



Calamity's Empire: Slavery, Scarcity, and the Political Economy of Provisioning in the British Caribbean, C. 1775-1834

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**Calamity's Empire:
Slavery, Scarcity, and the Political Economy of Provisioning in the British
Caribbean, c. 1775-1834**

A dissertation presented

by

Nicholas Crawford

to

The Department of History

in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
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in the subject of
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Abstract

This dissertation examines how practical and conceptual concerns over ensuring the basic needs of colonial subjects shaped the political economy of slavery and empire in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century British Caribbean. Provisioning—here defined as food, clothing, shelter, and sometimes medical care—was the dominant lens through which early modern European empires viewed matters related to the health and bodily needs of soldiers, sailors, colonists, slaves, and other subjects. This dissertation offers the first focused study of provisioning in the eighteenth and nineteenth-century British Atlantic world and introduces the concept of overlapping British imperial “provisioning regimes” in order to examine how logistical and infrastructural matters related to provisioning shaped evolving conceptions of the material care and health of subjects under imperial rule. Utilizing an extensive array of primary sources—colonial governors’ correspondence, plantation letters and accounts, merchant papers, naval and military records, customs statistics, parliamentary debates and inquiries—this dissertation embeds quantitative data within a thematic framework attentive to the lived experience of slaves and other actors on several scales of analysis.

Chapter One situates enslaved subsistence practices and other lifeways within an examination of where provisions consumed in the West Indies came from and how imperial trade restrictions constrained their flows. Chapter Two examines the

provisioning regimes of the Royal Navy and the British Army in the wartime Caribbean in order to show how “heavy” institutions soaked up food and other resources in a region marked by scarcity. Based largely on the “ration” as the unit most proper to reckon human necessity, naval and military provisioning regimes affected other actors in the region including prisoners of war, refugees, and slaves through the immediate necessities of conducting warfare and feeding and sheltering mobile and displaced populations of permanent and transient subjects. Chapter Three reconstructs transatlantic and colonial provisioning supply chains as well as contemporary moral and political debates over the procurement of slave provisions through tenuous systems of debt-finance. Chapter Four scales down to West Indian properties and examines food cultivation and rationing within plantation provisioning and healthcare regimes holistically in order to show how subsistence functioned in the customary practices and formal laws that governed relations between masters and slaves. My research highlights in particular the ways in which slaves sought protections for customary rights related to provisioning by appealing to colonial magistrates, justices of the peace, protectors of slaves, and other authorities intended to intervene on their behalf in complaints against masters.

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Abbreviations

AAS – American Antiquarian Society

BL – British Library

HSP – Historical Society of Pennsylvania

ICS – Institute of Commonwealth Studies, Senate House Library, University of London

JCBL – John Carter Brown Library, Brown University

NAS – National Archives of Scotland

NLS – National Library of Scotland

NYHS – New-York Historical Society

ODNB – Oxford Dictionary of National Biography

STP – Simon Taylor Papers

TNA – British National Archives (Kew)

ADM – Admiralty

C – Chancery

CO – Colonial Office

WO – War Office

WMQ – William and Mary Quarterly

INTRODUCTION

Empire's Necessity

In April 1793, the slave ship *Sandown* cleared out of London and sailed for the coast of Sierra Leone, where captain Samuel Gamble would arrange for the purchase of 232 African captives from various resident merchants. Beginning in late March 1794, Gamble then piloted the ship across the Atlantic, reaching Port Royal and Kingston, Jamaica, in the early part of May 1794. Like dozens of other slave-trading merchants in British ports, the *Sandown*'s investors surely had been hoping to capitalize on inflated demand for slaves generated by the speculative boom in sugar and coffee planting in Jamaica following the collapse of Saint-Domingue in 1791. Shortly after arriving in Kingston, Gamble noted in his private journal: "am informd that theres upwards of 3000 Slaves in the Harbour for Sale and in the course of this last twelve months there [h]as been 60,000 Sold." However, Gamble jotted down about two weeks later: "Slaves as before, they go off very slow (Market glutted)." Slowness in trade stemmed from more than an oversupply of slaves. Severe food shortage prevailed in Jamaica due to wartime trade disruptions and the recent influx of refugees from Saint-Domingue and other French colonies. Gamble wrote: "Provisions are very scarce and dear. Planters & others complain that they cannot purchase what Negroes they want having nothing for them to subsist upon."¹

¹ Bruce L. Mouser, *A Slaving Voyage to Africa and Jamaica: the Log of the Sandown, 1793-1794* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 2002), 111-115. On the *Sandown*'s voyage, see *Voyages: the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database*, slavevoyages.org, accessed 12 May 2016. On the effects of the post-1791 speculative boom on slave purchasing in the British colonies, see Chapter Three of this dissertation.

Gamble was forced to have the *Sandown* sit in the harbor for several months in the hopes that food prices would drop and create renewed demand for slaves. Ship's crew and captives alike grew sick during this time. Gamble noted that yellow fever—"that dreadful Callamity at Philladelphia"—was cutting a swath through the white population both in town and afloat: "very few that are taken ill Recover again. especially strangers that are not seasoned to the Climate." Gamble avoided fever but developed gout and rheumatism. His journal also enumerated the deaths of several slaves from various illnesses below-decks. Gamble likely would have accepted a small number of slave deaths as the incremental losses that were factored into standard accounting projections for slaving ventures. What must have weighed more on his mind was the fact that the continuing food shortage on the island was threatening the voyage's entire bottom line by completely stalling local slave sales. "Theres still a great Complaint of the scarcity and want of every article in the Provision line," he recorded on July 1st. However, the slaver's fortunes would improve toward the end of the month: "A great number of Americans arrived here with a supply of all sorts of dry Provisions. Flour drop't from the enormous price of £13 to fifty shillings, and other articles in proportion." For Gamble, this arrival of goods had the immediate desired effect: "The *Sandown*'s Slaves all sold but four."²

Gamble's journal of the *Sandown*'s voyage and the uncertain fate of its captive cargo sketched a tale that would have been familiar and unavoidable to West Indian residents and visitors. Food scarcity and famine were not only commonplace, they comprised central elements of what Alexander Byrd has usefully coined as the "routines

² Mouser, *A Slaving Voyage to Africa and Jamaica*, 114-116.

of disaster” that were expected as essential features of life in the region. Scarcity stemmed from a variety of factors—weather, disrupted trade flows, political realignments, population movements—and occurred over a series of time-scales—seasonal, annual, multi-year. Seasonal and periodic distress especially shaped the parameters of slave nutrition and labor in agricultural colonies that were heavily weighted toward the monoculture of sugar and other cash crops as opposed to the cultivation of adequate supplies of food.³ The anecdote from the *Sandown’s* journal further illustrated how planters, ship captains, governors, and other actors recognized that stabilizing and supporting plantation agriculture involved the management of a sort of stopgap, just-in-time economy, in which calamities were usually overcome by suspensions of trade restrictions with the U.S. and other neutral nations. Britain’s West Indian colonies were in this way central to the political economy of empire thanks to the riches generated by sugar, yet peripheral to it by being on the receiving-end of tenuous Atlantic-wide flows of what Gamble termed “every article in the Provision line.”

Viewed from the perspective of the British Caribbean colonies, the revolutionary era was checkered with persistent want and frequent episodes of catastrophe. Over the course of the eighteenth century, Britain’s West Indian possessions had relied on provisions from the mainland North American colonies, from which was imported almost all of the corn and about one-third of the salt fish that was consumed mainly by slaves in the islands. Mainland supply lines were severed following the outbreak of hostilities between Great Britain and the United States in 1775, which kicked off a major

³ On “routines of disaster” and the multiple causes of scarcity that made severe deprivation essentially the norm for at least a decade in Jamaica in the 1780s-90s, see Byrd, *Captives and Voyagers: Black Migrants across the Eighteenth-Century British Atlantic World* (Baton Rouge, La: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 2008), 86-93.

provisioning crisis in the Caribbean colonies. From 1775 to 1783, prices skyrocketed for foodstuffs and most other items necessary to West Indian economies, including lumber, casks, staves, livestock, and even soap and candles. Four major hurricanes swept through the region during and after the war and destroyed provision crops in various locales. Tens of thousands of slaves died from starvation and related diseases. Across the Atlantic, countless British merchant firms and planters faced financial ruin. Following American independence, the British government upheld what we would describe as protectionist trade policies by placing firm restrictions on the West Indian colonies from importing foodstuffs and other goods in U.S. vessels. Not surprisingly, problems in the supply of food and other necessities in the islands persisted into the nineteenth century and became especially acute throughout the years of almost uninterrupted warfare against France and other Atlantic powers from 1793 to 1815.⁴

⁴ According to Selwyn Carrington: “In the 1770s the British West Indies received from the mainland colonies approximately one third of their dried fish; almost all of their pickled fish; seven eighths of their oats; almost three quarters of their corn; nearly all of their peas, beans, butter, cheese, and onions; half of their flour; quarter of their rice; five sixths of their pine, oak, and cedar boards; over half of their slaves; nearly all of their hoops; most of their horses, sheep, hogs, and poultry; and almost all of their soap and candles.” Carrington, “The American Revolution and the British West Indies’ Economy,” *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, vol. 17, no. 4 (Spring 1987), 823-850 (quoted 823). For the crisis during the American Revolution, see also Richard B. Sheridan, “The Crisis of Slave Subsistence in the British West Indies during and after the American Revolution,” *WMQ*, vol. 33, no. 4 (Oct. 1976), 615-641; Andrew Jackson O’Shaughnessy, *An Empire Divided: the American Revolution and the British Caribbean* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 160-67. According to O’Shaughnessy, one-fifth of a total enslaved population of 38,000 on Antigua alone perished between 1778 and 1781. For problems in food supply during the wars against revolutionary and Napoleonic France, see Lowell J. Ragatz, *The Fall of the Planter Class in the British Caribbean, 1763-1833: a Study in Social and Economic History* (New York: Century, 1928), 320-326. On the effects of hurricanes on food supply in an earlier period, see Matthew Mulcahy, *Hurricanes and Society in the British Greater Caribbean, 1624-1783* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2006). On the importance of the U.S. as a grain supplier to both the Caribbean and Europe in the revolutionary Atlantic world, see Brooke Hunter, “Wheat, War, and the American Economy during the Age of Revolution,” *WMQ*, vol. 62, no. 3 (July 2005), 505-526. For a brief discussion of the political significance of food scarcity in import-dependent British colonies around the globe in this period—and proposals for cultivating alternative and experimental foodstuffs by metropolitan scientists and officials—see Anya Zilberstein, “Inured to Empire: Wild Rice and Climate Change,” *WMQ*, vol. 72, no. 1 (January 2015), 127-158 (esp. 129-30).

However, Britain's West Indian colonies were not simply dependent variables prone to failure within an economic system that privileged metropolitan needs over peripheral wants. Many contemporaries well understood that the underfeeding of slaves was central to labor exploitation in the islands. In 1818, Dominica Governor William Maxwell wrote about slave rationing in a letter to Secretary of State the Earl of Bathurst. "I have long been of opinion that a considerable proportion of the Negroes in this Colony are not sufficiently fed," Maxwell wrote, "and it has been remarked to me that the case is similar in the other Islands by various Military officers who have been in them for a long period." Maxwell had gathered anecdotal information around the island on what constituted the "smallest quantity of Salt and Pickled Fish allowed to each grown Negro" (two pounds per week) as well as what most of the island's attorneys claimed to dole out to the slaves that were under their management (three pounds per week for adults, one and one-half pounds for children). By comparing customs statistics on imports of cured fish into the island against recent population returns, Maxwell then determined that the actual rations given to slaves must have matched the "smallest allowance stated" rather than the more generous amounts quoted from the attorneys. The governor further explained to Bathurst that not all imported provisions were intended for the consumption of slaves. He noted that much of the salt fish in particular would have been eaten by Dominica's French and free black colonists, soldiers (both white and black), and "the poorer Whites and Colored persons employed in the lower stations of Life."⁵

As an amelioration-minded official, Maxwell was fairly unusual among West Indian governors in his interest in reporting back to London on matters related to the

⁵ William Maxwell to Lord Bathurst, 21 February 1818, no. 72, CO 71/55, TNA.

mistreatment of slaves.⁶ But both the content of Maxwell's letter and its transmission to one of the highest levels of imperial governance illustrated how the subject of slave provisioning had grown to feature prominently in the political relationship between metropole and colony in this period. Further, Maxwell's letter revealed how the provisioning of slaves was embedded within a broader official framework for thinking about the basic necessities of a diverse array of colonial subjects—white, black, free, enslaved, British, French, military, civilian. For instance, Maxwell was careful to note that Dominica's white British slaveholders and managers would have regarded salt fish as unfit for their own consumption, but that French whites and *gens de couleurs* seemingly had no qualms about eating it. Other colonial residents mentioned in the letter operated within more constrained circumstances in terms of how they received provisions, notably soldiers and “the poorer Whites and Colored persons employed in the lower stations of Life.” If Captain Gamble's notes about the *Sandown*'s voyage underscored the links between food supply and coercive labor, then Maxwell's dispatch highlighted how provisioning had become a vehicle for imperial authorities to think through the social categorization and disciplining of colonial population groups.

This dissertation examines how practical and conceptual concerns over ensuring the basic needs of colonial subjects shaped the political economy of slavery and empire in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century British Caribbean. Provisioning—here defined as food, clothing, shelter, and sometimes medical care—was the dominant lens through which early modern European empires viewed matters related to the health and

⁶ For more on Maxwell's career, see Chapter Four of this dissertation.

bodily needs of soldiers, sailors, colonists, slaves, and other subjects.⁷ I contend that “human necessity” itself must be understood as a term with historically contingent meanings that evolved over time and in different places according to a variety of intertwined factors: the material environments in which historical actors lived and labored; the logistical capabilities of the polities under whom they were subject; and the competing values of societies in which they existed and operated as moral actors. In the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, a series of political revolutions on both sides of the Atlantic fostered radical redefinitions of individual rights and the responsibilities of states to subjects and citizens. Meanwhile, several overlapping evolutions in medical thinking—alongside the unprecedented mobilization of fighting men in the Caribbean and other parts of the globe—entrenched provisioning as a major focus of imperial policy and administration in ways that it had not been before the 1790s. Finally, the growth of British abolitionism intersected with planter-led proposals for the “amelioration” of slavery and as a result turned slave provisioning into a highly contested political topic.⁸

This dissertation introduces the concept of overlapping British imperial “provisioning regimes” in order to show the emergence of ideas and practices that were centered on providing “adequate” sustenance to subjects across institutions in the Caribbean. Transformations in imperial provisioning regimes must be analyzed

⁷ Food, clothing, and shelter were often lumped together as the “arts of life” by doctors and other authorities in this period. For instance, see John Aikin, *The Arts of Life: 1. of Providing Food, 2. of Providing Cloathing, 3. of Providing Shelter; Described in a Series of Letters: for the Instruction of Young Persons* (Boston: H. Sprague, 1803).

⁸ This historical framing is adapted from Michel Foucault’s conception of the emergence of “biopower” and related technologies of governance related to the sustenance of human life in the eighteenth century: For a brief introduction on biopower, see Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume One: An Introduction*, trans. by Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990), 140-44.

dialectically, taking into account both the actions of colonial authorities operating in an arena characterized by social coercion and the ideas of metropolitan officials crafting policies that were often influenced by misunderstandings of colonial conditions. Here, regional scarcity should be understood as a necessary but not sufficient condition for producing changes in official notions of what constituted “adequate” provision for different inhabitants of the West Indian colonies. I argue that official prescriptions for proper food, clothing, shelter, and medical care were first consolidated around the provisioning of naval and military forces in the region in the 1790s. Based largely on the “ration” as the unit most proper to reckon human necessity, naval and military provisioning regimes affected other actors in the region—prisoners of war, refugees, slaves—through the immediate necessities of conducting warfare. Meanwhile, slave provisioning regimes were first shaped in the management of sugar estates and other properties and then entered into colonial amelioration codes. Similar to naval and military provisioning regimes, “rations” would play a prominent role in political discourse when metropolitan officials and abolitionists began taking an increased interest in slave provisioning in the early nineteenth century. Moreover, slaves’ cultivation of food crops and customary rights to own provision grounds as a form of property would shape imperial reform projects in Trinidad and eventually debates during the emancipation period about whether slaves would perform wage labor if granted freedom.

Historiography

This dissertation offers the first focused study of provisioning in the eighteenth and nineteenth-century British Atlantic world. Beyond this immediate contribution,

“Calamity’s Empire” contributes to scholarship in three broad areas: historiography on early modern political economy and governance in the Atlantic world; historical studies of markets, commodities, and economic life; and work on slavery and the politics of abolition and amelioration in the British Empire. Older studies of British overseas settlement and governance, especially work under the banner of the so-called “Imperial school,” which emphasized the significance of the role of the central government in London to colonial development, often recognized the trade in foodstuffs and food cultivation as important topics. But this foundational scholarship tended to downplay or ignore altogether environmental and ecological factors in shaping modes of governance originating either in colonial peripheries or radiating out from imperial centers.⁹

Subsequent generations of scholars have moved nature and the environment to the fore in analyses of the impact of European overseas expansion on colonial territories and colonized peoples. Ecological and epidemiological disasters especially have become established players—if not central actors—in many historiographical interpretations of New World colonization and its legacies.¹⁰ Historians of the environment have recently turned toward examining the effects of climate change on the societies and politics of the early modern Atlantic world and the relationship of climatic instability to topics ranging from the origins of free trade to early industrialization.¹¹ Climate, ecology, scarcity, and

⁹ The most important economic and social overview of the period remains (despite its heavily dated politics) Lowell J. Ragatz, *The Fall of the Planter Class*. For the “Imperial school,” see Charles MacLean Andrews, *The Colonial Period of American History*, 4 vols. (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1934-1938).

¹⁰ For an early and still-influential interpretation, see Alfred W. Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: the Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900*. For a more recent take on the determining role of disease on geopolitics in the Atlantic world, see J.R. McNeill, *Mosquito Empires: Ecology and War in the Greater Caribbean, 1620-1914* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010).

¹¹ On climate’s impact on free trade and other matters in the Iberian Atlantic: Sherry Johnson, *Climate and Catastrophe in Cuba and the Atlantic World in the Age of Revolution* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2011). On the importance of ecological factors (and contemporary understandings of them) to the

famine have also assumed central roles in recent studies of the development of ideas of political economy during the Enlightenment, such as in agricultural “improvement” projects in the Scottish Highlands and the Atlantic contexts of Thomas Robert Malthus’ writings on food supply, population growth, and poverty.¹²

By demonstrating how modes of colonial governance were shaped by crisis management in the West Indies, this dissertation highlights the importance of ecological instability to political transformations in the British Atlantic world during the revolutionary era. Wartime trade disruptions, hurricanes, grain blights, the collapse of speculative markets, and a host of other natural and human-produced calamities combined to generate food shortages throughout the Caribbean region from the 1770s to the 1830s. In the British West Indies, these crises often spurred political contestations between colonial inhabitants and imperial authorities, especially over the importation of U.S. foodstuffs despite trade restrictions. Governors and other high-ranking colonial officials not only mediated disputes between colonists and imperial authorities over trade laws, they also reported extensively on how ecological factors were affecting the cultivation of food crops and other matters related to slave provisioning. These dispatches, in turn, discursively situated the islands within the broader natural world and

British Atlantic world in the era of revolution and early industrialization, see Joyce E. Chaplin, “Ogres and Omnivores: Early American Historians and Climate Change,” *WMQ*, vol. 72, no. 1 (January 2015), 25-32, and Chaplin, “The Other Revolution,” *Early American Studies: an Interdisciplinary Journal*, vol. 13, no. 2 (Spring 2015), 285-308. See also Zilberstein, “Inured to Empire: Wild Rice and Climate Change.” On food crises and British imperial governance in the late nineteenth century, see Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World* (New York: Verso, 2001).

¹² Fredrik Albritton Jonsson, *Enlightenment’s Frontier: The Scottish Highlands and the Origins of Environmentalism* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2013); Alison Bashford and Joyce Chaplin, *The New Worlds of Thomas Robert Malthus: Rereading the “Principle of Population”* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2016). For slightly older works: Richard Drayton, *Nature’s Government: Science, Imperial Britain, and the “Improvement” of the World* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2000); Richard Grove, *Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens, and the Origins of Environmentalism, 1600-1860* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1995).

would make the “health” of colonial landscapes converge with the practical workings of empire. My research therefore suggests connections between ideas of governance and governance itself that revolved around ensuring the needs of colonial subjects in the early modern British Atlantic world.

This dissertation also contributes to scholarship on the shape of the eighteenth-century British imperial state by highlighting the decentralized nature of decision-making processes and administrative confusion in the implementation of provisioning policies. John Brewer’s *Sinews of Power: War, Money, and the English State, 1688-1783*, has influentially argued that eighteenth-century Great Britain constituted a strong, centralized “fiscal-military state,” based on the ability to collect taxes on a national scale and mobilize for large-scale warfare on the high seas and foreign shores.¹³ Brewer’s study, however, is concerned almost solely with domestic administration and political culture, leaving the world beyond the British Isles unexplored. More recent studies have built upon Brewer’s insights on flexible forms of state-and-mercantile governance in this period by elucidating the role of the Royal Navy in helping to build, alternately, the “contractor state” and the “fiscal-caring state” through the provision of food and medical care to sailors around the globe.¹⁴ My research builds on this work by outlining provisioning regimes crafted in a variety of peripheral settings—warships, army barracks, jails, prison ships, port towns—and often meted out by military and naval authorities on the ground and afloat on ad hoc and improvisatory bases. Naval and military authorities

¹³ John Brewer, *Sinews of Power: War, Money, and the English State, 1688-1783* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989).

¹⁴ Roger Knight and Martin Wilcox, *Sustaining the Fleet: 1793-1815: War, the British Navy, and the Contractor State* (Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 2010); Erica Charters, *Disease, War, and the Imperial State: the Welfare of the British Armed Forces during the Seven Years’ War* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2014).

in particular often lacked clear directives from the imperial center for the treatment of prisoners of war, refugees, and other temporary subjects. As such, I argue that provisioning regimes must be analyzed in terms of a feedback loop, as administrative ideals and proposals were in constant conflict with the actions of individuals and groups who were the objects of attempted disciplinary control.

Scholarship on the economic aspects of British West Indian slavery has been dominated by questions of the relative timing of “decline” in the sugar business and its relationship (or lack thereof) to the development of the abolition movement in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries.¹⁵ Another branch of scholarship has described sugar estates as “agro-industrial” enterprises that relied upon the close managerial oversight of large-scale slave labor forces in so-called “factories-in-the-fields.” Much of this scholarship has focused on how planters and managers coordinated slave labor with a modern-seeming sense of time discipline, especially during crop season, when sugarcane was cut, processed, packaged, and shipped as quickly as possible in order to maintain sweetness (sucrose) in the transition from plant to product.¹⁶ However, historians have

¹⁵ For scholarship that has emphasized “decline” in the British West Indian colonies in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see Lowell J. Ragatz, *The Fall of the Planter Class*; Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1944); David Ryden, “Does Decline Make Sense? the West Indian Economy and the Abolition of the Slave Trade,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, vol. 31, no. 3 (Winter 2001), 347-374; Selwyn H.H. Carrington, *The Sugar Industry and the Abolition of the Slave Trade, 1775-1810* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2002); Ryden, *West Indian Slavery* (2009). For scholarship that has challenged “decline” interpretations, see Seymour Drescher, *Econocide: British Slavery in the Era of Abolition* (Pittsburgh: Univ. of Pittsburgh Press, 1977); J.R. Ward, “The Profitability of Sugar Planting in the British West Indies, 1650-1834,” *The Economic History Review*, vol. 31, no. 2 (May 1978), 197-213; Ward, *British West Indian Slavery*. Recently, scholars have emphasized the economic viability of newer colonial acquisitions well into the nineteenth century: Nicholas Draper, “The Rise of a New Planter Class? Some Countercurrents from British Guiana and Trinidad, 1807-33,” *Atlantic Studies*, vol. 9, no. 1 (March 2012), 65-83.

