage a ferocious war against the British while American settlers, most noticeably the so-called Paxton Boys, took equally ferocious revenge, making western Pennsylvania and the Ohio Valley a zone of vicious racial violence.<sup>20</sup> A similar dispute about the incorporation of non-Europeans into the empire also took place in St. Vincent where so-called “black” Caribs – the descendants of black slaves who had married with native Carib Indians – occupied considerable territory that the British wanted to sell to British planters. The result was the same as in the Ohio Valley: an attempt by the

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<sup>19</sup> O’Shaughnessy, *An Empire Divided*, 124-6

<sup>20</sup> The best recent treatments of Pontiac’s War within the context of imperial relations are Gregory Evans Dowd, *War Under Heaven: Pontiac, the Indian Nations and the British Empire* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 2002) and David Dixon, *Never Come to Peace Again: Pontiac’s Uprising and the Fate of the British Empire in North America* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2005).

British at assimilation of the black Caribs into the empire followed by fierce repression after Caribs resisted, culminating in a violent war in 1772-3 followed by an uneasy peace that lasted until a Carib uprising in 1795 resulting in the forced removal of black Caribs from the island.<sup>21</sup> The significance of the episode in 1772 is two-fold. First, the intended incorporation of non-Europeans involved descendants of African slaves rather than indigenes, thus challenging for the first time white West Indian assumptions that African slaves were removed entirely from any formal status within the British Empire.<sup>22</sup> Second, unlike Pontiac's Rebellion, the expedition of 1772-1773 to St. Vincent occasioned debate in parliament on the intentions of the expedition and generated one of the earliest sustained critiques, on humanitarian grounds, of the behaviour of the British against what Barlow Trecothick, a leading friend of America, called "defenceless, innocent and inoffensive people."<sup>23</sup>

As P.J. Marshall notes, it is a stretch "to detect a new climate of humanitarianism in responses to the problems posed by the incorporation of new subjects" but it is "undeniable that concern for non-British peoples featured increasingly in official rhetoric and in public debate" from 1763 onwards. Christopher Brown has traced how embryonic plans of imperial reform intersected with developing humanitarianism in the period of the American Revolution, with the

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<sup>21</sup> Bernard Matthews, "The Black Caribs – Native Resistance to British Penetration into the Windward Side of St. Vincent, 1763-1773," *Caribbean Quarterly*, 19 (1973), 4-19; Michael Craton, "The Black Caribs of St. Vincent: A Reevaluation," in Robert L. Paquette and Stanley L. Engerman, eds., *The Lesser Antilles in the Age of European Expansion* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996), 71-85; Robin F.A. Fabel, *Colonial Challenges: Britons, Native Americans, and Caribs, 1759-1775* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000), 187-93; Paul Thomas, "The Caribs of St. Vincent: A Study in Imperial Maladministration," *Journal of Caribbean History*, XVIII (1983), .

<sup>22</sup> Peter Hulme notes how the British were determined to see Caribs as overwhelmingly African in skin tone and culture when race and culture are more complicated and don't fit well with the rigid classificatory schemes devised by Europeans. It is noticeable that the people that planters termed black Caribs were the people in charge of the section of St Vincent most desired by the British while the smaller number they arbitrarily termed yellow Carib lived in the westward part of the island where the French were strongest. Peter Hulme, "Black, Yellow, and White on St Vincent: Moreau de Jonnès Carib Ethnography," in Felicity A. Nussbaum, ed., *The Global Eighteenth Century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).

<sup>23</sup> Brown, *Moral Capital*, 156-58.

American Revolution indispensable for shaping the antislavery movement as it actually turned out, transforming the political and cultural significance of antislavery organising. They also coincided with events in India. Empire in India was, as Marshall points out “the total antithesis of all ideals for a British empire that was characterized by freedom.” The British government had found, in the East India Company, an ideal vehicle for implementing imperial policies that were predicated upon establishing a benevolent autocracy accountable to parliament that could curb European excesses and could protect Europeans from Indian attacks. The contrast between India, “where empire in the sense increasingly envisaged by British opinion was being successfully made” and America, where tyrannical planters were demanding liberty while oppressing slaves was palpable.<sup>24</sup>