¹⁶ For a classic statement of sugar estates as “agro-industrial” enterprises with large numbers of laborers relative to other sites of production in this period, see Sidney W. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: the Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York: Penguin, 1985), xxiii (“factories-in-the-field”), 48-52. For a brief summary and critique of this characterization of sugar estates as overly monoculturalist enterprises, see

given much less attention to sugar estates as important sites of commodity consumption in addition to their more familiar roles as producers of commodities. With a few notable exceptions, commodity histories have focused mainly on luxury goods, presenting consumption as a means of self-fashioning for largely autonomous historical actors.¹⁷ More humble—though no less widespread—goods, such as the foodstuffs, clothing, and other necessities commonly ordered by planters for enslaved consumers, have generally been treated as marginal objects of analysis compared to the larger business of staple-crop production.¹⁸

This dissertation troubles scholarly interpretations of consumption in the early modern Atlantic world as a means of liberal self-fashioning and instead highlights the significance of consumer practices linked to the exploitation of slave labor. My dissertation therefore centers social coercion in our understanding of the relationship between commodity consumption and emerging industrial capitalism. This project further connects actual consumer practices to contemporary political debates about planters’

Justin Roberts, “Working between the Lines: Labor and Agriculture on Two Barbadian Sugar Plantations, 1796-97,” *WMQ*, vol. 63, no. 3 (July 2006), 551-2.

¹⁷ On luxury goods: David Hancock, *Oceans of Wine: Madeira and the Emergence of American Trade and Taste* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2009). For a volume that signaled a major turn toward the study of the role of consumers and consumer goods in early modern economic life, see John Brewer and Roy Porter, eds., *Consumption and the World of Goods* (New York: Routledge, 1993). For an overview of the literature on commodities and consumers in the early modern Atlantic world, see Michelle Craig McDonald, “Transatlantic Consumption,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Consumption*, Frank Trentmann, ed. (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2012), 111-125. A major exception to scholars’ under-emphasis on sugar estates as sites of consumption would be the enormous amount of work on the Atlantic slave trade. For instance, see David Eltis, *The Rise of African Slavery in the Americas* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000).

¹⁸ For exceptions to studies of luxury goods: Bertie Mandelblatt, “A Transatlantic Commodity: Irish Salt Beef in the French Atlantic,” *History Workshop Journal*, vol. 63, no. 1 (2007), 18-47; Chris Evans, “The Plantation Hoe: the Rise and Fall of an Atlantic Commodity, 1650-1850,” *WMQ*, vol. 69, no. 1 (January 2012), 71-100. For a treatment of the wearing of clothes in early modern England as not being defined solely by “people’s capacity to exercise choice,” but rather by “involuntary consumption” among servants and the poor, see John Styles, *The Dress of the People: Everyday Fashion in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2007), 247-301.

responsibilities for the inadequate rationing of slaves. On this point, I argue that analyses of the compositional characteristics of commodities such as slave provisions should be nested within examinations of contemporary perceptions of the markets through which these goods flowed. As was the case with the slave trade, the actual workings of provisioning supply chains became points of attack for abolitionists as well as objects of defense for planters. While planters and abolitionists reached contradictory conclusions about how well slaves were “maintained” in a system that relied on debt-finance for the procurement of foodstuffs and other goods, observers nonetheless tended to agree that sugar estates operated as unique sites of production—simultaneously agricultural, industrial, commercial, and speculative—which generated discursive anxieties about the human consequences of far-flung economic relationships.¹⁹

This dissertation further seeks to complicate a historiographical emphasis on utilizing the emerging eighteenth-century field of “political economy” as the dominant analytical lens for studying the political and economic position of slavery within the empire. Instead, this project re-inscribes the importance of the term “economy,” or “œconomy,” to contemporary understandings of commerce and other forms of economic life. In the eighteenth century, “economy” was generally understood to mean the proper management of money or other resources, especially in the oversight of households and

¹⁹ For a recent call to “rethink materiality” in economic history by embedding quantitative studies within contexts of ideas and cultures, see Kenneth Lipartito, “Reassembling the Economic: New Departures in Historical Materialism,” *American Historical Review*, vol. 121, no. 1 (2016), 101-139. For an examination of the workings of the Atlantic cotton market in the nineteenth century, see Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2013), 244-279.

dependents.²⁰ Planter publications encouraging the provision of better food, clothing, shelter, medical care, and other “comforts” for slaves often linked the term “economy” with “humanity” as part of an emerging ideological position advocating for benevolent as well as economical slaveholding practices. In a manual published at Kingston in 1796, Jamaican penkeeper Patrick Kein wrote: “Every man then who wishes to grow rich with ease, must be a good oeconomist, must feed his negroes with the most wholesome food sufficient to preserve them in health and vigour.”²¹ It would be tempting to dismiss such musings as epiphenomenal to a labor system defined by gross exploitation, but rhetorical couplings of “humanity” and “economy” inflected a wide range of publications by what could be considered “managers” of various other institutions in the empire. For instance, Royal Navy surgeon Gilbert Blane justified his program to eradicate scurvy in the fleet as tending to both the “humanity” of the Navy’s treatment of sailors and the “economy” of the state.²² As Chapter Two will examine, these terms also appeared frequently in governors’ correspondence with metropolitan officials about the treatment of slaves, refugees, and other colonial residents. Rather than challenging the notion that ideas about political economy were important categories for eighteenth-century statesmen, I suggest that simultaneously studying the rhetorical deployment of “economy” alongside

²⁰ For the historical etymology of “economy” and eighteenth-century uses of the term in print: “economy, n.” *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, June 2016), www.oed.com, accessed 16 June 2016.

²¹ Kein, *An Essay upon Pen-Keeping and Plantership* (Kingston, Jamaica: 1796), 20. On the contemporaneous deployment of the “principle of humanity” by North American slaveholders as a means to justify their treatment of slaves in the early North American lower South, see Joyce E. Chaplin, “Slavery and the Principle of Humanity: A Modern Idea in the Early Lower South,” *Journal of Social History*, vol. 24, no. 2 (Winter 1990), 299-315.

²² On the rhetorical connections between “humanity” and “economy” in British medical culture in this period, Mark Harrison writes: “For most of the century, the term ‘economy’ referred to good management and discipline rather than simply to the conservation of public money.” Mark Harrison, *Medicine in an Age of Commerce and Empire: Britain and Its Tropical Colonies, 1660-1830* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2010), 17-18.

“humanity” in print and in correspondence illuminates the intellectual and practical linkages among the management of various private and public institutions in the empire.

Further, this dissertation breaks down scholarly boundaries that have separated the study of the antislavery movement from slavery itself by investigating the ways in which provisioning determined both the social terrain of authority in the islands and legal regimes of slavery throughout the empire. Scholarship on the politics of slavery in the British Empire has been dominated by the meanings and motivations behind the abolition of the slave trade in 1807 and, to somewhat lesser extent, slavery itself in 1833-34.²³

Finding the earliest emancipationist schemes among reformers in the wake of the unprecedented expansion of the empire following the Seven Years’ War (1756-63), Christopher L. Brown has recently reoriented our understanding of the periodization, motivations, and goals of the British antislavery movement. Brown centers in our conception of the politics of slavery the economic interests of the empire as well as administrative proposals and policies vesting slaves with certain “rights” as legible subjects.²⁴ Relatedly, Christer Petley has pointed out that British “opposition to slavery

²³ The vast scholarship on the abolition of the slave trade is usefully summarized in Christopher L. Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2006), Introduction. For the politics of emancipation: Thomas Holt, *The Problem of Freedom: Race, Labor, and Politics in Jamaica and Britain, 1832-1938* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1992); Nicholas Draper, *The Price of Emancipation: Slave-ownership, Compensation, and British Society at the End of Slavery* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010). For debates about free labor in the West Indian colonies in the era leading up to and following emancipation, see Seymour Drescher, *The Mighty Experiment: Free Labor versus Slavery in British Emancipation* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2002). For older treatments of the end of slavery that have focused on imperial policy, administration, and personnel, see W.L. Burn, *Emancipation and Apprenticeship in the British West Indies* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1937); William A. Green, *British Slave Emancipation: the Sugar Colonies and the Great Experiment* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976).

²⁴ Brown, *Moral Capital*; Brown, “Empire Without Slaves: British Concepts of Emancipation in the Age of the American Revolution,” *WMQ*, vol. 56, no. 2 (April 1999), 273-306; “From Slaves to Subjects: Envisioning an Empire without Slavery, 1772-1834,” in *Black Experience and the Empire*, Philip Morgan and Sean Hawkins, eds, (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2004), 111-139. Brown also briefly notes the importance of parliamentary inquiries and debates for collecting information on colonial slavery and

was linked with metropolitan efforts to legitimize and control” the governance and commerce of an increasingly global empire in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. Such efforts often centered on curbing the “worst excesses” of certain groups (e.g., West Indian planters, East India Company “nabobs”) who were perceived to be operating outside the bounds of the state.²⁵

This dissertation contends that provisioning was a central concern to both the development of slaves as legible subjects with certain rights as well as to abolitionist critiques of the need to curb and regulate the absolute authority of masters. My research casts a spotlight on the years in between the abolition of the slave trade and general emancipation as an important and oft-neglected era in which competing conceptions of the “proper” provisioning and treatment of slaves emerged among colonial and metropolitan authorities. Here, I stress the importance of the collection of information on conditions in the colonies on the part of both abolitionist activists and centralized state bodies such as the Colonial Office and the House of Commons. Some colonial governors such as William Maxwell also served as key conduits of information on local laws and customs related to the provisioning and mistreatment of slaves as well as on how slave codes and customary practices shaped social and legal relations among whites. Governors’ dispatches occasionally disclosed testimony and depositions from slaves and masters alike on cases of grotesque punishments and other kinds of cruelty. This information often seeped out of closed official channels and ended up in parliamentary reports and abolitionist publications such as the *Anti-Slavery Reporter*. This dissertation

pushing the issue to the forefront of public debate: Brown, “Slavery and Antislavery,” in *Oxford Handbook on the Atlantic World, c. 1450-1820*, Nicholas Canny and Philip D. Morgan, eds., (Oxford, 2011), 613.

²⁵ Christer Petley, “Rethinking the Fall of the Planter Class,” *Atlantic Studies*, vol. 9, no. 1 (2012), 1-17 (quoted 8).

thus suggests the importance of individual stories to political debates over slavery in the British Empire in addition to abolitionists' critiques of the broad structural inequalities and immoralities of the institution.

From a more bottom-up perspective, an examination of plantation provisioning adds crucial dimensions to our understanding of the politics of slavery on the colonial level. Historians and anthropologists have long recognized the importance of food cultivation to the economic, cultural, political, and of course, nutritional lives of slaves in the British Caribbean and other parts of the Americas.²⁶ Recently, Judith A. Carney and Richard Nicholas Rosomoff have provided an overview of enslaved foodways that focuses on the African cultural dimensions of food cultivation on plantations and in maroon communities.²⁷ More generally, enslaved food production has been examined as one facet of the detailed scholarly project spanning the last several decades that has explored how the cultivation of sugar and other cash crops variously shaped slave work routines, demographics, and cultures.²⁸ Scholarship on British West Indian plantation

²⁶ For two early pieces of scholarship on the importance of food cultivation to West Indian slave life: John H. Parry, "Plantation and Provision Ground: An Historical Sketch of the Introduction of Food Crops into Jamaica," *Revista de Historia de América* 39 (1955), 1-20; Sidney W. Mintz and Douglas G. Hall, "Origins of the Jamaican Internal Marketing System," *Yale University Publications in Anthropology*, No. 57 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960).

²⁷ Judith A. Carney and Richard Nicholas Rosomoff, *In the Shadow of Slavery: Africa's Botanical Legacy in the Atlantic World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009). See also Bertie Mandelblatt, "'Beans from *Rochel* and Manioc from *Prince's Island*:' West Africa, French Atlantic Commodity Circuits, and the Provisioning of the French Middle Passage," *History of European Ideas*, vol. 34, issue 4 (2008), 411-423.

²⁸ For a definitive statement of this general approach to the study of slavery, see Ira Berlin & Philip D. Morgan, eds., *Cultivation and Culture: Labor and the Shaping of Slave Life in the Americas* (Charlottesville: UVA Press, 1983), Introduction. The most useful modern overview of slave provisioning and subsistence practices in the British West Indian colonies remains B.W. Higman, *Slave Populations of the British Caribbean, 1807-1834* (Baltimore: JHU Press, 1984), 204-218. See also Richard B. Sheridan, "The Crisis of Slave Subsistence in the British West Indies during and After the American Revolution," *WMQ*, vol. 33, no. 4 (Oct. 1976), 615-641, and *Doctors and Slaves: a Medical and Demographic History of Slavery in the British West Indies, 1680-1834* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1985), esp. 158-164, and "Strategies of Slave Subsistence: the Jamaican Case Reconsidered," in Mary Turner, ed., *From Chattel Slaves to Wage Slaves: the Dynamics of Labour Bargaining in the Americas* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ.

management in particular has emphasized that food crops were grown more extensively on estates (especially in Barbados) in the decades following the subsistence crises of the American Revolution, the emergence of the movement to abolish the slave trade, and threats posed by more uncertain markets for sugar and other produce. Here, provisioning has been understood as part of a larger drive to rationalize production and increase self-sufficiency on some estates, rather than as a central analytical category in its own right.²⁹

Rather than asking how much food was grown on estates or how “African” were the agricultural and culinary practices employed by slaves, this dissertation situates food cultivation and rationing within plantation provisioning regimes more holistically in order to examine how subsistence functioned in the customary practices and formal laws that governed relations between masters and slaves. From a comparative perspective, scholarly debates about how legal regimes affected the treatment of slaves in different European empires have tended to cast the British Caribbean colonies as largely lawless places, wherein slaves had far less recourse to either shore up customary rights or seek

Press, 1995), 48-67; Robert Dirks, “Resource Fluctuations and Competitive Transformations in West Indian Slave Societies,” in Charles D. Laughlin and Ivan A. Brady, eds., *Extinction and Survival in Human Populations*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), 122-180, and *The Black Saturnalia: Conflict and Its Ritual Expression on British West Indian Slave Plantation* (Gainesville: Univ. of Florida Press, 1987); Jerome S. Handler and Frederick W. Lange, *Plantation Slavery in Barbados: an Archaeological and Historical Investigation* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1978), *passim*; Roderick McDonald, *The Economy and Material Culture of Slaves: Goods and Chattels on the Sugar Plantations of Jamaica and Louisiana* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993), esp. 18-20, 23-28. On provision grounds and slaves’ economies directly, see the following three essays in Berlin & Morgan, eds., *Cultivation and Culture*: Woodville K. Marshall, “Provision Ground and Plantation Labor in Four Windward Islands: Competition for Resources during Slavery;” Dale Tomich, “Une Petite Guinee: Provision Ground and Plantation in Martinique, 1830-1848;” Joseph P. Reidy, “Obligation and Right: Patterns of Labor, Subsistence, and Exchange in the Cotton Belt of George, 1790-1860.”

²⁹ For studies of plantation management that have incorporated extensive analyses of food production and purchasing, see J.R. Ward, *British West Indian Slavery, 1750-1834: The Process of Amelioration* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1988), esp. 19-37, 108-118; Justin Roberts, *Slavery and the Enlightenment in the British Atlantic, 1750-1807* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), and “Working between the Lines: Labor and Agriculture on Two Barbadian Sugar Plantations,” and “The ‘Better Sort’ and the ‘Poorer Sort’: Wealth Inequalities, Family Formation, and the Economy of Energy on British Caribbean Sugar Plantations, 1750-1800,” *Slavery & Abolition*, vol. 35, issue 3 (2014), 458-473.

manumission or other benefits through formal legal means.³⁰ Accordingly, historians of British West Indian slavery have created a richly elaborated body of work on punishment and other forms of discipline that characterized master-slave relations as well as the rise of penal cultures in the colonies.³¹ More recently, scholars have called for understanding the ways in which slaves adapted cultural practices, crafted lifeways, created affective ties, and consolidated communities in the face of the cruel contours of plantation life as everyday components of a “politics of survival.”³²

This dissertation contributes to scholarship on the “politics of survival” by arguing that enslaved foodways and coping strategies for scarcity were fundamentally

³⁰ These debates were influentially set forth in Frank Tanenbaum, *Slave and Citizen: the Negro in the Americas* (New York: Knopf, 1947). For reexaminations of the Tanenbaum debate, see Alejandro de la Fuente, “From Slaves to Citizens? Tannenbaum and the Debates on Slavery, Emancipation, and Race Relations in Latin America,” *International Labor and Working Class History*, 77 (Spring 2010), 154-73, and “Slave Law and Claims-Making in Cuba: The Tannenbaum Debate Revisited,” *Law and History Review*, vol. 22, no. 2 (Summer 2004), 339-69. For scholarship on the slave codes of the British West Indian colonies: Elsa V. Goveia, “The West Indian Slave Laws of the 18th Century,” (Lodge Hill, Barbados: Caribbean Universities Press, 1970); David Barry Gaspar, “Ameliorating Slavery: the Leeward Islands Slave Act of 1798,” in *The Lesser Antilles in the Age of European Expansion*, Robert L. Paquette and Stanley L. Engerman, eds. (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1996), 241-258. An important exception to the scholarly avoidance of addressing slaves as legal actors with access to courts and magistrates in the British West Indian colonies is the work of Mindie Lazarus-Black: “Slaves, Masters, and Magistrates: Law and the Politics of Resistance in the British Caribbean, 1736-1834,” in *Contested States: Law, Hegemony, and Resistance*, Mindie Lazarus-Black and Susan F. Hirsch, eds. (New York: Routledge, 1994), 259; Lazarus-Black, “John Grant’s Jamaica: Notes Towards a Reassessment of Courts in the Slave Era,” *Journal of Caribbean History*, vol. 27, no. 2 (1993), 144-159. See also Nicole N. Aljoe, *Creole Testimonies: Slave Narratives from the British West Indies, 1709-1838* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), 93-118. For a treatment of slaves before the law in the British Caribbean that emphasizes their relative powerlessness, see Diana Paton, “Punishment, Crime, and the Bodies of Slaves in Eighteenth-Century Jamaica,” *Journal of Social History*, vol. 34, no. 4 (Summer 2001), 923-954.

³¹ See for example: Diana Paton, *No Bond but the Law: Punishment, Race, and Gender in Jamaican State Formation, 1780-1870* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2004); Vincent Brown, *Reaper’s Garden*; Trevor Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire*.

³² Vincent Brown, “Social Death and Political Life in the Study of Slavery,” *American Historical Review*, vol. 114, no. 5 (December 2009), 1231-1249. For other recent examples of this approach, see Byrd, *Captives and Voyages*; Randy M. Browne, “The ‘Bad Business’ of Obeah: Power, Authority, and the Politics of Slave Culture in the British Caribbean,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, vol. 68, no. 3 (July 2011), 451-480. For a study of how material culture shaped black women’s and men’s politics through “their quotidian struggles for survival” in the post-slavery period in the British Caribbean, see Natasha Lightfoot, *Troubling Freedom: Antigua and the Aftermath of British Emancipation* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2015), quoted 16.

political in nature. My research highlights not only how deprivation and hunger shaped power relations between masters and slaves but also the overlooked ways in which slaves sought protections for customary rights related to provisioning through formal legal avenues. The ways in which slaves were understood as legal actors particularly influenced metropolitan reforms intending to improve colonial provisioning from the 1810s to the 1830s. Furthermore, managerial correspondence, court cases, and magistrates' records documenting slaves' various modes of coping with scarcity attested neither to standard historiographical tropes of "agency" and "resistance," nor to reified forms of "dehumanization" and "brutalization."³³ Rather, these sources illuminate how slaves' strategies for dealing with hunger and occasional famine were inseparable from their negotiation of relationships with masters and other slaves as well as to their navigation of colonial and imperial legal regimes largely indifferent toward—and often hostile to—their material treatment and condition.

Organization

Utilizing an extensive array of primary sources—colonial governors' correspondence, plantation letters and accounts, merchant papers, naval and military records, customs statistics, parliamentary debates and inquiries—this dissertation embeds quantitative data within a thematic framework attentive to the lived experience of slaves and other actors on several scales of analysis. In addition to extensive coverage of Jamaica, which was by far the most important British possession in the region, earlier

³³ For a critique of agency as a dominant analytical category in scholarship on slavery, see Walter Johnson, "On Agency," *Journal of Social History*, vol. 37, no. 1 (Fall 2003), 113-124. For an interpretation of early British West Indian slave codes as being articulated around the notion of the "bestialization of black men," see Edward Rugemer, "The Development of Mastery and Race in the Comprehensive Slave Codes of the Greater Caribbean during the Seventeenth Century," *WMQ*, vol. 70, no. 3 (July 2013), 429-458.

studies of the period of West Indian “decline” were weighted toward analyses of Barbados (where managers commonly set aside greater amounts of estate lands to grow food crops) and the colonies that made up the Leeward Islands (heavily dependent on food imports).³⁴ I have focused my research mainly on Jamaica as well as less-studied areas where the British plantation complex was “newer” and expanding geographically. Specifically, I explore provisioning in the so-called Ceded Islands acquired at the conclusion of the Seven Years’ War (1763)—Dominica, Grenada, St. Vincent, and Tobago. My research also includes coverage of Trinidad, which was absorbed under the Crown in 1797 and became the site of metropolitan “experiments” in slave provisioning codes and other forms of “amelioration” in the 1820s.³⁵

Chapter One situates enslaved subsistence practices and other lifeways within an examination of where provisions consumed in the West Indies came from and how imperial trade restrictions constrained their flows. Slave provisioning entered into managerial and proprietorial concerns as diverse as buying, valuing, and maintaining the health of slaves; purchasing, allocating, and valuing tracts of land; organizing slave gangs, work routines, and markets for hired labor; and speculating in, accounting for, and dissolving debt-financed plantation enterprises. Attorney correspondence and estates’ accounts reveal on the one hand considerable consolidation of provisioning practices, but also persistent scarcity, inefficient management, and speculative failure that should caution us against making broad conclusions about the rationalization or “improvement”

³⁴ Ragatz, *Fall of the Planter Class*; Ward, *British West Indian Slavery*.

³⁵ For a tract promoting the settlement of the Ceded Islands that emphasized the ease of raising food supply alongside sugarcane and other cash crops, see John Campbell, *Candid and impartial considerations on the nature of the sugar trade: the comparative importance of the British and French islands in the West-Indies: with the value and consequence of St. Lucia and Granada, truly stated: illustrated with copper-plates* (London: 1763).

of estate management in this period. Finally, this chapter concludes by showing how managerial concerns related to slave provisioning and the management of scarcity on estates inflected correspondence between colonial authorities and metropolitan officials over the selective discarding of imperial trade restrictions.