It was India that humanitarian attitudes and a new kind of imperial authoritarianism, signalled in Edmund Burke’s famous declaration in 1783 that Britain was obliged to act as trustees for the less fortunate, first emerged.<sup>25</sup> This new concern with the ethics of British imperialism soon spread to an investigation of West Indian slavery and a determination to increase, rather than lessen, the centralization of authority over recalcitrant and reactionary white settlers by Britain. Early antislavery writers such as Maurice Morgann in 1772 and James Ramsey, both before the American Revolution and in the 1780s, linked stopping planter cruelty to slaves with stomping hard on planter assumptions about their own independence. Maurice Morgann, author of a pioneering antislavery text that proposed building colonies of

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 456-7; Marshall, *Making and Unmaking of Empires*, 196-7, 201, 216, 270-71.

<sup>25</sup> “All political power which is set over men ... ought to be in some way or other exercised ultimately for their benefit. If this is true with regard to every species of political dominion ... are all in the strictest sense a *trust*; and it is of the very essence of every trust to be rendered *accountable*; and even totally to *cease*, when it substantially varies from the purposes for which alone it could have a lawful existence.” Edmund Burke, “Speech On Fox’s East India Bill,” 1 December 1783, Paul Langford, ed., *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981- ) V: 385. On the East India Company and British Politics, see H.V. Bowen, *Revenue and Reform: The Indian Problem in British Politics, 1757-1773* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) and P.J. Marshall, *The Impeachment of Warren Hastings* (Oxford, 1965).

free Africans in Florida that would force older colonies to give up slavery, insisted that America and the West Indies were “mere Colonies planted in subserviency to the Interest of Great Britain & calculated to increase its commerce its Wealth & its power.” James Ramsay was both a forceful antislavery campaigner and also an opponent of colonial rebellion. Much of his distaste for slavery arose out of his distaste for planters, whom he termed tyrants devoted to “the Kingdom of *I*” and who were men with a particular contempt for Christianity. A planter insisted on liberty for himself but felt free, he noted, to “ill treat, main and starve” slaves “at the suggestion of his lust, his avarice, his malice, his caprice.” As Brown notes, the wickedness of British American slavery clinched the case against colonial self-governance.<sup>26</sup>

West Indian planters were apoplectic at the contemptuous way in which Ramsay treated them. James Tobin of Nevis, for example, responded to Ramsay with a stream of invective and ridicule, as if he could hardly believe that any Briton could possibly think ill of West Indian planters. He also hastened to defend not only West Indian slavery – a common theme in pro slavery literature of the late 1780s, with three pamphlets published in 1788 alone from Jamaica, by William Beckford, Peter Marsden and Hector McNeill, purporting to tell the “true” state of West Indian slavery<sup>27</sup> – but also the character of the West Indian planter. West Indian slave holders, he averred, were as “worthy, as useful, as loyal, but as *misrepresented* a set of subjects as any in the Dominions of Great Britain.”<sup>28</sup> The abolitionist onslaught against slavery and against West Indians as “loyal subjects” was deemed so serious by 1788 that planters and merchants in the largest and most important West Indian colony, Jamaica, called a special session of the assembly to protest against their

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<sup>26</sup> Brown, *Moral Capital*, 74, 243-53

<sup>27</sup> William Beckford, *Remarks upon the Situation of Negroes in Jamaica ...* (London, 1788); [Peter Marsden], *An Account of the Island of Jamaica ...* (Newcastle, 1788); and Hector McNeill, *Observations on the Treatment of Negroes, in the Island of Jamaica ...* (London, 1788).

<sup>28</sup> [James Tobin], *Cursory Remarks upon the Reverend Mr. Ramsay's Essay ...* (London, 1785), 22.

misrepresentation in Britain, with Jamaica's leading intellectual, Bryan Edwards, being chosen to write the Assembly reply, in which he admitted that the "slave trade may be very wicked" but insisted that "the planters are very innocent."<sup>29</sup>