Chapter Two examines the provisioning regimes of the Royal Navy and the British Army in the wartime Caribbean in order to show how “heavy” institutions soaked up food and other resources in the region as well as how they governed the provisioning needs of a broad range of subjects. Under the auspices of the Admiralty and War Office based in London, military and naval commanders oversaw the bodily needs of tens of thousands of soldiers and sailors, provisioning them through both Atlantic-wide trade networks and the creative procurement of “fresh” provisions across enemy lines. Medical ideas about disease prevention for Europeans in the tropics were crucially intertwined with dietary prescriptions for soldiers and sailors as well as authorities’ desire to maintain social discipline in controlled environments through proper bodily management. Chapter Two is about more than the functional administrative apparatus of the British state at war, though. The Royal Navy, British Army, and colonial authorities would together end up overseeing the provisioning of tens of thousands of temporary and transient “subjects” from other imperial regimes, including French royalists and slaves in Saint-Domingue and Jamaica. Here, military and naval provisioning regimes would become integral to official understandings of provisioning broadly conceived through the soldier’s ration becoming shorthand as the go-to administrative unit that could be scaled up or down in quantity in order to reckon proper sustenance for subjects and strangers alike.

Chapter Three reconstructs transatlantic and colonial provisioning supply chains and contemporary political debates over the procurement of slave provisions through metropolitan commission houses. Resident planters and attorneys such as Jamaican sugar “tycoon” Simon Taylor, who managed several estates with thousands of slaves for absentee proprietors, ordered slave provisions through commission houses on an industrial scale. Indeed, plantation supply networks were likely some of the largest and most integrated economies of scale in existence in the British Atlantic world during this period. While credit fueled the business of West Indian slavery by enabling planters to order necessities from abroad before sugar had been harvested, shipped, and consigned, mounting debts from failed crops and glutted markets would come to dominate political discussions over planters’ malnourishment of slaves. Planters and abolitionists alike often homed in on the securing of mortgage debts via slaves as being particularly deleterious to both enslaved health and the basic functioning of transatlantic finance. Interestingly, planters often emerged in debates over the moral dimensions of the Atlantic market for slave provisions as more activist political figures than most scholarship on the abolitionist movement would suggest.

Chapter Four scales back down to sugar estates and other West Indian properties in order to examine how “amelioration” played out on the ground in relations between masters and slaves. The chapter opens with an incident on a sugar estate in Dominica in 1818 in which a manager transgressed the customary rights of slaves by ordering a patch of ground provisions be ripped out of the earth by members of the gang. Several slaves resisted this encroachment on their grounds and were subsequently brutally punished. Using this case as a wedge on competing conceptions of “property” and “rights” held by

masters as well as slaves, the chapter then reconsiders the period of colonial amelioration as one in which slaveholders consolidated their control over plantation landscapes through the elaboration of legal codes and the maintenance of relations among managerial and medical communities in order to keep slaves spatially “fixed” to estates for labor and sustenance. Slaves recognized that planters wielded the provision of food and especially medical care in disciplinary and often coercive ways. However, slaves in most of the British Caribbean colonies could go to magistrates and other designated officials in order to lodge protests of mistreatment from masters and other slaves. While many of these claims would be unsuccessful—and often met with physical punishment from officials—they would come to influence in part imperial reforms of slavery through the collection of information on conditions in the colonies by metropolitan legal commissions sent to the islands.

CHAPTER ONE

“All our Prospect of Provisions must in future come from the Ships:”

Scarcity & Governance in the British West Indies

During the height of parliamentary agitation over the abolition of the slave trade and around the beginning of formal investigations into the “distress” of the West Indian colonies, absentee planter and politician Sir William Young published a large volume on political economy titled *The West-India Common-place Book* (1807). Young wrote the book with the intention of promoting British governmental policy support and intervention for the sugar colonies in a period of diminishing economic prospects and crippling warfare. He and other members of the West Indian planter elite had become increasingly vocal in print and in Parliament over what they perceived as overly protectionist metropolitan trade policies that promoted the interests of groups such as merchants and shipbuilders over those of sugar growers. Among other issues, Young highlighted difficulties encountered by West Indian residents and authorities in keeping up food imports from Great Britain and British North America; fluctuating and generally rising prices for imported provisions and other plantation necessities; and problems occasioned by unreliable wartime convoy systems that rendered flows of food into the islands especially tenuous. In order to buttress his claims, Young catalogued masses of statistical information on provisioning supply chains and other matters that commonly vexed planters and colonial authorities.¹

¹ Sir William Young, *West-India Common-place Book: Compiled from Parliamentary and Official Documents; Shewing the Interests of Great Britain in Its Sugar Colonies* (London: Richard Phillips, 1807).

Regardless of whether *The West-India Common-place Book* had any impact on imperial policies, the book was emblematic as an intellectual project of how slave provisioning had become central to the ways in which planters constructed themselves as commercial, managerial, political, and ideological actors. Sugar estates were major sites of consumption that drew from ecologies of salt, fish, flesh, wool, wood, coal, and other goods throughout the Atlantic world. Commodities destined for estates flowed through complexly woven transatlantic markets that linked together a wide array of producers, transporters, and consumers—fishermen, curers, coopers, commission merchants, captains, colonial town agents, managing attorneys, overseers—from disparate locales across the British Isles, mainland North America, and the islands. Young himself well understood this in practical terms through his tenure as governor of Tobago from 1807 until his death in 1815. As governor, Young presided over frequent food shortages on the island owing to failures in wartime trade as well as a continuing reluctance on the part of planters and managers to fully embrace his proposals to increase the cultivation of food crops on estates. Young’s writings and his political career together illustrated how Atlantic-wide provisioning networks along with local food cultivation were central to both the operation of colonial economies and contemporary understandings of the position of the islands within the political economy of empire.²

Studies of the Atlantic provisions trade have focused mainly on the structure and organization of merchant networks in New England, Philadelphia, and other North American ports and hinterlands that served as breadbaskets for the Caribbean colonies

On the context of Young’s publication, see Ryden, *West Indian Slavery*, 244.

² On Young’s career as governor of Tobago, see the section of this chapter titled, “Governing Scarcity.”

before and after the American Revolution.³ Among historians of West Indian plantation management, there is consensus that provisions were more extensively cultivated in provision grounds and on estate lands in the decades following the subsistence crises of the 1770s-80s and the emergence of the abolition movement.⁴ However, histories of hurricanes, droughts, and various other disasters in the region have illustrated the frequency and material consequences of deprivation, especially for slaves.⁵ Connecting the islands to more coercive aspects of overseas commerce, scholarship on the slave trade and slavery in general has recently highlighted the roles that dislocation, disease, and death played in the experiences of Africans newly arrived to the West Indian colonies. These studies have offered fresh and more critical perspectives on such well-studied topics as mercantile accounting, enslaved adaptations to new environments, and the fundamental instability of colonial populations.⁶

³ Richard Pares, *Yankees and Creoles: the Trade between North America and the West Indies before the American Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1956); Richard N. Bean, "Food Imports into the British West Indies, 1680-1845," *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, vol. 292 (June 1977), 581-90; John Coatsworth, "American Trade with European Colonies in the Caribbean and South America, 1790-1812," *WMQ*, vol. 24, no. 2 (April 1967), 243-266; Thomas Doerflinger, *A Vigorous Spirit of Enterprise: Merchants and Economic Development in Revolutionary Philadelphia* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1986); Michelle McDonald, "From Cultivation to Cup: Caribbean Coffee and the North American Economy, 1765-1805" (PhD Dissertation: Univ. of Michigan, 2005); James Roberts, "'Yankey dodle will do verry well here: New England Traders in the Caribbean, 1713 to circa 1812'" (PhD Dissertation: Johns Hopkins, 2011).

⁴ On management and food production: J.R. Ward, *British West Indian Slavery*; Justin Roberts, *Slavery and the Enlightenment*, and Roberts, "Working between the Lines: Labor and Agriculture on Two Barbadian Sugar Plantations."

⁵ Richard B. Sheridan, "The Crisis of Slave Subsistence in the British West Indies;" Mulcahy, *Hurricanes and Society in the British Greater Caribbean*. For comparisons to other imperial regimes, see Sherry Johnson, *Climate and Catastrophe in Cuba and the Atlantic World*; Stuart B. Schwartz, *Sea of Storms: a History of Hurricanes in the Greater Caribbean from Columbus to Katrina* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2015).

⁶ See for instance Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2005); Stephanie Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: a Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2007); Brown, *Reaper's Garden*; Byrd, *Captives and Voyagers*.

Yet scholars have often divided the study of flows of goods and captives throughout the Atlantic world from examinations of plantation labor and land use in the islands. This division has tended to occlude how daily life as well as trade and governance were shaped by everyone's understanding of their relationships both to the sea and to the land. Michael Jarvis begins his study of Bermuda as a node in Atlantic trade networks by asking: "What did early America look like from the deck of a ship, and how might this perspective change the ways we understand it?"⁷ This chapter instead asks: What did the Atlantic world look like from the perspectives of those who labored on or managed a West Indian estate? This question compels us to examine how the persistent conditions of scarcity that prevailed in the islands owing to shortcomings in transatlantic trade shaped the management of coercive regimes of cultivation. Shipping networks and Atlantic ecologies of food were knit together by the production of sugar and other staple crops. On sugar estates, planters' foremost managerial objective was to ensure that the most fertile soils were worked according to the calendar of cane: holing, planting, and dunging fields in the wet fall season; harvesting, producing, and packing crops in the drier early part of the year; and then shipping produce across the Atlantic before the onset of the hurricane season and the rise of insurance prices in the late summer. Planters hoped that sugar production would be supported by the timely arrival of supply ships loaded with provisions and other necessities before Christmas along with the ability of slaves to subsist themselves throughout the remainder of the year with produce from their provision grounds.⁸

⁷ Michael J. Jarvis, *In the Eye of All Trade: Bermuda, Bermudians, and the Maritime Atlantic World, 1680-1783* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2010), 1.

⁸ Ryden, *West Indian Slavery*, 94; Roberts, *Slavery and the Enlightenment*, 69, 106-116, 120-27.

When failures occurred in this system, the effects of want had severely differential impacts on various colonial residents. Still, the reality—or at least ever-present threat—of scarcity tied together the actions and experiences of slaves, planters, supply agents, and colonial and metropolitan authorities in important ways. By focusing less on the immediate effects of disaster and more on how West Indian inhabitants—enslaved and free—survived, responded to, managed, and intermittently made efforts to forestall conditions of scarcity, this chapter argues that the management of estates and the governance of colonies were woven together around the provisioning needs of slaves. Slaves created and adapted subsistence practices and other lifeways in order to survive the ordeal of being “seasoned” to plantation environments and to get through the annual perils of the “hungry season.” Planters and attorneys sought to exert some measure of control over trade networks through the coordination of shipping patterns and the creation of local supply chains that could procure foodstuffs and other plantation commodities (including slaves) on a timely basis. Managers further utilized several strategies to deal with scarcity on estates, including relying—and often over-relying—on neighboring properties for slave provisions in order to keep up production. When severe want prevailed, colonists put pressure on governors and other colonial authorities to suspend imperial trade restrictions as a means to both feed slaves and maintain social order. For their part, governors and colonial authorities frequently opened ports to neutral vessels and oversaw relief shipments of provisions from North America and neighboring islands. Their official correspondence with superiors in London attempted to mediate relations between colonists eager to keep slave economies functioning and metropolitan officials

wary of overstated claims of enslaved deprivation serving as justification for the abrogation of trade laws.

This chapter begins by describing how planters purchased slaves and how newly arrived Africans as well as more “established” slaves crafted subsistence practices and other lifeways in order to survive harsh labor regimes on sugar estates and other properties. The chapter moves on to show how planters and merchants managed extensive supply networks and attempted to carefully—if not always successfully—align annual cycles of the shipping of transatlantic supplies with the coercive production of sugar and other cash crops. Turning from the sea to the land, the third section traces managerial strategies for dealing with scarce times as well as the consequences of persistent food insecurity on estates for both the health of slaves and relations among investors. Finally, the chapter concludes by showing how the provisioning needs of slaves influenced political correspondence between colony and metropole.

Hunger & Survival

Planters sought to “season” new slaves to colonial environments as quickly as possible. In addition to managing diseases, this managerial process centered on having slaves first work in the provision grounds of “established” slaves and then cultivating their own plots. Subsistence shaped slaves’ lives as well as the organization of their labor once they had been settled and were laboring on estates. Slaves often pressed managers for more foodstuffs and other occasional “indulgences” like extra rum and tobacco to survive the rigors of labor and mitigate the miseries of lean times. More darkly, malnutrition and overwork generated a host of maladies along with high mortality rates

for slaves—even if planters were usually averse to attributing slave sickness and death to underfeeding. Furthermore, slaves' lives were constrained not only by the cultivation of sugarcane and other cash crops, but by the fact that managers pushed them to work harder in order to ship produce across the Atlantic on schedule. As such, severe punishments were often meted out if managers felt that they could force slave gangs to meet shipping deadlines on time.

Planters keen on purchasing new slaves expected that Africans would arrive at colonial markets in emaciated and weakly conditions from the miserable provision afforded them during the voyage across the Atlantic. Some planters tried to use the malnourished condition of newly arrived slaves as a market advantage. The amelioration-minded planter and doctor David Collins argued that ill-fed Africans up for sale—"those negroes who arrive in a very sickly condition, and are deemed refuse"—represented speculative opportunities for well-heeled planters. While usually only poor whites and free blacks purchased such slaves, Collins argued that they could be good investments for planters who could afford to revive them "with ease, where food only is required." Collins acknowledged that some weakly slaves might be more "severely disordered" and require greater care, but believed that a "medical man" could still purchase them "on a very advantageous speculation of profit."⁹

In the 1790s and early 1800s, increasing abolitionist activity forced planters to reckon with losing access to the seemingly limitless supply of captive laborers that they had grown accustomed to. In 1792, a committee of the Jamaica Assembly published anti-abolitionist proceedings that outlined the fortunes of one hypothetical planter who settled

⁹ [David Collins], *Practical Rules for the Management and Medical Treatment of Negro Slaves, in the Sugar Colonies* (London: Vernor and Hood, 1803), 83.

an estate “with a gang of one hundred African slaves, all bought in the prime of life.” During the first twenty years, the report presumed, about eighty or ninety of these slaves would be able to perform the hardest labor on the estates. After this period, however, the number would be reduced to thirty or forty—even taking into account any natural increase. As a result, the estate would require 50 “new negroes” over the course of twenty years, but not owing to any “cruelty, or want of good management” on the part of the planter. To the contrary, the report proclaimed, the more “humane” a planter was in terms of feeding and maintaining his slaves, “the greater number of old people and young children he will have on his estates,” who of course would perform little work and necessitate greater provisioning expenses.¹⁰ Rather than expressing a desire to better “maintain” new slaves, planter-politicians here responded to the threat of the abolition of the slave trade with fears of declining productivity and increased provisioning expenses.

Planters figured that it took about two or three years before Africans were “seasoned” to new environments and could be put to hard labor.¹¹ Upon their arrival at estates, so-called “new negroes” were typically assigned to live in the households of seasoned or creole slaves, working the grounds of their hosts in return for food. Masters meanwhile would provide utensils and cookware to the “established” slaves for each new slave in their household. These items included knives, calabashes, and iron pots, though

¹⁰ *Proceedings of the Hon. House of Assembly of Jamaica, on the Sugar and Slave Trade, in a Session which Began the 23d of October, 1792* (London: Printed and Published, by Order of the House, by Stephen Fuller, Esq. Agent for Jamaica, 1793), 10-11.

¹¹ In 1801, Simon Taylor explained: “no great dependance can be laid on the labour of new Negroes for the first three years untill they are seasoned to the Country that is have gott a House of their own Grounds a Wife or Child and a Hogg.” Simon Taylor to David Reid, Kingston, Jamaica, 10 March 1801, STP, ICS 101 1/D/53. On seasoning, see Alexander Byrd, *Captives & Voyagers*, 57-85.

masters generally stopped short of providing additional rations.¹² Planters claimed that established slaves welcomed these new additions because their extra labor might produce more food for the consumption of slave families or for sale at Sunday markets. But planters sometimes acknowledged flaws in the system. In 1801, Simon Taylor cautioned, “a great deal depends on the Habitts of the Negroes when they arrive, the Situation of their Houses, and whether the Negroes on the place that were there before were well inclined or ill disposed.” If the established slaves were “ill disposed,” Taylor went on, “a man is allmost sure of loosing the Whole of what he putts on.”¹³ Other planters wished to have new slaves in their own houses as soon as possible. Absentee Jamaica proprietor Joseph Hayne urged his attorneys in 1807: “I particularly request your attention to the new negroes so as to render them Independent of the old ones.”¹⁴ Resident and absentee planters alike had good reason to have their slaves become “Independent”—seasoned slaves were both fitter laborers and surer debt securities, representing increases to the productive potential as well as the actual value of estates.¹⁵

Beginning in the second half of the eighteenth-century, amelioration-minded planters urged better clothing for slaves, especially new ones. David Collins suggested

¹² For three planters’ accounts of seasoning, see Bryan Edwards, *The History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies* (London: B. Crosby, 1798), 187-188; Sir William Young, *A tour through the several islands of Barbadoes, St. Vincent, Antigua, Tobago, and Grenada, in the years 1791 & 1792*, volume 3, Bryan Edwards, *The History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies*, vol. 2 (London: John Stockdale, 1801), 271-272; Gordon Turnbull, *An Apology for Negro Slavery: or, the West-India Planters Vindicated from the Charge of Inhumanity* (London: Stuart and Stevenson, 1786), 25-6. Turnbull noted that new slaves ate from a common “pot” each morning for as long as one year.

¹³ Taylor instead advised one planter setting out in Jamaica, “if he will wait with Patience his Annual Income laid out in Negroes and they taken Care off will annually increase.” Simon Taylor to David Reid, Kingston, Jamaica, 10 March 1801, STP, ICS 101 1/D/53.

¹⁴ Joseph Hayne to [John Hiatt/James Laing], 5 August 1807, *Hayne v. Higgin*, C 112/171, TNA.

¹⁵ One manager of several cotton estates in Berbice wrote to an absentee proprietor: “seasoned Negroes are almost all ready money.” Peter Fairbairn to Lord Seaforth, Kingston, [Demerara/Berbice], 29 May 1802, GD 46/17/21, NAS.

that upon arrival at estates, slaves should receive “caps, jackets, blankets, petticoats or trousers, according to the sex,” and if these items were not available, then at least “a warm blanket.”¹⁶ But it would be difficult to make blanket statements about any improvements in rations of slave clothing in this period. As the amelioration movement unfolded in an era of increasing economic uncertainty, the quality and care afforded to the procurement of slave clothing was likely more emblematic of planters’ relentless focus on cost-cutting than any abiding interest in improving the treatment of their slaves.¹⁷ In 1824, one newly hired white employee on a Jamaican sugar plantation noted in his journal: “I can not help observing that the Planters ought to pay more attention to the clothing of their Slaves, then many of them do. Independently of its being an almost necessary preliminary to an improvement in the manners of a Negro, and will be more so now that the wet Season has set in, it is sometimes really cold in the mornings.”¹⁸

Beyond the middle passage and the ordeal of seasoning, serial removals produced nutritional stresses on enslaved life. Since proprietors frequently transported slaves from one estate to another, ensuring adequate provision grounds at destinations was vital. Simon Taylor advised one planter who owned estates in Hanover parish in northwest Jamaica and who recently had purchased slaves to “sett about preparing Houses and Grounds for them before they go up.” Taylor believed these slaves could be removed eventually to other estates in neighboring St. James and Trelawny parishes, “where the Seasons and soil is very much like Hanover.” However, if the planter wished to remove

¹⁶ Collins, *Practical Rules*, 62-3.

¹⁷ On slave clothing as being often “inadequate” to last for one year, see McDonald, *Economy and Material Culture*, 123.

¹⁸ [Anonymous], Jamaica Journal, 12 February 1824, f. 29a-30, MS 17956, NLS.

them to “the Heavy Seasons and cold Clayey Grounds in St. Marys” on the other side of the island, “they would die off like rotten Sheep.”¹⁹

Food production formed the leading edge of labor on new properties. On new ventures, planters reckoned that it took three crops of sugar or five crops of coffee before profit could be realized. Accordingly, speculating planters’ first objective was to compel slaves to clear land for provision grounds in order to reduce rationing expenses. William Bremner and an associate purchased a 100-acre plot of Crown Land in Dominica in 1804 and “immediately set about clearing and planting it in coffee and ground provisions.”²⁰ Another agent in Dominica had earlier explained to a potential proprietor that while a coffee estate would not raise “permanent revenue” before five crops had been picked, packed, shipped, and sold, at least “provisions can be raised mean time for the Subsistence of the Negroes.”²¹ Likewise, one Trinidad planter explained in 1808 that for a new sugar estate, the first year “would be chiefly for provisions Negro houses &c.” and planting canes, and by the third year, “please god, to defray all the expences of the establishment.”²² Estates in frontier territories faced uphill climbs to profit. Proprietors throughout the Ceded Islands testified before Parliament in 1790 about the difficulties they encountered in carving estates out of wilderness over the previous couple decades. Grenada planter James Baillie averred that “no return whatever can be expected from an estate settled out of woods” in fewer than four years, and that no “returns of any

¹⁹ Simon Taylor to George Hibbert, Kingston, Jamaica, 21 February 1807, STP, ICS 101 1/I/5.

²⁰ William Bremner Diary (typescript), p. 40-41, NAS.

²¹ Stephen Egan to Lord Arden [extract], Dominica, 4 September 1785, f. 61, Egmont Papers, BL.

²² W. Lockhead to [Brennan], Abercromby, Trinidad, 23 May 1808, *Thompson v. Desborough*, C 109/380, TNA.

considerable value” could be had in fewer than ten.²³ Clearing land encompassed cutting down, hauling away, and burning trees; removing underbrush, rocks, boulders, and other impediments; and weeding soil and preventing regrowth. “Clearing new Land is exceedingly laborious troublesome and difficult,” one agent in Dominica summed up in 1785.²⁴ Bryan Edwards calculated an average cost of £7 currency per acre for clearing and planting provision grounds on Jamaican sugar estates, compared with £12 for caneland.²⁵ One legal case from Jamaica in the 1780s showed a planter resorting to unusual means to have provision grounds cleared. In the terms of the agreement, one planter had agreed to loan his slaves to “Fall, clear & plant into provisions” about 60 acres of mountain land in order pay off a debt of £900 currency owed by his late father, a task which was subsequently carried out.²⁶

For slaves, the costs of clearing land were much more visceral. “In new settlements, where there are a great many negroes of recent importation,” wrote David Collins, “the number of negroes will diminish, and that very rapidly.”²⁷ James Baillie expressed similar sentiments in 1790: “in the settlement of all new lands there is certainly a greater proportion of Slaves lost, than on estates that are in perfect cultivation.”