What was of almost as much concern to planters was West Indian realisation that Britons were beginning to think of them not as freeborn Englishmen, different in capacity and degree from non-Englishmen in the colonies, but as colonial subjects who were little different from other subjects. Thinkers started to rethink subjecthood in the mid-1760s. By the American Revolution, some people were almost prepared to see African slaves as also subjects of the Crown. That Africans might be subjects rather than property was hardly a fixed idea by the 1780s but, for West Indian planters, there were disturbing signs, in actions such as Lord Dunmore's promise of freedom to slaves who helped the Crown against American rebels that influential imperial thinkers were beginning to reconceive imperial relationships in such a way as to raise the status of Africans and other non-Europeans to that of subjects while diminishing that of white colonists from the equals of Englishmen to people with no more rights than the French Catholics, Bengalis, Australian convicts and freed Africans in Sierra Leone who joined the empire from the mid-eighteenth century.<sup>30</sup>

The intersection of concerns about the rights of subjects in a multiethnic empire; the creation of an empire without slavery; and the project to make colonial governance more authoritarian, was particularly apparent in the development of new settlements initiated after the American Revolution. One such scheme was a settlement of displaced British settlers from Spanish territory in Central America (the Mosquito Shore) to the Gulf of Honduras. Here, in a settlement formally part of the polity of Jamaica since the 1740s, a plan emerged, headed by one of the new breed of

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<sup>29</sup> Bryan Edwards, *A Speech ... Concerning the Slave Trade* (Kingston, Ja., 1789), 13-14.

<sup>30</sup> Bowen, "British Conceptions of Global Empire"; P.J. Marshall, "Empire and Authority."

imperial proconsuls who were determined both to transform colonial morality while enforcing imperial control, Colonel Edward Despard, that showed how British reevaluations of the place of slavery within the empire and their rethinking of what sort of political relationships ought to exist between metropolis and colonial dependencies worked out in practice. Here, the new ideas of empire, especially the insistence that the duty of imperial officials was to correct longstanding settler assumptions that slavery was a local issue rightly outside imperial oversight ran up against settler insistence that they were the best judge of what laws should operate in the areas they lived in and that such laws depended upon their consent.<sup>31</sup>

Despard's views on who should have what were decidedly unconventional. He wanted all settlers, rich and poor, black and white, male and female, to have equal rights to land and Honduras to be a radical experiment in racial and gender democracy. Moreover, he brooked no opposition to his plans, as the leading men of the colony lamented when they commented both on his 'leveling principles' and on 'his passion for despotic authority.' Despard had a passion for equality that was so strong that he was determined to impose it regardless of the opinions of established white settlers. But depriving planters unilaterally of their property in slaves and turning upside down settled notions of the superiority of whites over blacks led settlers to claim that Despard was violating the liberties of Britons. Settlers complained that their "society had been dissolved" as "all Men ... were on an equal footing." The Home Secretary, Lord Sydney, agreed: "people of Colour, or Free Negroes ... [were not to be] considered upon an equal footing with People of a different Complexion." Despard overreached himself by not respecting the "natural Prejudices" of British citizens. After Sydney resigned, Despard lost his job and

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<sup>31</sup> Bayly, *Imperial Meridian*. For similar self-assertiveness by military men turned colonial governors in the late seventeenth century, see Stephen Saunders Webb, *Lord Churchill's Coup: The Anglo-American Empire and the Glorious Revolution Reconsidered* (New York, 1995).

eventually his sanity: he was executed in 1803 after scheming to assassinate George III.<sup>32</sup>

The controversies in Honduras showed how British feelings about race and equality changed following the American Revolution. Reformers were animated by the challenge of considering blacks and whites on equal terms but this reconciliation were usually a challenge to the imagination rather than an issue of empirical importance. One of the ways in which Despard's dispute with Honduran settlers is significant is that Despard considered blacks equal to whites in the concrete. Predictably, the rise of anti-slavery sentiment and the threat of coercion by the imperial state, as embodied in the person of Superintendent Despard, put slaveholders on the defensive. Typically, planters reacted by insisting that owning slaves was a fundamental right of Englishmen. Before the American Revolution, a weak central government facilitated the extension of private property in slaves and accentuated colonial belief that the right to control their slaves was a right that could not be countermanded by metropolitan intervention.<sup>33</sup> The re-assertion of stronger metropolitan interference in colonial affairs challenged these comfortable colonial assumptions. The Honduras episode was a foretaste of metropolitan willingness to dictate terms about slavery in the colonies that was to lead to the greatest challenge that West Indian planters ever faced, the abolitionist onslaught against the slave trade and then slavery. British counter-revolutionary imperialism or pro-consular despotism, as Bayly puts it, was implemented everywhere in the empire from 1783 onwards. The fact that this policy of pro-consular despotism, extending from Trinidad to the Cape of Good Hope did not lead to disaster, as it had in the case of the

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<sup>32</sup> For Despard's later career, see Mike Jay, *The Unfortunate Colonel Despard: Hero and Traitor in Britain's First War on Terror* (London: Bantam, 2004).