Clearing land generally fell to adult male slaves, as women were not deemed strong enough for the work—“none other but full-grown strong Negroes being equal to the

²³ *Minutes of the evidence taken before a committee of the House of Commons ... appointed ... for the purpose of ... the examination of such witnesses ... who have petitioned ... against the abolition of the slave trade* (London, 1790), 103, 202.

²⁴ Stephen Egan to Lord Arden [extract], Dominica, 4 September 1785, f. 61, Egmont Papers, BL.

²⁵ Edwards, *History, Civil and Commercial* (1798), 221-223.

²⁶ Cunningham & Cleland to the Assignees of Boyer & Kenyon, Montego Bay, Jamaica, 2 June 178[4]; William Vincent to Robert Kenyon, Montego Bay, Jamaica, 7 February 1792, *Bradbury v. Bradbury*, C 110/152, TNA.

²⁷ Collins, *Practical Rules*, 21.

arduous business of clearing the lands,” one Dominica planter remarked. The work was so difficult—and establishing provision grounds so vital—that planters sometimes re-allocated labor on estates in order to complete the task. Grenada planter Alexander Campbell formed special gangs to perform the hardest work of clearing provision grounds—“felling the trees, and lopping them, the burning them off”—and left the rest of the work to individuals and families to finish in their spare time.²⁸

Slaves placed great value on newly cleared, more productive lands for provision grounds versus older soils. Bryan Edwards noted that on large Jamaica estates, “the Negroes make it a practice to enlarge their own grounds, or exchange them for fresh land, every year.”²⁹ There was no uniform rule on the size of provision ground plots, but it was not customary for slaves to receive more than an acre or two; allotments also could be about one-half acre. Families tended to receive slightly more ground than individual slaves, and larger allotments were often given to drivers and other high-status or favored slaves.³⁰ Slaves generally had Sundays to work their grounds and attend markets during

²⁸ See the following testimonies from *Minutes of the evidence*: Ashton Warner Byam, 98; Gilbert Franklyn, 130; Alexander Campbell, 178; James Baillie, 200-202; John Gregg, 225, 231; John Dalling, 433. Planters in provision-ground colonies occasionally set aside estate lands for food crops, especially in more recently developed areas. Grenada planter Alexander Campbell noted that the field gang on his sugar estates worked a “common provision ground,” with the produce going to sick and old slaves, as well as those whose grounds were barren or low yielding. One Tobago planter testified that it was customary on the island to intercrop sugarcane with corn, yams, and eddoes, noting that yams were beneficial for sugarcanes in similar ways to how turnips were sown among barley on English farms. *Minutes of the evidence*, 128-9, 179. See also Roberts, *Slavery and the Enlightenment*, 112.

²⁹ Edwards, *History, Civil and Commercial* (1801), 161-162.

³⁰ For the most part, slaves were left to cultivate their grounds as they saw fit. White observers generally expressed disinterest in how slaves chose soils, divided land, or allocated crops. According to William Beckford: “[slaves] scatter themselves over the face, and form themselves into distinct parties at the bottom, of the mountains; and being consequently much divided, their general exertions can be only observed from a distance;” quoted in McDonald, *Economy and Material Culture*, 23. Grenada planter James Baillie testified that families received larger plots than individual slaves: *Minutes of the evidence*, 195-6. For sizes of grounds, see also Higman, *Jamaica Surveyed: Plantation Maps and Plans of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (Kingston: Institute of Jamaica, 1988), 79, 82, 164, 198-99, 261-276; Woodville Marshall, “Provision Ground and Plantation Labor in Four Windward Islands,” 52-3.

crop season. Out of crop, slaves might be given another day per week, particularly Saturday afternoon. They selected food crops in large measure based on the relative ease of planting and harvesting them along with the nutritional payoff. African staples such as plantains and yams were supplemented with indigenous crops like cassava. Plantains were the dominant staple crop—high-yielding, low-maintenance, starchy, and harvestable year-round.³¹

Slave subsistence practices shaped the organization, seasonality, and daily rhythms of work routines on sugar estates and other properties. As a means to promote efficiency in food production and preparation on estates, planters put all “able”-bodied slaves to field work and gave to “weakly,” older, and younger slaves tasks related to provisioning, such as maintaining animals, preparing meals, and watching over provision grounds. Bryan Edwards described three typical work gangs on a sugar estate: the “great gang” of the strongest men and women, who “clear the ground, plant and cut the canes, and attend the process of sugar-making;” second were “younger negroes and convalescents,” who attended to weeding “or any such light exercise;” and third were “children, superintended by the old women, who pull green meat [fodder] for the cattle, or weed in the garden.”³² There were also typically smaller numbers of enslaved domestics, drivers, and workers with specialized occupations, such as carpenters, coopers, distillers, and boilers.³³ Older slaves generally served as watchmen over

³¹ McDonald, *Economy and Material Culture*, 23, 27-28; Marshall, “Provision Ground and Plantation Labor,” 55; Carney & Rosomoff, *In the Shadow of Slavery*, 112-117.

³² Edwards, *History, Civil and Commercial* (1798), 188.

³³ Justin Roberts has demonstrated that slaves on sugar estates were often shuttled between field gangs and other occupations, rendering the concept of “gangs” more of a guiding principle than a rigid managerial practice. Roberts, “Working Between the Lines,” 558-574.

provision grounds.³⁴ Other aged, sick, or otherwise “weakly” slaves were often assigned marginal tasks related to provisioning. On Mt. Pleasant estate in Jamaica, there were the following slaves: Tom, a fisherman; Steven, a “Crabber,” who was “Ruptur’d;” Cicero, who “attends Hogs,” and had “Boneach” (bone-ache); Johnny, who “attends Sheep;” and Cumba, the “Cook for Negroes daily fed,” who had “a very bad sore.”³⁵

Rations of salt fish and other imported provisions served to mark out the days of the week, seasons of the year, and special holidays on sugar estates and other properties. Salt rations were typically doled out once per week on Sundays.³⁶ Slaves were tasked with parceling out allowances and putting them in meals of their own preparation with produce from their provision grounds. Former slave Ashton Warner recalled that during a typical out-of-crop workday on a sugar estate, the “great gang” would assemble in the cane fields by sunrise. Around nine o’clock, after several hours spent working, they would have a half-hour for “breakfast,” which was eaten in the field. Slave women usually would have prepared the meal the night before, and it might have consisted of “roasted or boiled yams, eddowes, or plantains, or such like, and a piece of salt fish, or

³⁴ Watchmen were often broken down from the rigors of plantation labor and unfit for other work. One 1831 list of slaves on the Jamaican cattle estate Retirement Pen listed one John Warner, 41 years old, described as “Weakly & ill disposed,” and “Watching negro grounds.” List of Negroes in Retirement Penn as Served with Clothing, on the 28th day of March 1831, by Hamilton Brown, Esquire, Series X, Box 46, Folder 8, Powel Family Papers, HSP. Similarly, a list of slaves on Mt. Pleasant estate (Jamaica) from 1787 named 224 slaves and described six out eleven of them: “chiefly employ’d as watchmen and Ratcatchers—moving the penns &c.—being unfit for constant Field labour.” List of Negroes on Mount Pleasant Estate, (Hanover, Jamaica), 1 June 1787, *Douglas v. Harrison*, C 110/141, TNA.

³⁵ List of Negroes on Mount Pleasant Estate, (Hanover, Jamaica), 1 June 1787, *Douglas v. Harrison*, C 110/141, TNA.

³⁶ Managers of the cotton estate Vigilance in Demerara noted in monthly lists the weekly Sunday rations—“Served Salt Fish & Plantains as usual”—alongside columns and rows recording slave work routines, production figures, and observations on the weather and other matters. For the December 1810 list, two rows were marked “Christmas Holiday” with the annotation: “Served among the Gang three Barrels porter, Tobacco, pipes, Rum & 250 lbs Saltfish.” Monthly List of Plantation Vigilance, December 1810, Luther Box 4, Bradish Papers, NYHS. For ration schedules, see Sheridan, *Doctors and Slaves*, 162-4; Dirks, *Black Saturnalia*, 60-67.

herrings, by way of seasoning.” Warner remembered that slaves with no food would “fast till mid-day.” The great gang then worked until “dinner” around noon, when they were allowed an hour-and-a-half to two hours of “rest,” during which time they were expected to pick a bundle of grass for fodder for livestock. Work resumed from about two o’clock in the afternoon to sundown around seven o’clock.³⁷

Slaves well understood that hunger was built into the calendar of sugar production. In 1816, planter William Dickson remarked: “Slaves habitually divided the year into ‘the crop-time, and the hard time,’ or ‘the plenty time, and the hungry time.’”³⁸ Sugar crop season, which lasted from January to May or June, was considered by planters to be a time of plenty, because they allowed slaves to consume sugarcane syrup as they harvested the plant. In 1815, John Shand expressed planters’ common belief about such calories-in-the-field: “nothing can be more nourishing or healthy.”³⁹ But crop season brought nutritional stresses for certain slaves. Ashton Warner remembered that in the early mornings field slaves picked ripened cane-tops for cattle feed and then headed to the sugar works to gather bundles of dried mogass (cane stalks squeezed of juice) for fuel to keep sugar vats boiling until nine o’clock at night. “After this the slaves have to prepare their suppers; for, if they have no very aged parents or friends belonging to them, they must do this themselves, which occupies them another hour.” Warner, an enslaved cooper, further noted that crop season was harder nutritionally on mechanics and pasture

³⁷ Ashton Warner, *Negro Slavery Described by a Negro: Being the Narrative of Ashton Warner, a Native of St. Vincent’s* (London: Samuel Maunder, 1831), 33-38.

³⁸ Joshua Steele and William Dickson, *The Mitigation of Slavery, in Two Parts* (London: R. and A. Taylor, 1814); 308-9. See also Dirks, *Black Saturnalia*, 77-80.

³⁹ William Shand to George Watson Taylor, Spanish Town, Jamaica, 27 March 1819, STP, ICS 101 8/E/4; John Shand to George Watson Taylor, Spanish Town, Jamaica, 31 March 1816, STP, ICS 101 8/B/9/2.

boys employed in potting sugar: “we did not leave off to get our breakfast till ten or eleven o'clock, and I have known it mid-day before we have tasted food.”⁴⁰

Slaves often pressed managers for increased food allowances during crop season or in periods of annual and episodic scarcity. In 1802, attorney John Shand had taken over the management of two sugar estates in Vere Parish (present-day Clarendon), Jamaica, on which the former overseers had neglected planting provision crops in favor of pushing slaves to hoe and plant sugarcane. Since Vere estates generally did not feature provision grounds but rather relied on corn grown on estate lands, food supply would have been nearly nil on these properties. Shand described the slaves as “clamorous, & justly for food at Exeter,” noting: “I found the negroes digging cane holes in very stiff land not only without the usual comfort of sugar and rum allowed when put to that severe labour; but actually without food.” Shand resorted to the market in Kingston for provisions, lamenting, “even from motives of economy, to say nothing of humanity the owner must be most bountiful when he can worst afford it.”⁴¹ Shand’s ensuing correspondence showed that slaves valued rations of salt fish not necessarily for the sustenance of the meat, but for the fact that they could boil out the salt and use it to flavor dishes composed mostly of produce from provision grounds. When slaves continued to press him for food during the crop season, Shand mentioned: “In addition to the necessary article of a little cloathing the chief claim they make on their master is for

⁴⁰ Warner, *Negro Slavery Described by a Negro*, 38.

⁴¹ John Shand to Abraham Chambers, Vere, Jamaica, 11 December 1802, *Chambers v. Goldwin*, C 112/163, TNA. Barbados planter Philip Gibbs mentioned in a plantation management manual: “The pickle of salt beef and herrings, passed through a fine sieve, is excellent for seasoning the victuals of negroes. The use will prove the value.” Philip Gibbs, *Instructions for the Treatment of Negroes* (London: Shepperson and Reynolds, 1797 [second ed., orig. 1786]), 39. On food cultivation in Vere, see Higman, *Slave Populations of the British Caribbean*, 211.

Herrings. This is the principal ingredient in seasoning all their food and I think has been dealt out with too sparing a hand.”⁴²

Basic hunger and overwork were not the only considerations for slaves when they pressed managers for additional or better-quality foodstuffs and other goods. On estates that were distantly situated from town markets, slaves might put more pressure on managers for “indulgences” that slaves on other estates would have been able to procure more easily. In December 1809, absentee proprietor John Whyte Melville complained to his attorney, Walter Traill, about expenses for salt and tobacco on Melville Hall estate in Dominica.⁴³ Traill wrote him back: “as far as my recollection serves me [tobacco] was first introduced by an application of the Negroes to Mr Laing himself and has been since occasionally continued.” He explained: “The extra quantity of Salt was necessary by the scarcity of salt fish for several years back.” Traill further cautioned that there would be “Murmurs & discontents” among the slaves if they did not receive the same “allowances” and “indulgences” as those on nearby plantations. He noted that Melville Hall’s slaves were “certainly justly entitled to more indulgences” than slaves on estates near towns, “where they have a ready market for what ground provisions they can raise with the produce of which they can purchase necessaries for themselves.”⁴⁴ Traill and other managers figured that it was better to provide marginal “indulgences” than risk a more disaffected labor force.

Provisioning was a crucial factor in planters’ decisions on whether to hire slaves for additional work on estates. “Jobbing” gangs were usually resorted to during large

⁴² John Shand to Abraham Henry Chambers, 2 April 1803, *Chambers v. Goldwin*, C 112/163, TNA.

⁴³ J.W. Melville to Walter Traill, London, 13 December 1809; J.W. Melville to Walter Traill, Bath, 24 March 1810, GD 126/8, NAS.

⁴⁴ Walter Traill to John Whyte Melville, Melville Hall, Dominica, 4 January 1810, GD 126/8, NAS.

crops, to perform especially difficult tasks, or when sickness and high mortality had reduced labor forces on estates.⁴⁵ Planters viewed the costs for hiring and maintaining jobbing gangs as worthwhile if the additional labor enabled an estate's slaves to perform other tasks such as the cultivation of food crops. In January 1804, one Tobago attorney explained to an absentee proprietor: "I have done you much good by Jobbing 12 Acres of Cane" in the fall, for this enabled estate slaves to dung and plant additional land as well as secure "a Crop of Corn."⁴⁶ Regular subsistence practices for slaves were also critical if planters wished to "job" them. Planters' decisions about hiring-out involved balancing slaves' nutritional needs against their market value as temporary laborers. In May and June 1807, several slaves belonging to a cattle pen in St. Ann's, Jamaica, were hired-out to another pen for a fortnight to plant guinea grass and cut down pimento. Upon returning to their "home" estate, the slaves went to work, in the words of the managing attorney, "clearing and supplying the plantain walk." This attorney assured their absentee proprietor, "by August they will be ready to go upon another job," after their food crops had been tended to.⁴⁷

Planters' use of marginal food production as a means to shape flexible, adaptable, moveable, and rentable slave laborers might be viewed as one of the most precociously modern managerial aspects of the sugar business. But some planters cautioned against the

⁴⁵ Heather Cateau, "The New 'Negro' Business: Hiring in the British West Indies, 1750-1810," in *In the Shadow of the Plantation: Caribbean History and Legacy*, Alvin O. Thompson, ed. (Kingston: Ian Randle, 2002), 100-120; Roberts, *Slavery and the Enlightenment*, 109-110.

⁴⁶ George Morison to Alexander Gordon, Tobago, 13 January 1804, *Morison v. Morison*, C 104/178, TNA.

⁴⁷ From England, the proprietor, Joseph Hayne, approved of jobbing the slaves for eight months out of the year, but ordered that they were not to be loaned out "in the depth of Winter or rainy Seasons." James Laing to Joseph Hayne, Goshen, Jamaica, 8 June 1807; Thomas Bruce to Joseph Hayne, Jamaica, 9 June 1807, C 112/171; John Hiatt to Joseph Hayne, Mount Plenty, Jamaica, 10 June 1807; John Hiatt to Joseph Hayne, Mount Plenty, Jamaica, 5 July 1807; Thomas Bruce to Joseph Hayne, St. Ann's, Jamaica, 8 July 1807, *Hayne v. Higgin*, C 112/171, TNA.

hiring-out of slaves if it led to long absences from their provision grounds. In 1789, Jamaican planter and attorney William Robertson wrote to an absentee proprietor, “if hired out they [the slaves] are in general hard work’d, ill used, ill fed & [given] the worst or no accommodation that’s comfortable while their houses, lands, provisions, stock & Children in their absence are neglected & ruined.”⁴⁸ While lessees of slaves were typically supposed to provision jobbing gangs for the duration of the hire under so-called “make-good” bargains, Robertson’s objections to the practice indicated that such obligations were likely seldom met.⁴⁹ But his admonitions against hiring-out were also probably unusual. Hiring-out was a lucrative business that only intensified with rising prices for slaves and increased labor demand in Jamaica and other colonies throughout the 1790s and early 1800s.⁵⁰

Sickness was as prevalent a fact of life for slaves as food scarcity and overwork. Infectious diseases periodically swept through entire slave populations, which planters attempted to stave off mainly because they regarded sick slaves as both unproductive workers and costlier mouths to feed. One Tobago attorney lamented in 1803 that measles had confined half the gang on one Tobago sugar estate for several months and “occasioned a considerable Expence for proper food.”⁵¹ The attorney later expressed disapproval about moving one group of “invalids” to another estate: “they will do more harm than good & aught to remain where they are as they can be fed at less expence than

⁴⁸ William Robertson to James Johnston, St. Ann’s, Jamaica, 5 Nov 1789, Series XII, Box 55, Folder 10, Powel Family Papers, HSP.

⁴⁹ For a well-informed abolitionist opinion on the inadequacy of “make-good bargains,” see James Stephen, *Slavery in the British West-India Colonies Delineated*, vol. 1 (1824), 86-7.

⁵⁰ Heather Cateau, “The New ‘Negro’ Business,” esp. 109, 114.

⁵¹ George Morison to William Lushington, Tobago, 20 November 1803, *Morison v. Morison*, C 104/178, TNA.

at Bacolet.”⁵² The attorney’s cost-benefit analysis of provisioning “sickly” slaves demonstrated the managerial logic by which enslaved health was calculated by the relationship of healthy bodies to markets for goods and labor. He would contrast the compromised value of sick slaves against those well enough to perform hard labor: “I have the Satisfaction to say with exception of Invalids the negro’s are very prime & in high order,” with “prime” field slaves currently fetching £100 at island markets.⁵³

While malnutrition was a major—if not *the* major—contributor to many of the maladies that afflicted slaves, it was rarely (if ever) singled out as a specific condition in documents such as estate valuations that itemized and priced slaves. Instead, planters tended to employ clusters of general and somewhat vague terms to describe slave health.⁵⁴ An 1805 valuation of Mount Pleasant estate in Jamaica described slaves variously as “Able” (the most common term), “young & healthy,” “middling,” “weakly,” and “very indifferent,” with more specific cases including slaves who were “Ruptured,” or “laid up this long time with a Venereal.”⁵⁵ But the effects of malnutrition were clearly apparent in almost any of the annual lists of “increase and decrease” that were drawn up on most plantations. One list from Mt. Pleasant named eight slaves who had perished

⁵² George Morison to Charles Gordon, Tobago, 22 July 1804, *Morison v. Morison*, C 104/178, TNA.

⁵³ George Morison to Messrs Baillie & Campbell, Tobago, 26 August 1804, *Morison v. Morison*, C 104/178, TNA.

⁵⁴ Some planters and contemporary medical authorities pinned the cause of specific illnesses poor diet such as tetanus or “locked jaw” among infants and young children: Joshua Steele and William Dickson, *The Mitigation of Slavery*, 324–325. Anthropologist Robert Dirks cites the following diseases and symptoms (and their contemporary appellations) directly related to poor diet among slaves: beriberi (“sugar disease” or “plantation sickness”), beriberi-pellagra syndrome, Scott’s Palsy, bowel disorders (“fluxes”), swellings (such as “Barbados leg”), coco-bea, parasitic worms, edema (“dropsy”), anemia, geophagia (“dirt-eating”), conjunctivitis, diarrhea, “sore-eyes,” and skin ulcers (commonly referred to collectively as “leprosy”). Dirks also notes that poor nutrition exacerbated the severity of contagious diseases like yellow fever, smallpox, influenzas, and yaws. Dirks, “Resource Fluctuations and Competitive Transformations,” 143–146.

⁵⁵ Valuation of Slaves purchased by Henry Jackson Esqr. & put on Mount Pleasant, with their Increase, taken this day of 14 February 1805, *Douglas v. Harrison*, C 110/141, TNA.

between May 1786 and June 1787, including Charles, from “a pain in his Stomach, occasioned by eating dirt;” Harry, “of a Dropsy, long declining for 18 Months before;” Towerhill, “being swell’d & bloated for a considerable time before;” Portsmouth, from “flux—an indiff^t Negro;” and, youngest of all, “Kettunah’s Amorrta,” an infant who passed “from teething.”⁵⁶

Healthy and sick slaves alike recognized that shipping and production cycles were intertwined. In 1818, justices of the peace were dispatched to the sugar estate Mount Eolus in Dominica in order to take depositions about the disciplining of two dirt-eating women. Intended to serve as both a punishment of the two women and a lesson to other slaves on the estate, Mount Eolus’ manager had forced the women to consume a mixture of human excrement and fireplace ashes; the women both died within several weeks. In official depositions about the incident, Mount Eolus’ slaves recalled that the punishment had happened around sundown outside the boiling house during crop season. Notably, several slaves said that it had occurred about a week before a brig named either the *Peter Parker* or *Peter Proctor* was set to sail. From boilers to field hands to sick nurses, Mount Eolus’ slaves reconstructed the punishment of two ailing women as a narrative event that unfolded during a ramped-up production schedule for processing and packaging sugar for the scheduled departure of a ship.⁵⁷ Documentation from the case powerfully captured the ways in which deprivation and physical coercion worked together to discipline slaves. And the managers’ timing for the punishment underscored how the parameters of slave

⁵⁶ Decrease of Negroes from May 1st, 1786 to June 1st, 1787, *Douglas v. Harrison*, C 110/141, TNA.

⁵⁷ Examinations on Mount Eolus Estate, enclosed in Maxwell to Bathurst, Dominica, 27 September 1818, no. 99, CO 71/55, TNA.

life were shaped by transatlantic shipping cycles in addition to the labor that they performed on and around estates.

Shipping Networks

West Indian proprietors often entered into consortiums with other planters and merchants to own shares in vessels that could ferry provisions and other supplies to the islands and return “home” with sugars and other produce. Resident planters and attorneys took a strong hand in managing shipping networks through correspondence with metropolitan commission houses. They utilized their local knowledge of cultivation schedules and maritime and riverine geographies to carefully time the arrival and departure of ships in order to meet production cycles and to avoid the hurricane season. But sugar estates would never be able to solely rely on transatlantic shipping for imported goods. Colonial merchants known as town agents served as vital nodes in provisioning networks by procuring stopgap foodstuffs on a timely basis. Though primarily concerned with ensuring the adequate supply of estates, the activities of town agents and supply ship captains were hardly removed from the coercive elements of plantation economies. Indeed, the trade in slaves was often intertwined with the trade in provisions and other necessities in the Caribbean.

The correspondence of Simon Taylor from Jamaica provides extensive information about ship owning and the management of shipping networks by a major resident proprietor and attorney.⁵⁸ Taylor first became active in shipping concerns in the

⁵⁸ For a brief examination of Taylor’s coordination of trade and shipping networks, see B.W. Higman, *Plantation Jamaica, 1750-1850: Capital and Control in a Colonial Economy* (Kingston, Jamaica: Univ. of the West Indies Press, 2008), 205-212.

1790s. He had claimed throughout the first period of war with France that he had no interest in owning ships. In November 1802, he wrote to his cousin, the London commission merchant Robert Taylor: “God knows I have enough to do already not to be further plagued by shipping and shipping concerns.” Nevertheless, increased wartime scarcities of shipping as well as fluctuating costs and high freight charges for herring, coals, and other necessities obtained outside London led him to concede that he wanted “vessells solely my own.”⁵⁹ From about 1790 to his death in 1813, Taylor was a would-be transatlantic shipping magnate. He ordered that several new brigs for his concerns be constructed at Newcastle and Lancaster. Taylor also owned several coastal and transatlantic supply vessels as part of a consortium that included his cousin’s commission house and at least one absentee proprietor and one captain.⁶⁰ While it is difficult to determine exactly how many vessels were owned under the consortium, Taylor mentioned at least ten supply vessels in his correspondence.⁶¹

The maritime geography of Taylor’s shipping network was shaped in large measure by the need to procure salted herring and coal. These two goods determined desired sailing routes, vessels types, and the practical knowledge that Taylor felt his captains should possess in order to pilot goods from British ports to Jamaican properties.

Most of the herring that Taylor ordered came from Cork, Dublin, Glasgow, Leith,

⁵⁹ Simon Taylor to Robert Taylor, Kingston, Jamaica, November 1802, STP, ICS 101 1/E/56.

⁶⁰ Simon Taylor to Robert Taylor, Kingston, Jamaica, 4 October 1803, STP, ICS 101/1/F/31; Simon Taylor to Robert Taylor, Bath, St. Thomas in-the-East, Jamaica, 11 January 1803, STP, ICS 101 1/F/4. See also Simon Taylor to Robert Taylor, Kingston, Jamaica, 4 December 1802, STP, ICS 101/1/F/3.

⁶¹ I have identified at least the following transatlantic supply vessels in the Simon Taylor and the Vanneck-Arcedeckne Papers: the *Jack Tarr*, *Indefatigable*, *Reliance*, *Llanrumney*, *Montego Bay*, *Holland*, *Golden Grove*, *Simon Taylor*, *Favourite*, and *Fortune*. It is worth noting that some of these vessels might have been chartered rather than owned. We do know that at the time of his death in 1813, Taylor owned one transatlantic ship in England, *The West Indian*, and a coastal vessel in Jamaica, *The Gleaner*. On these latter two ships, see Richard Sheridan, “Simon Taylor, Sugar Tycoon of Jamaica, 1740-1813,” *Agricultural History*, vol. 45, no. 4 (October 1971), 294.

Newcastle, and, more expensively, London. The majority of coal, which was used to heat cauldrons for boiling molasses, was picked up in Newcastle.⁶² Since herring could also be purchased affordably at Newcastle, Taylor was keen that captains should know the route to there from London—“all our Captains ought to know it, and I should hope in time we may be able to breed up Men who will be able as opportunities Offer to take Charge of the Ships.”⁶³ Logistical coordination for sending out supply ships could be complex. In January 1803, Taylor gave directions for the organization of shipping in a letter to cousin Robert: “One of these [vessels] should annually bring out the London supplies for Lyssons Holland Golden Grove & Hectors River. One should bring out the Herrings for the above as also for Houghton Court Georgia Great Vally Mountain Vally and Llan Rhumney by this she makes a Tour of the Island. Two should annually go to Newcastle to bring out the Coals and what I order from thence.”⁶⁴ Similar instructions were repeated frequently in Taylor’s correspondence. He grew frustrated if changes in shipping routes led to the incursion of increased expenses on goods purchased at different markets in the British Isles. After receiving annual supplies in 1803, he wrote to cousin Robert: “I can not point out matters clearer than I have, I am the Person that loads these Ships out and

⁶² Coal was also be fetched at Leith and Glasgow and, again more expensively, in London. Taylor wrote to cousin Robert: “It is true that the Glasgow Coals are not near as good as the Newcastle ones, but then they are much cheaper.” Simon Taylor to Robert Taylor, Holland, Jamaica, 1 May 1803, STP, ICS 101/1/F/18. On coal, see Ryden, *West Indian Slavery*, 233.

⁶³ Simon Taylor to Robert Taylor, Jamaica, 21 January 1805, STP, ICS 101 1/G/13. Taylor did not like captains who “have been brought up in the London Trade,” remarking, “they know nothing of the Navigation from London to Shields, nor back to the Downs.” Instead, Taylor went on, “the Captains should have been all brought up in the Coal and Coasting Trade, hard Working loyall People, not Beaux Petit Maitres, or people fond of gadding about.” He also disliked captains “bred up in the Navy,” alleging that they were more interested in ferrying passengers to Kingston than in promptly delivering supplies. Simon Taylor to Robert Taylor, Jamaica, 1 May 1803, STP, ICS 101 1/F/18. See also Robert Taylor to Simon Taylor, London, 6 June 1804, STP, ICS 101 13/A/200.

⁶⁴ Simon Taylor to Robert Taylor, Bath, St. Thomas in-the-East, Jamaica, 11 January 1803, STP, ICS 101 1/F/4. See also: Simon Taylor to Robert Taylor, Kingston, Jamaica, 9 July 1802, STP, ICS 101 1/E/4; Simon Taylor to Robert Taylor, Kingston, Jamaica, 4 October 1803, STP, ICS 101/1/F/31. See also, Simon Taylor to Robert Taylor, Bath, Jamaica, 11 January 1803, STP, ICS 101/1/F/4.

home, My People have all the Trouble with them, therefore it is not to be expected that I am to pay the same Freight for Bricks Tyles and Coals as if they were Muslins and Cambricks.”⁶⁵

Taylor and other planters expected that supplies would arrive in December at the latest before the commencement of the crop and the doling out of Christmas “indulgences” to slaves. On the eve of crop season in January 1803, Taylor wrote to the commission house: “I shall be most dreadfully disappointed if I have not coals and very soon.”⁶⁶ Homeward-bound vessels then had to load up and leave the islands before the hurricane season commenced in the late summer. Further, planters wanted their sugars to reach London and other major consignments ports as early as possible in order to avoid the annual gluts and lower prices that were almost inevitable features of British sugar markets.⁶⁷ Scarcity of homeward-bound shipping might force planters to alter their carefully conceived plans so as to avoid keeping their produce on hand until the early part of the next year.⁶⁸ In early 1803, Taylor noted that one of his ships, the *Indefatigable*, had landed the “Lyssons Supplies” at Port Morant on the south shore of the island. Since no other ship had yet arrived at St. Thomas-in-the-East, “she [the *Indefatigable*] must go to the River where there are more goods than will twice fill her, she must take in as much there as she can with safety take and then go to Port Morant or Morant Bay to fill up.”⁶⁹ Later that year Taylor paid freight and shipped 130 hogsheads of sugar from Llanrumney

⁶⁵ Simon Taylor to Robert Taylor, Bath, Jamaica, 11 January 1803, STP, ICS 101/1/F/4.

⁶⁶ Simon Taylor to Robert Taylor, Bath, St. Thomas in-the-East, Jamaica, 11 January 1803, STP, ICS 101/1/F/4.

⁶⁷ Ryden, *West Indian Slavery*, 94.

⁶⁸ Higman, *Plantation Jamaica*, 207-8.

⁶⁹ Simon Taylor to Robert Taylor, Bath, Jamaica, 11 January 1803, STP, ICS 101/1/F/4.

estate to Glasgow and Liverpool so that the produce did not “waste in the open Air” for several months.⁷⁰

Delays in homeward-bound shipping in the early summer could upset planters’ expectations for receiving slave provisions and other supplies by the end of the year. Writing to cousin Robert in July 1812, Taylor fretted about the eponymous vessel the *Simon Taylor* being still at Jamaica and his not being able to send away a “full Ship” of produce for London until August 13th. He wrote: “her detention has put me at the very great inconvenience, both in respect to getting the herrings and shipping the Sugars and Rum, and which if I had not detained for her, she must have been delayed sailing from hence until March or April next” because of the ensuing hurricane season. Taylor worried about how this would affect outward-bound supply ships for the following crop: “From the Simon Taylor having been so long in coming out I do not know how you mean to distribute your ships next year.”⁷¹

Planters expected that supply ship captains would carefully time when they loaded up on goods in British ports and set sail across the Atlantic in order to match sugar production cycles. The consortium’s main captain, John Renwick, an investor himself, often assured Taylor and other members that he was mindful of the importance of picking up goods and dispatching ships in order to get them to the islands in time for the crop. He wrote to consortium member and absentee proprietor Chaloner Arcedeckne from Newcastle in October 1799: “I hope I have done right in ordering the *Reliance* down here to fill up, as the River Estates will require a full supply of Coals both on account of the

⁷⁰ Simon Taylor to Robert Taylor, Kingston, Jamaica, 20 November 1803, STP, ICS 101/1/F/33.

⁷¹ Simon Taylor to Robert Taylor, Kingston, Jamaica, 28 July 1812, STP, ICS 101 13/B/30. The *Simon Taylor* did finally get off the island: Simon Taylor to Robert Taylor, Kingston, Jamaica, 23 January 1813, STP, ICS 101 13/B/36.

late Wet Season and the great quantity of Bourbon Canes they will have to cut next Crop.”⁷² But Taylor forced Renwick out of the concern within only a few years. He alleged that Renwick was defrauding him on freight charges for herring and other goods⁷³ and that he was not astute enough at haggling with British tradesmen.⁷⁴ Taylor viewed the dismissal as a major lost opportunity for Renwick, whom he felt could have controlled the provisions trade on the north side of Jamaica: “[he] might have been the first Man at Newcastle and loaded a dozen Ships a year and supplied the Coals and Herrings for them but it is his Business.”⁷⁵

The weight of produce weighed heavily on Taylor’s mind when he considered specifications for the vessels in his concerns. Getting supplies to Holland and Golden Grove estates in St. Thomas-in-the-East required vessels that could navigate the shallow drafts of the Plantain Garden River while carrying full loads of sugar. For Taylor and the consortium, finding what he termed proper “River vessels” proved difficult. He wrote about selling off one ship: “she draws about 15 feet Water when loaded and there is only 17 or 18 feet in the River and nothing but a reef two or three feet.”⁷⁶ When ships such as the *Jack Tarr* and the *Albion* were prevented from going upriver with full cargoes, Taylor

⁷² John Renwick to Chaloner Arcedeckne, Newcastle, 14 October 1799, 3B/1799/56, VAN-ARC, Reel 6.

⁷³ Simon Taylor to Robert Taylor, Kingston, Jamaica, 9 July 1802, STP, ICS 101 1/E/45; Simon Taylor to Robert Taylor, Jamaica, 25 July 1802, STP, ICS 101 1/E/48.

⁷⁴ Simon Taylor to Robert Taylor, Bath, St. Thomas in-the-East, Jamaica, 11 January 1803, STP, ICS 101 1/F/4.

⁷⁵ Simon Taylor to Robert Taylor, Jamaica, 4 October 1803, STP, ICS 101 1/F/31. Pilots of smaller coastal watercraft also frustrated Taylor. He mentioned about one: “The Urania is a good Vessel and would do but the Capt. is a worthless Fellow. I wanted him to bring up 20 blls of Herrings belonging to Renwick from Lyssons Wharf to Port Morant, because he had a dispute with the Overseer of Lyssons he would not tho he promised me.” Simon Taylor to Robert Taylor, St. Thomas in the East, 26 September 1799, STP, ICS 101 1/C/22.

⁷⁶ Simon Taylor to Robert Taylor, Holland Jamaica, 21 March 1803, STP, ICS 101/1/F/14. Taylor remarked in another letter that the *Indefatigable* was “a good Vessel but really not proper for the Place.” Simon Taylor to Robert Taylor, Holland, Jamaica, 1 May 1803, STP, ICS 101/1/F/18.

was obliged “to send boats round the End with Coals,” or land them nearby and incur storage expenses. Taylor complained about bearing the cost for these transactions; the actual labor of carting the coals four to six miles to the estates, of course, would have been borne by his own slaves or those he had hired.⁷⁷

In wartime, Taylor and other West Indian planters and merchants expected state protection for private shipping through the system of outward- and homeward-bound naval convoys. Convoys left from Portsmouth and Cork at regular appointed intervals, but planters frequently complained of delays when large merchant houses held up everything by being slow in getting supply ships ready to depart.⁷⁸ Taylor himself expected his commission house to be timely in readying cargoes bound for his concerns. He generally ordered that his outward-bound supply ships should leave with the “First Fleet” departing Britain for the West Indies. In July 1804, he wrote to cousin Robert: “I observe you had not gott the Indefatigable away as you expected by the last Convoy, but had sent her to Portsmouth with only the Herrings on board to take advantage of the first Convoy that answers that she may have some Chance of getting away by that of July.”⁷⁹ Taylor later wrote that he wished supply ships for the Holland and Golden Grove estates in St. Thomas-in-the-East to sail from Portsmouth with the November 4th convoy, since those leaving in January encountered “severe Gales of Wind in the Bay” in Jamaica.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Another ship, the *Montego Bay*, drew 16 feet of water when fully-loaded, and Taylor wrote that it should likewise head out of the river when partially full to complete loading at either Port Morant or Morant Bay. Simon Taylor to Robert Taylor, Holland, Jamaica, 1 May 1803, STP, ICS 101/1/F/18. In late 1804, Taylor was happy to hear that cousin Robert had purchased another ship for the river estates, the *Fortyseven*, noting, “she is only two years old will carry a large Cargo at an easy draft of Water and is reported to sail Well.” Simon Taylor to Robert Taylor, Kingston, December 1804, STP, ICS 101/1/G/12.

⁷⁸ For a contemporary critique of convoys, see Young, *West-India Common-place Book*, 196-205.

⁷⁹ Simon Taylor to Robert Taylor, [Jamaica], July 1804, STP, ICS 101/1/F/59.

⁸⁰ Simon Taylor to Robert Taylor, Kingston, December 1804, STP, ICS 101/1/G/12.

Taylor often expressed frustration with the British government's efforts to secure safe waterways for colonial shipping against French, Spanish, and, eventually, American warships and privateers. In January 1796, he wrote from Kingston to cousin John Taylor in London: "The Privateers Swarm as thick as Bees on every part of the Coast, every Vessell that stirs out of any Harbour is sure to be taken or run on shore." He described the convoy ships on hand as "a parcell of boats without Men, Guns, or any thing else from America [probably Halifax], and they are as useless, as if they had sent out Thames Wherries." Cognizant of Jamaica's situation in the wartime geography of the western Caribbean basin, Taylor was fearful of losing cargoes from a recently departed homeward-bound fleet to ships that had been massing to northward: "I expect every Ship that sailed in the Fleet from hence on the 13 Inst. will be taken, their Convoy is a rotten Frigate, and we hear of numbers of Privateers that were in the Gulph [of Mexico] to way lay them." Produce fleets huddled for refuge in fortified natural harbors such as Kingston's, but even these spaces were not exempt from enemy depredations. Taylor noted in the same letter: "They [privateers and warships] dayly attempt to cutt out Ships out of our Ports and then the English Ministry insults us by talking of bum boats as Men of Warr."⁸¹

Taylor would often have the commission house send provisions and other supplies on multiple vessels in an effort to spread the risk of capture.⁸² In 1796, Taylor had herring shipped from Glasgow to Haughton Court estate on four different vessels—the *Elizabeth*, *Alexander*, *Hero*, and *George*. Taylor had good reason to utilize this strategy: in the same year, the "Irish provisions" he ordered for another estate under his

⁸¹ Simon Taylor to John Taylor, Kingston, Jamaica, 31 January 1796, STP, ICS 101/14/B/6.

⁸² Higman, *Plantation Jamaica*, 210.

management were captured at sea.⁸³ Taylor continued to complain about the threats posed to plantation supply networks by enemy shipping throughout the war years. He discovered in January 1813 that one of his ships “seems to have had a narrow escape” from a privateer or warship on its way back to London. Taylor reported the safe arrival of a supply ship into Port Morant despite Britain waging war against both France and the United States. He worried nevertheless, “how she or other vessels at the outports are to get their supplies to the Estates and Cargoes taken in I do not know for any port in the Island seems to be so blockaded by strong American Privateers that it is impossible to [trust] a boat out, and there is no disposable naval force on this Station to send against them indeed we seem to be totally abandoned.” Another one of Taylor’s coastal ships, the *Gleaner*, he deemed, “quite useless, and to send her to sea would only be making a present of her to the enemy.”⁸⁴

Aside from ocean-going supply ships, Taylor and other planters and attorneys also relied on so-called town agents for provisions and other supplies. Town agents were commission house factors in colonial ports that acted as crucial nodes in provisioning networks by linking together transatlantic and local supply chains. They were particularly useful in the procurement of North American foodstuffs such as bread, flour, corn, pickled fish, peas, and beans, as well as wood products—“common” and pitch pine boards, “ranging” timber, shingles, and red oak staves. In the 1780s, Simon Taylor employed another one of his cousins, John Taylor, as his town agent in Kingston. John’s responsibilities included making local purchases of supplies, especially following hurricanes and other instance of adverse weather; transshipping supplies that had arrived

⁸³ *Journals of the Assembly of Jamaica*, vol. 10 (Spanish Town: Alexander Aikman, 1807), 418-28.

⁸⁴ Simon Taylor to Robert Taylor, Kingston, Jamaica, 23 January 1813, STP, ICS 101 13/B/36.

in Kingston to different parts of the island; arranging for the return shipment of sugar and other produce; and visiting the estates owned and managed by Simon during the latter's one prolonged absence from the island.⁸⁵

John Taylor's position in a colonial port enabled him to gather and utilize commercial information more quickly and along different geographical axes than merchants based in Britain. Since slave provisions were time-sensitive supplies, John Taylor frequently reported to Simon that he would ship them either in one of Taylor's own vessels or by the "first opportunity" on freight.⁸⁶ Timeliness was especially vital in procuring emergency provisions following hurricanes and other calamities. One storm that struck eastern Jamaica in July 1784 devastated several of Simon's estates. In early September, John wrote to him: "The Bread shall be Sent to Golden Valley by first oppy."⁸⁷ In order to alleviate scarcity in August 1790, John dispatched some vessels to Nova Scotia in order to fetch plantation supplies, an order which would have taken London commission houses months rather than weeks to execute.⁸⁸ And John seemed to have kept a watchful eye on conditions of food scarcity on estates under Simon's management. He wrote to Simon in November 1791 that "the plantain Walk is blown down" on one estate, and that the manager "thinks it will be advisable [sic] to send out

⁸⁵ On John Taylor's early career in North America and arrival in Jamaica: John Taylor to Simon Taylor, STP, ICS 101/14/A/1-4. On his inspecting estates during Simon's absence: John Taylor to Simon Taylor, Kingston, Jamaica, 12 June 1791, STP, ICS 101/14/A/78. On town agents, see Thomas M. Truxes, *Irish-American Trade, 1660-1783* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1988), 91, 95-6, 148; Roberts, "'Yankey dodle will do verry well here,'" 106, 131-5; Nicholas Radburn, "Guinea Factors, Slave Sales, the Profits of the Transatlantic Slave Trade in Late Eighteenth-Century Jamaica: the Case of John Tailyour," *WMQ*, vol. 72, no. 2 (April 2015), 252-5, 261-3.

⁸⁶ See for instance John Taylor to Simon Taylor, Kingston, Jamaica, 8 January 1785, STP, ICS 101 14/A/14: "my whole attention since my coming down has been employed in endeavouring to forward Supplies to you."

⁸⁷ John Taylor to Simon Taylor, Kingston, Jamaica, 4 September 1784, STP, ICS 101 14/A/12. See also John Taylor to Simon Taylor, Kingston, Jamaica, 4 [September] 1790, STP, ICS 101/14/A/61.

⁸⁸ John Taylor to Simon Taylor, Kingston, Jamaica, 5 August 1790, STP, ICS 101 14/A/58.

some Pease or Beans—for fear the ground provisions should fall short before the plantains come round again.”⁸⁹

While town agents and other local suppliers were crucial to provisioning networks, we should not mistake functioning local trading systems for effective ones. Secondary foodstuffs procured to cover the failure of provision crops or the late arrival of supply ships were hardly valid substitutes for the already inadequate fare rationed to slaves. In this way, town agents and other local merchants contributed to the exploitation of slaves by enabling planters to minimally maintain them in periods in- and out-of-crop and in scarce times. Further, the varied business activities of town agents underscored how provisioning was tied into all facets of plantation economies—coercive and otherwise. For instance, many town agents and other local food suppliers were involved in slave trading. John Taylor himself was a colonial factor for a London “Guinea” house and occasionally procured slaves for Simon’s estates.⁹⁰

Merchants and ship captains in the plantation-supply business who operated on a smaller scale also dabbled in slave trading and other opportunistic forms of commerce if they encountered slow markets for provisions. In the late 1780s, Scottish merchant and ship captain Alexander Ruddach embarked a half-ton of herring (1000 barrels) from Greenock to the Windward Islands. Ruddach had purchased the fish from a Greenock merchant and banker, drawing bills of exchange at three-months’ sight and paying £1.1.8 per barrel. He had wanted to charter a ship (“so as to have the Command my Self”), but since there was “none to be got,” he paid the same merchant an additional £250 freight

⁸⁹ John Taylor to Simon Taylor, Kingston, Jamaica, 6 November 1791, STP, ICS 101/14/A/83.

⁹⁰ On this part of John Taylor’s career: Radburn, “Guinea Factors, Slave Sales, and the Profits of the Transatlantic Slave Trade.”

charge to carry the goods on the 231-ton *Lucretia*. After waiting in Greenock for a fortnight for the fish to be repacked “into full bound Casks for the West India Market,” Ruddach was sanguine about the venture: “there has No Ship Gone from this Coast with herrings, for Tobago, or is there any going, & they are not to be got at Cork.”⁹¹ Still in Greenock, he wrote a few weeks later that he “was very lucky in getting my herrings engaged when I first got here, they are now in great demand and not to be had.” One recently arrived traveler from Tobago had told him, “Herrings were then Scarse an from £4.10 to £3 Currency. So I have hopes of getting to a good Market.”⁹²

Arriving in Tobago in late January 1787, Ruddach met with disappointment: “a Ship from Getenburgh [Göteborg, Sweden] had got to Market before us.” Along with his brother, resident in the islands, Ruddach “push’d” for St. Vincent—“where I was informed they wanted herrings ... but found that we were too Late.” He decided to send some of the cargo to Grenada and bartered 300 barrels of herring “for a fine Schooner Belonging to a house here.” Ruddach also suggested that his brother ferry the fish along with “a good Freight of Negroes” to Tobago, “as there is to be a Great Sale to Morrow and next day, and a Tobago Gentleman meens to Purchase a hundred [slaves], if they Sell Reasonably.”⁹³ Ruddach’s relatively minor participation in the bustling inter-colonial slave trade probably proved more profitable than his venture in herring.⁹⁴ After multiple disappointments and an ill-judged investment in the schooner, he wrote from Grenada: “I

⁹¹ Alexander Ruddach to Charles Steuart, Greenock, 18 Nov 1786, f. 266-267, Steuart Papers, MS 5034, NLS.