<sup>33</sup> Greene, "Liberty, Slavery, and the Transformation of British Identity in the Eighteenth-Century West Indies."

American Revolution, had little to do with the wisdom of allowing hotheads like Despard excessive executive authority but resulted from the dramatically weaker position of West Indian planters within the imperial world as a result of the artificial separation of West Indian planters from their southern cousins. It was also easier to do because imperial officials sensed that West Indian reiterations of American Revolutionary doctrines betokened less radicalism than reactionary racism. The lack of metropolitan support for white West Indians, despite their previous prominent position in the empire and despite what seemed to white West Indians to be their incalculable importance as contributors to imperial welfare struck white West Indians as unbelievable. Gilbert Francklyn professed that planters thought it “incredible, that parliament will consent to abolish a trade, on which the very existence of the sugar colonies depend.”<sup>34</sup> The despair that West Indian planters felt at their abandonment – is apparent constantly throughout the correspondence of Simon Taylor, Jamaica’s richest planter in the late eighteenth century and an especially acute commentator on white Jamaican mores and a man as politically and as temperamentally different from the hot-headed authoritarian, Edward Despard, as can be imagined.<sup>35</sup>

Incredibly wealthy, dying worth well over a million pounds in 1813, Taylor was a remarkably successful planter and merchant.<sup>36</sup> He did not fit the metropolitan image of the indolent, debt-ridden planter, being energetic, well organised and moderate in his appetites and behaviours. Most importantly, he was a loyal British subject who saw himself as a valued inhabitant of a periphery of an extended British world. He saw himself as being as British as anyone in Britain and as holding values

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<sup>34</sup> Gilbert Francklyn, 20-21.

<sup>35</sup> A selection of the Taylor correspondence has been published in Betty Wood and Martin Lynn, eds., *Trade, Travel and Power in the Atlantic, 1765- 1884* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 7 – 155.

<sup>36</sup> Richard Sheridan, “Simon Taylor, Sugar Tycoon of Jamaica, 1740–1813,” *Agricultural History* 45 (1971), 285-96.

in common with those held by other Britons. He was also a proud Jamaican, jealous of his country's rights and settler privileges, although dismissive of the worst Creole habits. He wrote to his British nephew that when in Jamaica he should not "live Creole fashion, make a flash of a year or two, and involve your family in endless debts and difficulties."<sup>37</sup>

His conception of himself as a loyal subject of the Crown, a fervent British patriot, an adherent to the conservative, traditional values he felt inherent in the British constitution, and a man who disapproved passionately about the actions of the American and French revolutionaries in rebelling against established authority made it impossible for him to integrate his world view with what he considered the inexplicable madness of a British government hell bent on destroying its valuable possessions in the West Indies. He was convinced that the abolition of the slave trade would merely lead to the disaster of another Saint Domingue, as "the Negroes will rise and murder the few white inhabitants that are left and will possess the island" which would then become "another S. Domingo."<sup>38</sup>

The only way that he could understand what was happening was that the British government had been taken over by "a sett of mad ministers" that had a "systematick plan ... to ruin and destroy the West India colonies, by breaking every compact and agreement with them." For Taylor, Wilberforce was a "Hell-begotten imp" and abolitionists were "traitors, democrats and men who were using every act and means to bring in a revolution." Revolution, he averred, was in and of itself a bad thing, as could be evidenced not only by what had happened in Saint Domingue but also by what had happened in the United States, where at one time thought of removing to but from which he recoiled, due to its contamination as he saw it by an

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<sup>37</sup> Simon Taylor to John Taylor, Kingston, 6 March 1779, Institute of Commonwealth Studies, II A 34.