⁹² Alexander Ruddach to Charles Steuart, Greenock, 4 December 1786, f. 276-277, Steuart Papers, MS 5034, NLS.

⁹³ Alexander Ruddach to Charles Steuart, Kingstown, St Vincent, 3 Feb 1787, f. 13, Steuart Papers, MS 5035, NLS.

⁹⁴ On the intercolonial slave trade, see Gregory E. O’Malley, *Final Passages: the Intercolonial Slave Trade of British America, 1619-1807* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2014).

cant Say when I shall be Able to Leave the West Indies, but it is of very Little Consequence I see very Little prospect of doing any thing in this trade, and Shall Content my Self when I can get home, to retire to Some Cheap Part of the Country where I can Live on my half pay.”⁹⁵

Ruddach’s island-hopping travails demonstrated how flows of provisions, captives, and other goods bound together Caribbean colonies in a nexus of exchange and exploitation. Further, Simon Taylor’s careful coordination of transatlantic shipping interests revealed the ambitions and sometimes-impressive reach that resident planters and attorneys exerted in managing Atlantic supply networks. But it would be easy to overstate both the integration and the well-functioning nature of West Indian mercantile shipping networks. Planters’ reliance on town agents showed that their efforts to run plantations as life-support systems were not always effective. Further, warfare and the mismanagement of shipping and convoy systems on both sides of the Atlantic rendered commodity flows precarious, which was especially problematic for islands that remained overly reliant on imported foodstuffs. And the severe episodes of weather and climatic instability that plagued the greater Caribbean made the management of various kinds of scarcity central to the overall management of properties.

Managing Scarcity

Planters and managers utilized a “mixed” combination of strategies to deal with scarcity: planting more food crops when convenient; storing grain to ward off lean times when possible; purchasing emergency rations when necessary. Planters anticipated

⁹⁵ Alexander Ruddach to Charles Steuart, Grenada, 4 April 1787, f. 26, Steuart Papers, MS 5035, NLS.

purchasing at least some additional slave provisions over the course of the year due to poor weather, natural disasters, and other factors that wiped out provision crops on estate lands or in slaves' provision grounds. When scarcity loomed, planters especially relied on mercantile credit to procure emergency or stopgap foodstuffs. Managers also relied on neighboring estates and local markets to meet the bare nutritional needs of slaves while hoping that ensuing bumper crops would cover and exceed expenses with commission houses. If estates proved unable to achieve self-sufficiency over long periods, though, disputes between proprietors, merchants, and other financial stakeholders could lead to the dissolution of partnerships.

Low supplies of food generally prevailed on West Indian estates in the summer months before provision crops could be harvested and supply ships arrived. During this time of year, estates commonly purchased North American grains and cereals, such as maize, flour, rice, and beans in order to mitigate scarcity. For planters, these goods held the advantages of being cheaper than salted meats and more conducive to storing, and they were sometimes purchased during crop season in anticipation of summertime want. In March 1816, one Jamaican attorney wrote that he planned to “lay in as much rice and flour as will carry us through” the months of June, July, and August. He otherwise feared that slaves would eat their unripe provision crops in the summer, leading to cases of dysentery and other “bowel complaints.”⁹⁶ Indeed, grain- and cereal-heavy diets were widely recognized in print and in correspondence as being detrimental to slave health. In 1796, Jamaican penkeeper Patrick Kein wrote: “Scanty meals of North-American rice,

⁹⁶ John Shand to George Watson Taylor, Spanish Town, Jamaica, 16 September 1815, STP, ICS 101 8/B/2. Shand later reported that he would prepare “one good meal for all the children every day” in the summer and dole out rice and flour “with no sparing hand to the breeding women.” John Shand to George Watson Taylor, Spanish Town, Jamaica, 31 March 1816, STP, ICS 101 8/B/9/2.

corn, and flour, may sustain life; but it is our own produce only, which can impart athletic vigour.”⁹⁷ Tobago planter George Morison agreed with this sentiment in a letter from 1804: “There is no greater enemy than me to European & American provisions for negroes.”⁹⁸ Still, the guiding principle for planters and managers was to get slaves through the lean months alive with as minimal an impact on accounts as possible. (Chapter Three will examine in greater detail the relationship between slave provisioning and plantation accounting.)

Storms, droughts, floods, blights, and other weather events and climatic factors also produced episodes of want and very often famine. Hurricanes landed in the late summer and early fall and could wipe out provision crops with alarming thoroughness.⁹⁹ In November 1786, Alexander Johnston reported after a hurricane had struck Jamaica: “I have not a plantain tree standing.”¹⁰⁰ When hurricanes were coupled with other catastrophes, food supply could be undermined for several seasons. From Jamaica in the summer of 1786, Simon Taylor reported that famine prevailed “from one end of the Island unto the other” following a great storm in the previous year and an ensuing period of drought.¹⁰¹ In March 1819, Jamaican planter and attorney William Shand reported that one storm had been so devastating that the estates under his management in Hanover would “experience great want of food” until August or September of that year. Shand ordered ten puncheons of rice to be shipped from Kingston in the southeast all the way to

⁹⁷ Patrick Kein, *An Essay upon Pen-Keeping and Plantership*, 21.

⁹⁸ George Morison to James Baillie & Duncan Campbell, Tobago, 9 December 1804, *Morison v. Morison*, C 104/178, TNA.

⁹⁹ Dirks, *Black Saturnalia*, 80-83.

¹⁰⁰ Alexander Johnston to James Johnston, St. Ann’s, Jamaica, 14 Nov. 1786, Series XII, Box 54, Folder 10, Powel Family Papers, HSP.

¹⁰¹ Simon Taylor to Lady Taylor, Kingston, Jamaica, 13 August 1786, Simon Taylor Papers, STP, ICS 101 3/B/2; John Taylor to Simon Taylor, Kingston, Jamaica, 6 November 1791, STP, ICS 101 14/A/83.

Lucea in the northwest of the island. He warned the absentee proprietors that famine could only be kept at bay until “regular assistance from Britain” arrived at year’s end.¹⁰² It is worth noting that Shand managed several large and commercially integrated estates. Slaves who labored on estates that were less connected to extensive trade networks probably endured periods in which emergency foodstuffs were not procured for them.

Planters occasionally set aside some lands on estate to cultivate provision crops as a strategy to ensure against scarcity. On the eve of the hurricane season in 1787, Simon Taylor urged one of his Jamaican overseers to put in “an immense quantity of Cocos, and have in Orange Cove bottoms Potatoes, to prevent want even in Case of Storms.”¹⁰³ It would be difficult to determine how many planters in the provision-ground colonies followed Taylor’s lead. After all, he was a land-rich resident proprietor who would have had more ground at his disposal. Taylor also had long and recently reinforced memories of scarcity and famine on the island, making him perhaps more willing to cultivate food than absentee proprietors or managers who had newly set out. Trevor Burnard has recently characterized Taylor as being more careful than other Jamaican planters in provisioning and otherwise maintaining slaves on his own properties as well as those he managed. Burnard has contrasted Taylor’s managerial practices against those of a less well-heeled contemporary manager named Kelly. The latter man favored working the slaves he managed harder in order to realize the promise of quick riches offered by bumper crops of sugar. But Burnard is careful to note that Taylor did not pay more

¹⁰² William Shand to George Watson Taylor, Spanish Town, Jamaica, 27 March 1819, STP, ICS 101 8/E/4. Shand would revise the prognosis two months later: “I heartily rejoice with you that the storm has not been followed by such evil consequences in general as might have been expected the weather that followed was fortunately favorable and has in most situations brought some roots, pulse & corn to maturity.” William Shand to George Watson Taylor, Spanish Town, Jamaica, 9 May 1819, STP, ICS 101 8/E/8.

¹⁰³ Simon Taylor to Lady Taylor, Kingston, Jamaica, 21 September 1787, STP, ICS 101 3/B/14.

attention to feeding slaves out of any “humanitarian” concern. Rather, Taylor took the long view, favoring well-provisioned and healthy slave labor forces as surer additions to the capital value of properties than annual crops of sugar.¹⁰⁴

Moreover, the increased production of food on estates was closely linked to compelling slaves to work harder. Jamaican attorney John Shand reported near-famine conditions on the two sugar estates that he had recently taken possession of in drought-prone Vere Parish in 1802-3.¹⁰⁵ Shand worried about scant supplies of Guinea corn (sorghum) on the estates, which was the staple provision crop for both slaves and cattle: “It will only keep a few months and I must from time to time find the best succedaneum [substitute] that the markets afford.”¹⁰⁶ Eager to maintain the working order of the estates, Shand purchased corn at island markets in April 1803 in addition to ordering salt fish through the London house—underscoring the managerial imperative of ensuring colonial as well as transatlantic supplies of food in order to cope with scarcity.¹⁰⁷ In June, on the eve of the “hungry season,” Shand wrote that he would have slaves cut down and chip twenty tons of logwood on Exeter for extra revenue.¹⁰⁸ He hoped to use this money to purchase grain at market. He would also have slaves plant more Guinea corn on the

¹⁰⁴ Burnard, *Planters, Merchants, and Slaves: Plantation Societies in British America, 1650-1820* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2015), 135-7. On the dispute between Taylor and the manager Kelly, see also Byrd, *Captives and Voyagers*, 72-3.

¹⁰⁵ On provision cultivation on Vere estates: Higman, *Slave Populations of the British Caribbean*, 211.

¹⁰⁶ John Shand to Abraham Henry Chambers, Spanish Town, Jamaica, 11 December 1802, *Chambers v. Goldwin*, C 112/163, TNA. Shand continued to purchase provisions at Kingston market while they were at “moderate” prices with “ready money” through the first half of 1803. John Shand to Abraham Henry Chambers, Spanish Town, Jamaica, 15 January 1803, *Chambers v. Goldwin*, C 112/163, TNA.

¹⁰⁷ John Shand to Abraham Henry Chambers, 2 April 1803, *Chambers v. Goldwin*, C 112/163, TNA.

¹⁰⁸ John Shand to Abraham Henry Chambers, 3 June 1803, *Chambers v. Goldwin*, C 112/163, TNA.

estates.¹⁰⁹ By September, Shand reported that food prices had become “extravagant and the supply precarious” due to war, but believed that the Guinea corn would render the estates “independent of speculators & exempt from fears of actual want until the usual period for reaping another crop.”¹¹⁰

Food cultivation on estate lands constituted part of the managerial repertoire of command and control: exhausted laborers were not always allowed to choose between food and rest. Planters often compelled slaves to work their grounds on Sundays under the surveillance of drivers and overseers.¹¹¹ Indeed, what planters considered “humane” management practices were never removed from the social realities of coercion inherent in master-slave relations. In 1786-7, Simon Taylor wrote in a letter to his sister about a young manager, probably an overseer, named Stewart, who had apparently alienated slaves on a Jamaican estate. Taylor was sanguine that Stewart could reconcile with the slaves: “I have spoke and wrote to Stewart the same as if he was my own Son, to take every Care of the Negroes, and treat them with Humanity, and that no Cruelty of any kind to be used to them, as he is indefatigable in putting in provisions for them, I am hopefull when I go down next to find they like him, as much as they hated him, before.” Several months later, Taylor reported, “the Negroes were entirely reconciled to Stewart and were [in] exceeding good order.” It is difficult to discern Taylor’s precise meaning of how Stewart “reconciled” those slaves to him. Taylor and other planters might have genuinely

¹⁰⁹ Shand feared that a renewal of hostilities following the Peace of Amiens would raise food prices: “During war the Speculators at Kingston in that article are extensive & the consequences often destructive to the community.” John Shand to Abraham Henry Chambers, Spanish Town, Jamaica, 21 May 1803, *Chambers v. Goldwin*, C 112/163, TNA.

¹¹⁰ John Shand to Abraham Henry Chambers, Spanish Town, Jamaica, 10 September 1803, *Chambers v. Goldwin*, C 112/163, TNA.

¹¹¹ Grenada planter Alexander Campbell testified that slaves on his estates were “compelled” to work their grounds and that grounds were inspected regularly: *Minutes of the evidence*, 179. See also Roberts, *Slavery and the Enlightenment*, 85, 103.

wished to enhance plantation food supply and tend to what they considered the proper health or “comfort” of slaves. But their means of doing so remained compulsion, and the desired end was to ensure a more efficient and therefore profitable working order for estates. For as Taylor wrote of the slaves under Stewart’s management, “do the Work of the Estate they must.”¹¹²

Granaries for maize, guinea corn, yams, eddoes, and other preserves were another preventative against want. Planters might even hope to sell stored surplus foods to neighboring estates. On the two sugar estates in Vere, John Shand was shocked to find that previous managers had left nothing but a small amount of Indian corn on hand, forcing him to purchase an additional £350 sterling of American corn at Kingston market. Wary of purchasing eighty to ninety bushels of Indian corn weekly, which was not conducive to storing, Shand instead constructed granaries for Guinea corn. He estimated that each granary could store 4,000 bushels, good for two years’ supply for slaves on the estates with enough left over to hopefully fetch £2500 from neighboring estates.¹¹³ But planters frequently complained about the ineffectualness of storing foods in West Indian climates. Barbados manager Sampson Wood claimed that only millet would keep in granaries on Newton estate, and not Indian corn, peas, potatoes, or pumpkins.¹¹⁴ Weevils had earlier consumed the entirety of the stored Indian corn on Newton only three or four

¹¹² Simon Taylor to Lady Taylor, Kingston, Jamaica, 13 August 1786, STP, ICS 101 3/B/2; Simon Taylor to Lady Taylor, Lyssons, Jamaica, 8 March 1787, STP, ICS 101 3/B/7. On these letters, see also Byrd, *Captives and Voyagers*, 81-3.

¹¹³ John Shand to Abraham Chambers, Vere, Jamaica, 11 December 1802; John Shand to Abraham Chambers, 15 January 1803; John Shand to Abraham Chambers, 21 March 1804, *Chambers v. Goldwin*, C 112/163, TNA.

¹¹⁴ Sampson Wood to Thomas Lane, Barbados, 28 October 1801, Newton Family Papers, MS 523/457, Senate House Library, University of London Archives.

months after it had been harvested.¹¹⁵ In print, planter Gilbert Franklyn would even argue that food was better stored in slave huts, where smoke from fires that slaves kept burning all night would keep away insects and moisture.¹¹⁶

Insects, rats, and other pests often feasted on provision crops before they could be harvested and stored. Planters were generally baffled at how to combat them. In September 1797, Sampson Wood described one promising crop of Indian corn that had been “totally destroyed” by borer worm and drought.¹¹⁷ Three years later Wood claimed that cultivating provisions was like “throwing the Seed away” due to dry weather and “exterminating insects.” He identified the two most voracious predators as “the small caterpillar & a little brown fly.” Wood believed that they were “produced in the upper regions of the air & beaten down by the hard showers—for we generally see them thickest immediately consequent to such a rain.” According to Wood, they devoured entire fields of corn in a day or night.¹¹⁸ Still, planters remained clear in both correspondence and in manuals on plantation management about what they regarded as the more valuable crops to protect against insects. Describing how the borer worm had “laid waste” to sugarcane and provision crops in the Leeward Islands during four consecutive years in the late 1780s, Joshua Peterkin’s *Treatise on Planting* (1790) suggested spreading canes more thinly in rows in order to create more “ambient air”

¹¹⁵ Sampson Wood to Thomas Lane, Barbados, 26 September 1801, Newton Family Papers, MS 523/456, Senate House Library, University of London Archives.

¹¹⁶ Gilbert Franklyn, *Observations, occasioned by the attempts made in England to effect the abolition of the slave trade; shewing, the manner in which Negroes are treated in the British colonies in the West-Indies* (Kingston, Jamaica, 1789), 31-33.

¹¹⁷ Sampson Wood to John Lane, Barbados, 8 September 1797, Newton Family Papers, MS 523/321, Senate House Library, University of London Archives.

¹¹⁸ Sampson Wood to Thomas Lane, Barbados, 21 October 1800, Newton Family Papers, MS 523/423, Senate House Library, University of London Archives.

between the stalks. He also recommended that slaves fumigate the canes regularly. But Peterkin mentioned few special precautions for food crops.¹¹⁹

Planters also relied on neighboring estates for provisions and other supplies, especially if there had been failures in shipping. In August 1810, Simon Taylor assured his commission house that he was not inconvenienced when some plantation stores had failed to arrive earlier in the year—“being on very good terms with my Neighbours I was able to borrow from them.”¹²⁰ Planters probably purchased provisions and other goods from neighbors more commonly than they borrowed them. Accounts for one year (December 1797-December 1798) from John Tharp’s Jamaica estates showed purchases of corn, wine, ale, flour, pork, rum, rice, and turtles from several different properties—Good Hope, Covey, Wates, Potosi, Pantre Pant, Windsor Pen—along with merchants James Galloway & Co. (Falmouth), wharfmaster Henry Davis, and the 83rd Detachment.¹²¹ Further, James A. Delle has demonstrated that managers of the Jamaican cattle estate Marshall’s Pen made frequent purchases of foodstuffs from estate slaves as well as those on other properties in the 1810s. These purchases included fresh pork, poultry, and “corn to plant.”¹²²

Nonetheless, relying too much or too often on neighboring properties for foodstuffs could signal agricultural vulnerability and the impending failure of estates. Local plantation-provisioning networks could be easily overstretched. The history of

¹¹⁹ Joshua Peterkin, *A Treatise on Planting, from the Origin of the Semen to Ebullition; with a Correct Mode of Distillation, and a Melioration on the Whole Process Progressively. Dedicated to the Planters of the Leeward Charribbee Islands* (Basseterre, St. Christopher’s: Edward Luther Low, 1790), 7-13.

¹²⁰ Simon Taylor to Robert Taylor, Kingston, Jamaica, 18 August 1810, STP, ICS 101/1/J/15.

¹²¹ John Tharp’s Accounts Current, 31 December 1797 to 31 December 1798, Tharp Papers, R/55/7/125/2, Cambridgeshire Archives, Cambridge, UK.

¹²² James A. Delle, *The Colonial Caribbean: Landscapes of Power in the Plantation System* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2014), 159-64.

three interconnected cotton estates that made up the absentee proprietor Lord Seaforth's "Berbice Concerns"—Brahan, Kintail, and Seawell—illustrate how food insecurity could fatally undermine plantation enterprise. Coastal estates in Berbice were situated on an alluvial flood plain backed by swamps and threaded with tidal creeks and rivers. Lands became inundated in the rainy season and during the high tides of spring (though thick-rooted mangrove trees provided some natural protection from flooding). British speculators eager to create landscapes of cotton and sugar plantations would adopt the Dutch technique of draining land known as *empoldering*, which involved building mud dams around square tracts and installing sluices, or *cokers*, to drain land and control waterflow. Empoldering was hard labor. Slaves first felled trees and uprooted stumps, which one contemporary French writer referred to as "a long and difficult work, especially when [lands] are covered with Mangrove trees." Even when successfully drained, "polders" would have to be continuously protected from rising inland waters on "back" dams and floodtides from the coastal "front." Planters expected this unstable and unpredictable environment to yield reliable crops of cotton, sugar, and food.¹²³

Seaforth dispatched his personal secretary, Peter Fairbairn, to manage the three new cotton estates. Fairbairn promised Seaforth that two of the estates would be self-sufficient in provisions by July 1804.¹²⁴ Fairbairn initially hired a task gang to finish the empoldering work on Brahan's plantain ground, which involved clearing "heavy wood,"

¹²³ On British speculation in Berbice, see James Rodway, *Guiana: British, Dutch, and French* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1912), 26, 37, 39-40, 252-254; David Alston, "'Very Rapid and Splendid Fortunes?' Highland Scots in Berbice (Guyana) in the Early Nineteenth Century," *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness*, LXIII (2002-2004), 214-232. For a contemporary manual on empoldering land: Daniel Lescallier, *The Method of Draining Lands Overflowed by the Tides, such as Is Practised at Surinam, and Demerary. Extracted from a Work of Mr. Lescallier, and Translated into English by Himself* (Roseau, Dominica: 1802), JCBL.

¹²⁴ Peter Fairbairn to Lord Seaforth, Kingston, Demerara, 15 Feb 1803, f. 53-59, GD 46/17/23, NAS; Fairbairn to Seaforth, Demerara, 1 May 1802, GD 46/17/35, NAS.

a task that otherwise would delay the estate gang from putting in cotton. Fairbairn justified this “heavy Sum” (about £1000): “it is not to be considered as an Expence, but as an addition to the Value of the Estate.” He further proposed purchasing twenty seasoned male slaves to form “an able Gang of Trenchers,” which would enable him to allocate “the women & Boys” to tending young cotton.¹²⁵ Then in late 1803, drought laid waste to Brahan’s plantain walk. Fairbairn tried to establish plantains on another 100 acres, but wrote that slaves “cannot put a spade into it at present.”¹²⁶ “Sore drought” continued into early 1804. “The Lands of course get harder,” Fairbairn wrote, “& Labour more difficult.”¹²⁷ While Brahan’s plantain walk once had several hundred bunches of maturing plantains, Fairbairn wrote, “now they are so stunted that they will come to nothing without immediate Rains.”¹²⁸

In later years, heavy rains and flooding put pressure on Brahan’s “uncertain drainage” and flooded the plantain grounds.¹²⁹ In 1808, one “heavy season” leveled the walk “in common with all the Walks in that part of the Coast.”¹³⁰ Fairbairn had slaves trench a canal to hold back rising water and “Banks of mud” pushing up on the dams, but only “at considerable labour & expence.”¹³¹ Following the failure of the plantain walk on Kintail in the first half of 1810, Fairbairn spent £100 on thirty barrels of “American

¹²⁵ Particulars relative to the Berbice Concerns, f. 125, GD 46/17/24, NAS.

¹²⁶ Peter Fairbairn to Lord Seaforth, Plantation Brahan, 21 December 1803, pgs. 283-285, GD 46/17/23, NAS.

¹²⁷ Peter Fairbairn to Lord Seaforth, Plantation Brahan, 18 Jan 1804, pgs. 290-295, GD 46/17/23, NAS.

¹²⁸ Peter Fairbairn to Lord Seaforth, Plantation Brahan, 18 Jan 1804, pgs. 290-295, GD 46/17/23, NAS.

¹²⁹ Peter Fairbairn to Lord Seaforth, Berbice, 17 May 1811, pg. 257-9, GD 46/17/37, NAS.

¹³⁰ Peter Fairbairn to Lord Seaforth, Berbice, 5 Nov 1808, f. 338, GD 46/17/31, NAS.

¹³¹ Peter Fairbairn to Colin Mackenzie, 7 Nov 1808, f. 342-5, GD 46/17/31, NAS.