<sup>38</sup> Simon Taylor to Simon Richard Brissett Taylor, [1806], ICS, I H 32.

overly democratic spirit of liberty.<sup>39</sup> Taylor could never contemplate following the example of his American cousins. As he told his nephew in 1799, one had to be “a friend to your King and to the Constitution of your country as well as to good order and morals.” He was a strong monarchist and counter-revolutionary. One thing he did not want to do was “to learn the new philosophy of rights of Men as they are called” and wished to avoid “the cant of philosophy, liberty and equality” that were “the most pernicious vermin that were ever created,” designed “to destroy all religion, morality and virtue, to overturn all established government and order and to establish in their room murder, anarchy and confusion.”<sup>40</sup>

In the end, that loyalty left Taylor, and white Jamaicans in general, with nowhere to go. He could not abide the “madness” of government policy; he could not contemplate revolution. The latter, however, made him have to accept the former. In 1807, as he contemplated what he saw as the ruin of the island he loved but over which “some evil genius seem[ed] to preside,” he could only lament the consequences of his loyalty. Despite his father and himself doing nothing “but what was consistent to the law by which were inveigled by royal proclamation, grants and acts of the legislature,” their efforts were “to be sett aside and thus over 79 years labour is to be thrown away.” It was hardly surprising that he, and other West Indians, felt an intense sense of betrayal from the polity to which they had always been loyal and from which they expected loyalty in return.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Simon Taylor to Simon Richard Brissett Taylor, Kingston, 18 March 1807, ICS, I I 17; Simon Taylor to George Hibbert, Kingston, 11 May 1798, ICS, I B 21; Simon Taylor to Simon Richard Brissett Taylor, Kingston, 30 August 1806, ICS, I H 27.

<sup>40</sup> Simon Taylor to Simon Richard Brissett Taylor, Kingston, 30 November 1799, ICS, I C 38; Simon Taylor to Simon Richard Brissett Taylor, Kingston,, 30 October 1798, ICS, I B 31; Simon Taylor to Simon Richard Brissett Taylor, Kingston, 26 September 1799, ICS I C 25.

<sup>41</sup> Simon Taylor to John Taylor, Kingston, 9 August 1784, ICS, I A 46; Simon Taylor to Simon Richard Brissett Taylor, Kingston, 17 February 1807, ICS, I I 13.

Planters were handicapped against the brilliantly conducted propaganda campaign embarked upon by abolitionists because they continued to insist upon those principles in relationship to colonial sovereignty that had divided American patriots from metropolitan rulers during the American Revolution. West Indians insisted that they had all the rights of Britons, in particular the right to legislate for themselves over areas that they had specific expertise, such as colonial slavery, an institution that had no precise counterpart in Britain. As with American colonists and their reaction to the Stamp Act, West Indians refused to accept that Britain had the right to compel them to obey legislation that they had no say in passing. Their attitudes to sovereignty and settler rights were consistent before and after the American Revolution. What they wanted was local legislative autonomy and a bit of respect for them as loyal Britons. Edward Long expressed it well. What colonists wanted was “a mutual confidence, founded rather on the love and Gratitude of free Subjects, confirmed in the fullest Enjoyment of their Birthrights, than on the Awe and Fear of mere wretched Slaves, stripped of their Rights and Franchises, held in base Submission, by the sole Power, of unlimited Prerogative, of Military Force, or Parliamentary Tyranny.” Long wrote this in 1774 but West Indian sentiments were unchanged in 1789, when, in the crisis occasioned by the realisation that abolitionists posed a real rather than an imaginary threat, Jamaica’s leading intellectual, Bryan Edwards, declared that parliament was “not competent to destroy, nor partially to mutilate private properties” and that “violation of the property of any subject ... without our consent, or without full compensation, would be an unconstitutional assumption of power, subversive of all public faith and confidence.”<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Bryan Edwards, ;Edward Long, “Constitutional Remarks on the Government of Jamaica,” Add. Mss., 12,402, f.76.

One of the little appreciated features of the campaign to end the slave trade is that it highlighted how little difference the outcome of the American Revolution made to British understandings of the constitutional relationship between metropolis and periphery. Britain was to rule; the colonies were to obey. The West Indian response to abolitionist attacks was to deny the very premises of Britain's constitutional authority. In this way, as Jack Greene insists, the "old tensions between central authority and peripheral rights remained unabated." The constitutional problems that bedevilled the pre-revolutionary British Empire persisted into the future and, indeed, were intensified as reforming British colonial officials disregarded the rights of settlers to decide policy for themselves.