Beans.”¹³² He also attempted to grow rice as a supplemental crop on one of the estates. He wanted to construct a mill and follow the North American method of shelling and weighing the grain, but noted: “I have not hitherto met with any one who ever gave me any information on the subject.” Instead, he would rely on the knowledge of slaves under his management: “Ours is the African mode,— pounding in a mortar.”¹³³

As early as January 1804, Fairbairn was relying on neighboring estates for provisions and doling out imported North American flour to slaves.¹³⁴ Predictably, slaves on the estates grew sick from malnourishment and changes in diet. Many contracted bowel disorders from consuming too much imported flour and beans during long seasons of drought. Fairbairn blamed the sickness on the culinary habits of the slaves themselves: “Dysenteries prevail amongst the Negroes in consequence both from the change of Food, & that in general they cannot cook flour properly.” He promised Seaforth that he would go “in Search of materials to erect an Oven for baking the flour in bread, which will render it wholesome & nutritious.”¹³⁵ But sickness continued on the estates. In September 1805, Fairbairn reported the deaths of two slaves: “the former died of dropsy, & the latter of worms.”¹³⁶ Two month later, he mentioned more cases of worms, “both I fancy being peculiar to them [the slaves] in general & from the vegetable diet they principally live

¹³² Peter Fairbairn to Lord Seaforth, Berbice, 24 May 1810, f. 296, GD 46/17/35, NAS.

¹³³ Peter Fairbairn to Lord Seaforth, 29 September 1810, f. 196, GD 46/17/32, NAS.

¹³⁴ Instructions for the Manager, Plantation Brahan, 1 April 1805, f. 188-9, GD 46/17/25; Instructions for the Manager, Plantation Kintail, 1 April 1805, f. 190-91, GD 46/17/25, NAS; Peter Fairbairn to Lord Seaforth, Plantation Brahan, 18 Jan 1804, pgs. 290-295, GD 46/17/23. By April of that year Fairbairn noted, “flour is almost the universal food” on the coast: Peter Fairbairn to Lord Seaforth, Plantation Brahan, 26 April 1804, GD 46/17/23, NAS.

¹³⁵ Peter Fairbairn to Lord Seaforth, Plantation Brahan, 22 Feb 1804, GD 46/17/23, NAS.

¹³⁶ Peter Fairbairn to Lord Seaforth, Plantation Brahan, 28 Sept 1805, GD 46/17/27, NAS.

on.”¹³⁷ For their part, many of slaves under Fairbairn’s management figured that they could provision themselves better in the woods.¹³⁸ He reported: “A Settlement has been discovered on the Demerary Side of the Abary, about a days Journey from hence, (where about 50 Runaways have collected), consisting of Plantains, Rice, Tobacco, Cassava, &c, &c, &c, in abundance.”¹³⁹ But not all slaves found better sustenance while on the run. Fairbairn would remark about two runaways who returned to the estates: “The Boys came first, heartily tired of their excursion, & as lean as sticks.”¹⁴⁰

Fairbairn was not managing scarcity on the Berbice Concerns—he was scarcely managing them at all. Bills for slave provisions weighed heavily in the plantation ledgers. In 1804, contingent expenses for Brahan tallied 37,490.16.5 Holland guilders, of which 20,140.19.11 were for slave provisions.¹⁴¹ In 1807-8, Fairbairn drew bills of exchange on London commission merchants Inglis, Ellice & Co. totaling nearly £700 that were solely for the purchase of plantains.¹⁴² He later reckoned that expenses for plantains had averaged at least £800 annually.¹⁴³ Fairbairn would quickly find himself answering to increasingly skeptical correspondents in Britain about his management of the properties.

¹³⁷ Peter Fairbairn to Lord Seaforth, Demerara, 2 Nov 1805, GD 46/17/27, NAS.

¹³⁸ Several slaves belonging to the estates had run away not long after their arrival. A letter from January 1804 notes that one of Seaforth’s slaves was caught in the Bush, and that the “desertion has been Serious in this quarter.” Peter Fairbairn to Lord Seaforth, Plantation Brahan, 18 Jan 1804, pgs. 290-295, GD 46/17/23, NAS.

¹³⁹ List of Negroes purchased for Plantation Brahan, and their State, 1st January 1804, pg. 9-10, GD 46/17/25, NAS.

¹⁴⁰ Peter Fairbairn to Lord Seaforth, Berbice, 1 Jan 1808, f. 1-2, GD 46/17/31, NAS.

¹⁴¹ States of Plantations Brahan & Kintail to 31 December 1804, GD 46/17/25, f. 164-5, NAS.

¹⁴² There were also bills drawn for purchasing fish, salt, and tobacco. Fairbairn relied on six local merchants for foodstuffs and other supplies, and these were not inconsiderable sums: contingent expenses for that crop totaled £2234.4.12. (One of the plantain expenses of £50 was for the crop 1805-6.) Bills Drawn on Messrs Inglis, Ellice & Co. merchants in London, to account of the Current Expences of Plantation Brahan & Kintail & former arrears, f. 177, GD 46/17/31, NAS.

¹⁴³ Peter Fairbairn to Lord Seaforth, Berbice, 8 Feb 1811, pgs. 50-53, GD 46/17/37, NAS.

He defended himself initially by telling Seaforth that coastal estates in Berbice were too prone to drought, unlike those inland that featured “rich Coffee Land, peculiarly adapted to Plantains, well sheltered, & often visited with Rain.”¹⁴⁴ In 1808, he wrote to London commission merchants Inglis, Ellice & Co. that new properties were “unavoidably attended with greater Expence, in Buildings, Provisions, &c.,” but assured them that “Braham has begun to supply itself with Plantains,” while Kintail, “has a beautiful young Walk, which will be in bearing in a few weeks.”¹⁴⁵ By 1808, however, even Seaforth suspected Fairbairn of “embezzling” money.¹⁴⁶ Fairbairn grew desperate in defending his management of the estates. “The Negroes must be fed, clothed, &c.,” he lamented to Lady Seaforth in a letter from 1808, “& generally in Seasons when the Crop is most defective, the Expences are the greatest, for what affects the one is commonly injurious to the other.”¹⁴⁷ Food expenses proved so vexatious that Fairbairn tried to convince Lord Seaforth to purchase an additional estate for cultivating plantains to be called (appropriately) We’ll See. One of Seaforth’s investment partners nixed the idea.¹⁴⁸

In 1809, Inglis, Ellice & Co. reduced the amount of money that Seaforth could draw on them while tightening his repayment schedule to three months—an essentially impossible window to speculate on the long returns of cotton.¹⁴⁹ To keep his house of cards standing, Seaforth opened a line of credit with the Liverpool merchants John

¹⁴⁴ Peter Fairbairn to Lord Seaforth, Plantation Braham, 17 Jan 1805, f. 6, GD 46/17/27, NAS.

¹⁴⁵ Peter Fairbairn to Inglis, Ellice & Co., Berbice, 1 Jan 1808, f. 34-35, GD 46/17/31. Fairbairn was in fact anxious that the house would stop answering bills of exchange: Peter Fairbairn to Lord Seaforth Berbice, 1 August 1808, f. 275, GD 46/17/31, NAS.

¹⁴⁶ Peter Fairbairn to Colin Mackenzie, 7 Nov 1808, f. 342-5, GD 46/17/31, NAS.

¹⁴⁷ Peter Fairbairn to Lady Seaforth, 1 Feb 1810, f. 249-50, GD 46/17/35, NAS.

¹⁴⁸ Peter Fairbairn to Lord Seaforth, Berbice, 5 May 1807, f. 183-4, GD 46/17/31, NAS.

¹⁴⁹ Inglis to Lord Seaforth, London, 10 June 1809, GD 46/17/35, NAS.

Gladstone & Co., much to the frustration of Inglis, Ellice, who could now expect split consignments from the already poorly producing properties.¹⁵⁰ Other investors in the Berbice Concerns began to see the writing on the wall—or, to be more precise, noticed the dreary numbers in account books.¹⁵¹ In 1812, Colin Mackenzie had discovered that debts amounted to £7,000 on Kintail and Brahan and another £1,057 on Seawell. Mackenzie asked Seaforth to dissolve the partnership and release the original investors, as opposed to “Setting out on a fresh Scale of advances” with Fairbairn at the helm.¹⁵² In 1811, the trustees of Seaforth’s estate advised him to sell off the Berbice Concerns.¹⁵³ Undeterred, Seaforth ordered Fairbairn to shuttle all of his slaves to only one of the estates, to keep planting cotton and plantains, and to sell any surplus provisions to cover the salaries of white employees. In 1812, he confided to Fairbairn, “I am still confident the speculation will turn out a great thing,” and wanted that the estates should be “maintained” until markets improved.¹⁵⁴

Seaforth died in Scotland in 1815. Surveying the failure of the “Berbice Concerns,” neighboring planter James Fraser described “a train of Disappointments, a Disheartening Detail of Plans fondly conceived & ever failing, of calculations of Expences ever eroneous, because exceeded immensely from unforeseen calamities.” Fraser argued that Fairbairn had been reckless in neglecting the plantain walks on Seaforth’s estates “in preference to pushing in Cotton.” According to Fraser, Fairbairn

¹⁵⁰ John Gladstone to Lord Seaforth, 48 Russell Square, London, May 1812, p. 285-7, GD 46/17/37, NAS.

¹⁵¹ Robert Anderson to Lord Seaforth, 9 April 1810, GD 46/17/36, NAS.

¹⁵² Colin Mackenzie to Lord Seaforth, Edinburgh, 9 June 1812, pgs. 333-341, GD 46/17/37, NAS.

¹⁵³ Seaforth’s financial problems were not confined to the colonies. Due in part to declining income on his Highland properties in Scotland, he owed the staggering sum of £128,514.17.1 sterling to various creditors. Minute of a Meeting of Lord Seaforth's Trustees, 9 July 1811, GD 46/17/36, NAS.

¹⁵⁴ Lord Seaforth to Peter Fairbairn, Richmond, 9 Sept 1811, f. 474-77, GD 46/17/37, NAS.

had gambled on purchasing “the superfluity of the produce from the [Abary] river plantain walk” near Kintail, but when that walk had failed in the drought of 1803-4, he was left without any recourse for food supply.¹⁵⁵ Compounding problems, even the initial math on the investments had been faulty. Projections for cotton proceeds had been calculated “not on an average of a few years, but principally on the Crop 1799, 1800” — years of unusually large yields and high prices.¹⁵⁶ But what had transpired on the Berbice concerns was one logical outcome of West Indian enterprise. Fairbairn’s difficulties managing the properties illustrated the tenuous nature of yielding both profit and sustenance in unstable colonial environments. Seaforth and Fairbairn believed that slaves could subsist themselves in what was in fact a highly vulnerable and imperfectly manipulated landscape. Once high expenses for provisions were woven into annual estates’ accounts, merchants would begin pulling out the threads of credit that held together the entire fabric of the speculation.

Planters and managers recognized that sugar estates and other West Indian properties needed to produce provision crops to keep slaves alive in addition to cash crops to make planters and merchants rich. Accordingly, the management of slave work routines and the cultivation of sugarcane invariably necessitated that at least some attention be paid to how and when slaves were provisioned in periods in- and out-of-crop. Some planters and managers even touted their abilities to keep slaves well provisioned at the same time as they compelled them to produce cash crops. Here, notions of “humanity” and “improvement” often served as rhetorical handmaidens for the perpetuation of forced labor. But food scarcity remained both an annually expected event

¹⁵⁵ James Fraser to Lord Seaforth, Inverness, 14 Feb 1812, GD 46/17/36, NAS.

¹⁵⁶ Peter Fairbairn to Lord Seaforth, Berbice, 7 April 180[8], f. 143-144, GD 46/17/31, NAS.

and a fairly normal occurrence in the West Indies. Famine often lurked its head on both individual properties and across entire regions and colonies. These issues—and the very vocabulary that resident planters and managers used to describe them—would increasingly surface in correspondence between colonial governors and London officials about the management of scarcity at an imperial level.

Governing Scarcity

Governing in the West Indian colonies before, during, and after the war years of the 1790s-1800s centered on the issue of managing and attempting to control scarcity. Indeed, whites in the islands generally feared that the social order was at stake whenever slaves were not given customary rations, especially around the Christmas holiday. The official curtailment of slave provisions and other plantation necessities in U.S. vessels following the American Revolution ensured that no single set of governing policies and practices would keep the islands free from want. Rather, governors, legislators, and other colonial residents turned to a variety of touch-and-go methods of procuring necessities in times of scarcity, including smuggling and, more importantly, the temporary suspension of imperial trade restrictions. Opening ports to U.S. and other neutral vessels remained the most reliable way to get foodstuffs and other goods into starving colonies, even in places where governors and planters had made concerted efforts to render colonies more self-sufficient. However, controversies over the opening of ports often strained relations between governors, local assemblies, and the metropolitan government.

Smuggling was one means by which food scarcity was alleviated in the islands. Evidence suggests that contraband foodstuffs and other goods arrived in large quantities

from U.S. ports in the years between 1784 and 1793. Smuggling had long been commonplace between the islands of different imperial powers in the Lesser Antilles, which were connected along maritime routes due to both their geographic proximity to one another and long-standing shared cultures of illicit activity. Documentation on smuggling in the Leeward and Windward islands is extensive especially for the period immediately following the American Revolution. In the eyes of U.S. merchants seeking trade opportunities within semi-enclosed imperial trading regimes, shipping provisions and other proscribed goods might have been regarded more as a form of “free-trade-by-other-means” than smuggling *per se*. After all, many merchant houses in New England and other provision-producing regions had retained extensive numbers of correspondents in the islands through kinship and business networks established during the colonial period. These connections would prove impossible to sever completely for British imperial officials.¹⁵⁷

One anecdote highlights how illicit trade could be an everyday calculation for American traders in the region. In 1806, Rhode Island merchants Brown & Ives dispatched agent John Bowers to the north side of Jamaica in the brig *Argus*, which carried a cargo of dry fish, cornmeal, flour, wood products, and cheese. Arriving at the port of Falmouth, Bowers was apprehensive that his cargo would not be allowed entry after talking with another Rhode Island captain whose vessel was seized for carrying

¹⁵⁷ According to Alice B. Keith, smuggling was “a large part” of U.S. trade with the British West Indian colonies, “but it was particularly common from 1783 to 1793.” Alice B. Keith, “Relaxations in the British Restrictions on the American Trade with the British West Indies, 1783-1802,” *The Journal of Modern History*, vol. xx, no. 1, (March 1948), 5. On New England merchants and smuggling, see Roberts, “Yankey dodle will do verry well here,” 83-88. On the eastern Caribbean, see Julius Scott, “Crisscrossing Empires: Ships, Sailors, and Resistance in the Lesser Antilles in the Eighteenth Century,” *The Lesser Antilles in the Age of European Expansion*, Robert L. Paquette and Stanley Engerman, eds. (Gainesville, FL: Univ. of Florida Press, 1996), 141.

cheese, which had not been allowed under a recent governor's proclamation. However, Bowers went ashore and was assured by a local merchant that his goods would not be detained. Proceeding to Montego Bay, Bowers sold off the entirety of the cargo with the exception of the cheese. He had originally intended next to send the *Argus* to Wilmington to pick up lumber and staves, but he observed that prices for those goods were currently low in Jamaica. Instead, he figured that it would be better to send the ship back to Newport to pick up "a Deck load of horses & mules with white pine lumber." He concluded that he did not think that the other goods that could be legally sent down were worth the cost—"Unless it were Counterband goods beef & Pork are extremely Dear here Irish pork is now selling at 20£ per barrel."¹⁵⁸ Bowers' casual reference to sending "Counterband goods" is evidence of the willingness of American merchants to disregard British trade laws when it suited their convenience.

Much more vital to keeping up island food supply than smuggling was the practice of temporarily opening colonial ports to neutral vessels carrying provisions, lumber, and other goods. From the perspective of governors, the selective discarding of imperial trade laws and the opening of colonial ports served as the most flexible response to want. When planters and other white colonists pressured governors to open ports to neutral shipping, they often drew a connection between food shortage and unrest among slave populations. These fears particularly surfaced as planters and managers anxiously awaited the arrival of supply ships carrying special "allowances" of salted beef, pork,

¹⁵⁸ John Bowers to Brown & Ives, Montego Bay, Jamaica, 23 December 1806, Box 492, Folder 6, BFBR, JCBL. Subsequent correspondence from Bowers shows that the *Argus* did sail for Newport to load up on horses rather than risk a voyage carrying beef and pork into Jamaican ports: John Bowers to Brown & Ives, Falmouth, Jamaica, 1 April 1807, Box 492, Folder 7, BFBR, JCBL.

tobacco, clothing, and other “indulgences” for slaves during the Christmas holidays.¹⁵⁹ In December 1793, Lieutenant-Governor Ninian Home of Grenada wrote to Whitehall: “The Island contains upwards of 30,000 negroes, and in the crop season it is peculiarly necessary to allow them Fish, as well from humane considerations as with a view to preserve among them a continuance of their present quiet and orderly behavior.”¹⁶⁰

Actual slave rebellions seldom resulted directly from food scarcity, but the close association between food security and social tranquility remained fixed in the official mindset throughout this period. Grenada’s authorities had frequently issued proclamations to open ports to foreign vessels for provisions in the early 1790s when the island was feeling the effects of wartime trade disruptions and the arrival of French refugees from Martinique.¹⁶¹ Then from 1795 to 1796, the event known as Fedon’s Rebellion turned much of the island into a wasteland of burned buildings, destroyed crops, and dead, runaway, or missing slaves.¹⁶² Grenada’s lieutenant-governor sent frequent reports to London about the progress of the “Insurgents” in burning and plundering estates near the port of St. George’s, where the majority of white British colonists had sought refuge. Out in the field, one army major reported to a superior: “The Estates are now burning close to us so that all our Prospect of Provisions must in future

¹⁵⁹ See for instance the explicit link made between “Famine” and slave rebellion following a hurricane in Lieutenant-Governor Alured Clarke to Lord Sydney, 15 August 1784, Jamaica, f. 27, CO 137/84, TNA. See also Dirks, *Black Saturnalia*, 170-173.

¹⁶⁰ Letter of Ninian Home, Grenada, 31 December 1793, CO 101/33, TNA.

¹⁶¹ On scarcity in the island and relaxations in trade laws, see the following letters of Ninian Home to Whitehall in CO 101/33, TNA: 28 December 1792, 15 February 1793, 6 April 1793, 2 May 1793, 31 December 1793. Home disallowed the importation of foreign salt fish (but still allowed for lumber) by March 1794, an act approved by his superiors at Whitehall; see Home’s letter of 13 March 1794 and the reply of 1 May 1794 in CO 101/33, TNA.

¹⁶² On Fedon’s Rebellion, see Michael Craton, *Testing the Chains: Resistance to Slavery in the British West Indies* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 2009), 183-90, 207-10.

come from the Ships.”¹⁶³ Dire conditions persisted into the nineteenth century, which forced the opening of ports to neutral vessels on a continual basis. In 1797, one lieutenant-governor wrote to Whitehall: “the extreme distress of the Island particularly for negroe Provisions (many Estates having been deprived of the opportunity of Planting any) I hope will justify the extending the Period [of keeping the ports open] to Six Months.”¹⁶⁴ In 1805, another governor wrote that Grenada’s ports had been open “without intermission” since the rebellion, and that the practice could not “be suddenly stopt.”¹⁶⁵

Metropolitan officials frequently reprimanded governors if they felt that they were suspending the Navigation Acts too frequently or too freely. Of particular concern to the home government was ensuring that islanders could only barter rum and molasses for American goods and not sugar; this was especially the case in the first phase of war against France, when sugar was scarce in British markets. For their part, American captains and merchants often refused taking rum and molasses and instead demanded sugar for provisions and other supplies. Further constraining the trading abilities of West Indian residents was the notorious scarcity of circulating money in island economies. Faced with these challenges, governors often prioritized staving off severe want over strict adherence to imperial trade laws. Governors in Jamaica, Barbados, St. Vincent, and the Leeward Islands would be reprimanded for allowing colonists to barter sugar for plantation necessities from Americans when local cash supply was tight. British ministers’ punitive threats against governors generally constituted removal from office

¹⁶³ Major H.A. Wright to Lieut.-Colonel Campbell, Observatory Hill, Grenada, No. 7, f. 64, CO 101/34, TNA.

¹⁶⁴ Alexander Houstoun to the Duke of Portland, 21 February 1797, Grenada, f. 28, CO 101/35, TNA.

¹⁶⁵ Letter of Maitland, 13 August 1805, CO 101/42, TNA.

and heavy fines. However, it does not appear that the home government followed through on any threats to remove governors who suspended trade laws in the war years.¹⁶⁶

Anglo-American diplomatic and trade relations continued to put the British West Indian colonies at a disadvantage as the war years dragged on. Negotiations over the Jay Treaty in the mid-1790s had failed to resolve the issue of U.S. trade to the British colonies. During the brief period of the suspension of hostilities between Britain and France known as the Peace of Amiens (1802-3), U.S. officials again sought to place American trading rights to the West Indian colonies on a more “firm basis,” but the renewed outbreak of warfare put those negotiations on hold. In 1806, British and American governments flirted with the notion of ending trading restrictions with one another, but Great Britain ultimately decided to keep West Indian ports protected. The opposition of British shipping interests to greater relaxations in U.S. trade with the West Indies led the Privy Council to uphold bans on the bartering of sugar for provisions and lumber—much to the chagrin of colonial residents. Britain’s Caribbean colonies thereafter remained utterly dependent on outside supplies. Food scarcity and famine remained crippling problems, especially in the Leeward Islands, St. Lucia, Trinidad, and St. Vincent. From 1807 to 1809, the mostly successful implementation of the Embargo Act further exacerbated conditions and laid bare the inability of British North America to adequately supply the islands with salt fish and other necessities.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁶ Ragatz, *Fall of the Planter Class*, 229-36.

¹⁶⁷ Ragatz, *Fall of the Planter Class*, 230-32 (Jay Treaty), 297-301, 320-326 (U.S. Embargo); Roberts, ““Yankey dodle will do verry well here,”” 279 (Jay Treaty), 305-6 (Embargo). British West Indian ports faced stiff competition in attracting U.S. shipping from similarly crisis-prone French and Spanish colonies, where Americans were more often able to barter provisions and other goods for sugar and coffee. British warships and privateers captured scores of American merchant vessels carrying goods to the French islands, but the threat of interdiction was not enough to halt the trade entirely. James A. Dun, ““What

As part of general parliamentary inquiries into the causes and consequences of what was termed “West Indian distress,” governors were asked to provide statistical returns drawn from customs house records on the importation of foodstuffs, lumber, livestock, and other selected commodities from 1794 to 1805. (Three parliamentary committees gathered evidence on colonial “distress” and published six reports on the matter from 1807 to 1808. They suggested a variety of fixes for sugar production and other managerial concerns to help alleviate the economic problems that plagued the islands, but Parliament did not grant more lenient trading privileges.)¹⁶⁸ Returns from Dominica demonstrated deep reliance on U.S. foodstuffs and other goods (Table 1.1). Britain’s West Indian colonies were also connected to one another through the organization of “relief” shipments of provisions and other goods on the part of governors and naval and military personnel. Effective governance therefore relied on the opening of ports to neutral vessels as well as the management of inter-island trade networks that filtered provisions from comparatively glutted colonies to ones where the necessities of life were dearer.¹⁶⁹

Avenues of Commerce, Will You, Americans, Not Explore!’ Commercial Philadelphia’s Vantage onto the Early Haitian Revolution,” *WMQ*, vol. 62, no. 3 (July 2005), 476-503.

¹⁶⁸ Ragatz, *Fall of the Planter Class*, 309-15.

¹⁶⁹ In December 1793, Lieutenant Governor Ninian Home of Grenada wrote to Whitehall: “This Island lies so far to Leeward that it can expect nothing while there is any want at Barbadoes, Tobago, Saint Vincent and Dominica; And as the scarcity of dry provisions and Lumber has been general the quantity we have as yet obtained is by no means adequate to our necessities.” Letter of Ninian Home, Grenada, 31 December 1793, CO 101/33, TNA. Foreign colonies that were occupied by British military expeditions, such as Martinique and Saint-Domingue, also substantially redirected regional commodity flows. For Tobago’s reliance on foodstuffs from British-occupied Martinique, see John Balfour to Bathurst, Tobago, 24 August 1815, no. 20, f. 49, CO 285/20, TNA.

Table 1.1: Foodstuffs and animals imported into Dominica, 1794-1805

	BRITAIN & IRELAND	BRITISH NORTH AMERICA	USA
Dry Fish (blls)	1,681	41,367	56,055
Pickled Fish (blls)	4,203	3,136	5,884
Beef & Pork (blls)	25,883	239	13,751
Rice (trc)	236		1,172
Butter (lbs)	21,147		
Indian Corn (lbs)			33,311
Oxen			3,249
Sheep/Hogs			4,166

Bll=barrels; trc=tierces; lbs=pounds

Source: Statistical returns from 1794 to 1805, Dominica, CO 71/41, TNA

Echoing contemporary ameliorationist texts by planters, some colonial governors advocated for increased food production on sugar estates and other properties as part of general schemes of agricultural improvement.¹⁷⁰ While often cloaked in the guise of treating slaves with greater “humanity,” these projects had the dual purposes of stabilizing plantation production regimes and relieving indebted planters from increasing expenses for imported provisions and other necessities. Tobago became something of a laboratory for colonial-led reform projects in agriculture and amelioration under the aegis of planter-politician Sir William Young (1749-1815), who served as governor from 1807 until his death in 1815.¹⁷¹ Similar to Jamaica and other Windward colonies, slaves on

¹⁷⁰ For a contemporary Jamaican planter’s proposals for “improvements” in plantation management, including the increased cultivation of foodstuffs for slaves under rationalized principles, see Gilbert Mathison, *Notices Respecting Jamaica, in 1808–1809–1810* (London: John Stockdale, 1811), esp. 93-98.

¹⁷¹ On Young’s life in general, see E.I. Carlyle and Richard B. Sheridan, “Sir William Young, second baronet (1749-1815),” *ODNB*, www.oxforddnb.com, accessed 11 June 2016.

Tobago cultivated extensive provisions grounds in addition to receiving weekly ration allowances of salt fish and other imported fare. Young directly promoted improved cultivation practices for provisions and cash crops through the creation of an Agricultural Society on the island. Tobago's planters and managers appeared to have made some effort to make the colony more self-sufficient by expanding provision grounds as well as increasing the amount of land for the cultivation of food crops on estates early in the nineteenth century. For instance, one initiative of the Society was to encourage planters to set aside more ground for Indian corn along with cassava and other root crops. In 1807, the first year of the Agricultural Society's existence, Governor Young claimed that already "treble" the amount of land had been devoted to cultivation of these crops than in prior years.¹⁷² But Tobago would remain at least partially dependent on imported foodstuffs for slaves, especially during annual summer-time scarcity and in years of bad weather. Tobago's small white population further connected the colony to circuits of transatlantic trade by consuming salted meat, flour, and other European and North American commodities.¹⁷³

Young's correspondence with metropolitan superiors was flavored with reports on the progress of provision cultivation in the island alongside assurances that he was upholding imperial trade laws. Acting on instructions received from Whitehall in May

¹⁷² William Young to Bathurst, 24 Nov 1807, CO 285/2, TNA. At Young's behest, a committee of Tobago's legislature, responding defensively to the abolitionist movement, suggested inscribing into law weekly food allowances for slaves. The recommended rations were either three pounds of salted pork, four pounds of salted beef, four pounds of fish, or fourteen "good herrings" per week. The report also recommended weekly "vegetable" allowances: 7 quarts wheat flour, 7 quarts Indian meal or oatmeal, 7 quarts "ship stuff," and 7 quarts Indian corn, guinea corn, peas, plantains, yams, ignams, potatoes, or eddoes. "Report of legislative committee on [the] state of the Negroes," 1798, CO 285/5, TNA. See also K.O. Laurence, *Tobago in Wartime, 1793-1815* (Barbados: the Press University of the West Indies, 1995), 117-9, 135, 148.

¹⁷³ Tobago's white population was 500-800, along with 300-400 free blacks. Laurence, *Tobago in Wartime*, 131.

1809, Young promised Secretary of State Lord Castlereagh that he had been denying the entry of U.S. vessels carrying beef, pork, and butter despite persistent local scarcity in these goods. He informed Castlereagh: “A Swedish Sloop & a Brig from the United States, are now at Anchor in Scarbro’ Bay, another American was here last week. but on my refusal to permit the Landing of Beef & Butter, [they] proceeded to seek easier Admittance, of its general & entire Assortment of Cargoes, Elsewhere.” The “Elsewhere” that Young alluded to was likely Martinique, which was then under British occupation. With a large military force to feed, Martinique provided stiff competition to smaller neighboring islands in attracting shipping. Young wrote: “I yet fear that Cases ever more pressing may occur before the close of the Year. Martinique having two years Crops on hand, & with the Tender of extraordinary high Freights, attracts much of the British Shipping, & whither the Ships proceed the Cargoes will go in Course.” Young explained to the Secretary that Tobago required “fourteen Merchant Ships to make up its yearly & usual Compliment of Vessels for bringing Supplies, & the Shipment of Produce in Return.” But prospects for receiving adequate supplies appeared to be poor: “I hear at most but of three or four Ships expected.” Regarding supplies of flour and biscuits for that year, Young wrote: “I yet entertain Hopes from America, should it continue in Amity with Great Britain.”¹⁷⁴

In Young’s dispatches, slaves were discursively enlisted as important consumers of foodstuffs as well as producers of sugar and other staple crops. In November 1811, he reported that he had received from London an order-in-council forbidding the importation of salt fish in neutral vessels. Young immediately called for a meeting of the legislature

¹⁷⁴ William Young to Castlereagh, Tobago, 25 May 1809, f. 20-21, CO 285/14, TNA.

to revive a colonial statute that would ban the unloading of fish carried in by American and other neutral traders. He believed that this would provide plenty of time for local merchants and planters to prepare “Correspondences with the British Fisheries” in North America and Europe. Young told his superiors: “I have of late enquired of individual Negroes, & find that they would prefer 2 lbs. pr. Week, of the Newfoundland dry Quintal, to 3 lb. of mark’d Pickled Fish from the Untied States.” He went on, “in fact, the 2lb has more of Substance, than the 3 lbs. but on large Plantations, (even the most liberally supplied & managed) the Slaves will in future get weekly 3 lb of Newfoundland Fish.” Young proudly concluded that Tobago feared little in terms of want because of the expansion of provision grounds under his watch. He also wrote approvingly that planters paid little heed to “menaces of Embargo by the Americans, especially the Estates having already in great part laid in the Staves necessary for the coming crop.”¹⁷⁵

Nonetheless, Young’s efforts at “improving” the food supply on Tobago were limited in their effectiveness. The colony remained dependent on occasional supplies from the U.S. The entrance of at least one U.S. ship carrying foodstuffs into Tobago as the war years were winding down generated much political controversy on both sides of the Atlantic. Young’s immediate successor in governing the island, Council President John Balfour, would forward extensive documentation to Whitehall about the landing of goods onboard the American brig *Independence* from New London, Connecticut. The case particularly divided planter and merchant communities and drew the attention and ire of metropolitan officials. The *Independence* had loaded and set sail from New London under captain Horace Stocking early in the month of April 1815 and arrived in the port of

¹⁷⁵ William Young to Liverpool, Tobago, 13 November 1811, f. 130-131, CO 285/16, TNA.

Scarborough in the first week of May. According to a petition from Stocking, the brig carried the following cargo: “41 Horses, 12 Cattle, 93 hhds Corn Meal, 76 barrels Flour, 4 hogsheads of Tobacco, 19 Firkins of Lard, 49 Barrels of Potatoes, 6 Tierces of Rice, 8 half Tierces of Rice, 7 Barrels of Corn, 203 Bushels of Corn, 1128 Ropes of Onions, 1823 lb of Cheese, 156 lb of Ham, 1200 Hoops, 5 Barrels Corn Meal, 1 Barrel Beans, 4,200 Red Oak Staves for Dunnage, 60 White Oak Puncheons to contain water for the Stock.” On Tobago, the governor’s proclamation for the allowance of enumerated goods in neutral ships had expired a few days before the arrival of the *Independence*. Stocking asked that the Council would allow for the entry of his goods upon his payment of the appropriate duties. He cited particularly the information that he had gleaned about “the great want in your Colony” for cattle “for the use of His Majesty’s Troops here.” The tobacco and foodstuffs onboard would also play important roles in the ensuing hearings over Stocking’s plea.¹⁷⁶

Eighteen individual planters and merchant houses undersigned Stocking’s petition in the hopes of facilitating entry of the goods. To make their case, the locals who wanted to land the goods gathered evidence on the size of Tobago’s slave population and the quantity of imported food currently in island stores. President Balfour wrote, “he had considered it his Duty to obtain the fullest possible information on a Subject of such serious importance to the preservation of the Black Labourers.” Balfour figured that in order to adequately feed the roughly 16,000 slaves on the island during July, August, and September—“which were always Months of Scarcity”—there would need to be 900 puncheons of cornmeal or ship’s stuff on hand. Since he calculated only 200 puncheons

¹⁷⁶ Minutes of His Majesty’s Privy Council held the 8th May 1815, Tobago, Petition of Horace Stocking, f. 21-22, CO 285/20, TNA.

onboard the ships that were “now arrived and expected,” Balfour reasoned that there would be “want of 690 Puncheons or 483000 lbs of Bread Kind to save the Colony from the danger of Famine.” In order to lend further authority to these statistics, Balfour and the Council called in several colonial residents who managed plantations. The Council asked them questions related to various methods of slave provisioning; the seasonality of slave health and sickness; sugarcane and provision cultivation and weather conditions in different parts of the island; and the correspondence methods of local estates with metropolitan commission houses.¹⁷⁷

Several of the colonists brought in were merchants who were also proprietors and attorneys in their own right operating within the boundaries of the metropolitan commission system. For instance, William Brasnell was addressed as “a partner in one of the first mercantile Establishments in this Colony.” He claimed that he owned one estate on the island and managed several others for absentee proprietors with about 1,200 slaves. One planter, named Wrightman, testified that he owned 300 slaves and managed about 1,000 more for absentee proprietors. Wrightman stated that there would be “great distress for Provisions in this Colony and which will increase until the Month of October which is the soonest that any sufficient supply can be got from the ground Provisions” following the rains. Wrightman noted that before the “American War” the colony had depended on supplies of “Corn, Corn Flour and Rice for the support of their Negroes during the Months of June, July, August & September.” But during the U.S. Embargo, he and other planters had ordered alternative supplies from Britain such as “Ships Stuff and Oatmeal” for slaves. In the current year, Wrightman had instructed his correspondents in

¹⁷⁷ Minutes of His Majesty’s Privy Council, f. 24, 26-7, CO 285/20, TNA.

Britain not to ship biscuits and oatmeal if a peace treaty was signed with the U.S. He instead had planned “on getting Supplies from America.” His commission house did as they were told, which subsequently left Wrightman with no other options for purchasing grain locally when he could not order it from America.¹⁷⁸

Several planters and managers brought before the Council touted the length of their residency in the island as a means of lending credence to claims of managerial competence. One planter, named Anderson, testified that he had lived in Tobago for forty-one years. He managed “an Estate of his own and considerable Property of other persons under my charge who are resident in Europe” with 1,086 slaves. In 1815, Anderson had ordered and received a “Supply of Dry Provisions” from England, but he said that he would require “at least” twenty additional puncheons of cornmeal. While Anderson concurred with other managers that as of late, “greater attention has been paid generally in extending the time usually given to the Negroes for the purpose of cultivating their own Grounds,” he argued that the recent drought “has affected the Growth of the Provisions to such an extent that in Spite of such Caution I think the Scarcity in general in the Island is likely to be much more felt in the Months of June, July, August and September than formerly.” Anderson further remarked that the recent “very unhealthy state” of the slaves would have rendered it inhumane for the governor to refuse the landing of the *Independence*’s goods. Anderson was not just invoking the necessity of providing foodstuffs to slaves, but also tobacco, “which forms one of the

¹⁷⁸ Minutes of His Majesty’s Privy Council, f. 26-7, CO 285/20, TNA.

essential requisites for the support of the Negroes.” He noted that the current high price of the good on the island had turned it into a luxury that few slaves could afford.¹⁷⁹

Not all locals welcomed the arrival of the *Independence*. Two counter-petitions accompanied Stocking’s plea for admittance. One was from merchant William Lang, who disputed the notion that Tobago was in need of European or North American provisions. Lang claimed that in his store, “he now has on hand upwards of 80 Barrels of Superfine Flour Puncheons of Oil Cake Beans, Oat Meal, Beef, Pork, Hams, Cheese Butter &ca which Articles he has all lately imported from Europe and selling at a very low rate without much demand.” Noting that strictly under the law, the vessel should be deemed “liable to Seizure by the Custom House,” Lang urged the Council not to have a “lenient Ear or be too acquiescent in the prayer of such Petitions.” He claimed that the last time neutral vessels had been allowed to land, the effect had been deleterious to the interests of colonial merchants.¹⁸⁰

A second counter-petition by colonial merchant Thomas Blakely was articulated more narrowly in terms of self-interest. Blakely had been approached by Stocking’s supporters to sign the petition but demurred because he “has from time to time at considerable risque and expense imported into this Island the Article of Tobacco in a legal way.” He had believed that British trade laws restricting the importation of tobacco in neutral vessels would protect current high prices and hence not threaten his speculation. Now, Blakely feared that the tobacco onboard the *Independence* “would

¹⁷⁹ Minutes of His Majesty’s Privy Council, f. 27, CO 285/20, TNA.

¹⁸⁰ Minutes of His Majesty’s Privy Council, f. 22, 24, CO 285/20, TNA. Lang later answered a question before the council on what imported European goods he had on hand: “I have about 87 barrels Flour at the price of a £8.2 curr. p Barrel, 10 Punks Beans at £18 p Puncheon, 4 Puncheons of Oatmeal at £24 p Puncheon.”

materially injure” his business and cost him upwards of £1,000 in losses. The Council called in Blakely and asked him about the quantities and prices of goods he had on hand. He replied that he had four hogsheads and two kegs of tobacco valued at £823.10 currency. In his second reply, he delineated between local markets for tobacco—enslaved and free—as a way to help the Council understand how his business operated: “I am informed Tobacco on Board the American Brig is of a Superior Quality to mine which could not bear a Competition with it but what I have is good enough for the Negroes.” Asked how much he sold the tobacco for, Blakely replied: “Any Person taking 100 lb may have it at 50 Dollars in retailing it to the Negroes I sell it at about a Dollar p lb.”¹⁸¹

In the brouhaha over the admittance of the goods, military men would have their say, too, voiced through Captain George Jack Roy, commander of Tobago’s garrison, where a troop of West India Rangers (black soldiers) were stationed. Captain Roy’s words were heard via a letter he had sent to the agent for the contractors for fresh beef for the garrison. Captain Roy had written that the garrison had for some time been “supplied with very indifferent Fresh Beef,” and he understood that the agent had felt “anxiety to procure the best” under the circumstances. Roy wrote that he had heard that “there are some very good Cattle on Board the American Brig in the Harbour which I hope you will use your exertions to procure for the use of His Majestys Troops.” Roy hoped that the cattle could be landed and slaughtered for the troops, especially “as Hostilities with America and France has ceased.”¹⁸²

Despite forwarding all of the documentation from the case, Balfour was still reprimanded by Secretary of State Bathurst for allowing goods onboard the *Independence*

¹⁸¹ Minutes of His Majesty’s Privy Council, f. 23-4, CO 285/20, TNA.

¹⁸² Minutes of His Majesty’s Privy Council, f. 24, CO 285/20, TNA.

to be landed and put up for sale.¹⁸³ Balfour defended himself by replying that fifty years of residency in the West Indies had made him understand from practical experience that it was necessary to allow for the landing of foreign foodstuffs in cases of actual want.¹⁸⁴ Balfour would soon toe the company line, though. He assured Bathurst in October of 1815 that Tobago would abide by the terms of a recent order-in-council and that absolutely no American vessels would be admitted with proscribed goods. Continuing in the vein of his predecessor William Young, Balfour reported favorably on the progress of provision cultivation in the island, claiming that want had been removed by “the most favourable Season known for many years.” And like Young before him, Balfour credited Tobago’s planters and managers with allowing slaves more time to tend food crops.¹⁸⁵

Balfour’s blandishments of Tobago’s managers aside, testimony and other documentation from the case of the *Independence* showed how contestations over the suspension of trade restrictions involved both colonial and imperial perceptions of the provisioning needs of slaves. First, Balfour and the Council sketched the scale of the slave population and shortages in food supply in order to introduce the notion that trade laws must be understood in terms of local contexts. For their part, managing attorneys emphasized the scale of their “concerns” (i.e., the estates they owned and managed), the length of their residency in the island, and their knowledge of local agricultural practices and growing conditions as information establishing their authority as experts in overseeing the provisioning and health of slaves. Offering further proof of their concern for the treatment of slaves, Balfour and the managers mentioned their commitment to

¹⁸³ Balfour alluded to the fact that the admittance of the goods “has not merited the Approbation of His Majesty’s Government” in his letter to Bathurst on 24 June 1815, Tobago, f. 32, CO 285/20, TNA.

¹⁸⁴ John Balfour to Bathurst, July 1815, Tobago, f. 33, CO 285/20, TNA.

¹⁸⁵ John Balfour to Bathurst, Tobago, 11 October 1815, no. 22, f. 52-3, CO 285/20, TNA.

expanding provision grounds and allowing slaves more time to cultivate food crops. Even the merchants who opposed the landing of the *Independence*'s goods couched their fealty to the laws of the Crown in terms of their rights as British subjects to receive protection for businesses servicing slave plantations—William Lang with foodstuffs, and Thomas Blakely with tobacco. Above all, the various testimonies showed how the push-and-pull relationships among enslaved food cultivation, sugar production, and Atlantic trade networks had come to define the political relationship of colony to metropole in both discourse and practice.

Conclusion

In 1811, the planters and merchants of Dominica noted in an address to the Privy Council that they had recently procured “a Copy of a Petition from our suffering fellow Colonists of the Island of Barbados.” The Barbados petition had begged relief for sugar planters through the usual requests of trade relaxations and other policy dispensations. Subsequently, the petition created by Dominica's planters and merchants included a few wrinkles distinguishing it from Barbados.' While Dominica's petitioners asked for relief measures for sugar planters, they also cited the fact that the typical coffee planter faced similar difficulties in “feeding and clothing his Negroes or for providing for the current expenses of conducting the cultivation of his Estate.” They bemoaned the “repugnance to the use of coffee among all classes” in Great Britain, the only market to which they were allowed to consign their staple crop. The petitioners were especially frustrated because “it has been clearly proved by the highest medical authority that Genuine Coffee is a far more wholesome Beverage than Tea while it is certainly, if properly prepared fully as

agreeable to the taste, and under fair management might be afforded at a cheaper comparative rate.” As a means of relief, the petitioners requested: “That British plantation Coffee should be introduced as a part of the rations of the navy and Army as well as the numerous Prisoners of War now in Great Britain.”¹⁸⁶

Dominica’s merchants and planters presented to the home government a creative variation on a common theme. Rather than avowing an interest in the more extended cultivation of foodstuffs, the petitioners instead expressed a devotion to monoculture. They asked for short-term fixes to the perils of market slumps in the form of increased access to imported foodstuffs as opposed to exploring long-term solutions such as systematically improving plantation agriculture and lessening the island’s reliance on maritime trade networks. Dominica and the rest of the British West Indian colonies would continue to rely on ad hoc systems of opening ports to neutral shipping in times of crisis in order to alleviate scarcity.¹⁸⁷ Moreover, similar to their counterparts in other colonies, Dominica’s petitioners were quick to claim that slaves were the real victims of planters’ financial misfortunes and disadvantageous imperial trade laws that left them poorly fed and clothed. While this argument was wielded cynically, it nonetheless unwittingly revealed evolutions that had been taking place in public and private mentalities about provisioning itself. Specifically, the petitioners’ mention of the provisioning needs of sailors, soldiers, and prisoners of war alongside slaves showed how human necessity and processes of social categorization were converging throughout the wartime British Atlantic world.

¹⁸⁶ The Petition of the Planters, Merchants and others interested in the Island of Dominica, CO 71/46, TNA.

¹⁸⁷ On continued scarcity in Dominica following the war years, see Langford Lovell, *A Letter to a Friend, Relative to the Present State of the Island of Dominica* (Winchester: James Robbins, 1818).

CHAPTER TWO

Rations, Race, & Revolutions:

Necessitous Subjects in the Wartime Caribbean

In 1794, Lieutenant-Colonel Frederick Maitland, a career army officer stationed in British-occupied Martinique, wrote a manual with suggestions for the proper feeding, clothing, and sheltering of soldiers sent to the Caribbean. Published by the War Office, *Regulations for the Use of Regiments, Upon their Arrival in the West Indies* incorporated Maitland's practical observations concerning the relationship of health and bodily practices in hot climates that he had amassed from several years of service in the region. He urged moderation in diet and exercise as well as balancing salted foods with "fresh provisions." Maitland and other officers and army doctors were especially wary of soldiers' hocking rations of salt provisions for rum: "Fresh Provisions should be served to the Troops as often as is practicable; and the Men should not be allowed to sell or to barter any Part of their Provisions, on any Pretence whatever." His distrust of soldiers' behavior was both pessimistic and paternalistic: "Soldiers are the most inconsiderate Beings on the Face of the Earth, and, if left to themselves, are in many Respects helpless."¹ Maitland's admonitions echoed contemporary medical wisdom linking bodily health to behavior, climate, and social discipline—beliefs that translated naturally to the hierarchical and coercive structures of the British Army and Royal Navy.

¹ War Office, 10th October, 1795. *Regulations for the Use of His Majesty's Troops, upon Their Arrival in the West Indies* (Martinique, 1795), 26-27.

Unfortunately for hordes of British redcoats and seamen, dietary and other behavioral prescriptions offered little protection from yellow fever, malaria, and other maladies that felled far more men who had been mobilized to fight against revolutionary France in the Caribbean than combat. British soldiers and other European travelers had long developed a culture of mordant humor about low life expectancy in the islands, expressed in the caricature of the live-hard-and-die-young sojourner “Johnny New-come.”² From 1793 to 1815, Johnny’s fictional fate would turn into reality for tens of thousands of Britain’s fighting men.³ The effects of yellow fever, malaria, and other diseases have garnered extensive scholarly attention, most recently concerning geopolitical developments in the early modern circum-Caribbean.⁴ A related strain of scholarship has examined early modern scientific as well as vernacular understandings of the connections between bodily health and climate.⁵ Historians of medicine have recently highlighted the importance of British doctors’ experience treating fevers and other

² On “Johnny New-come,” see Brown, *Reaper’s Garden*, 18, 60, 84, 93-4.

³ Yellow fever and malaria decimated the massive British military expeditions to Saint-Domingue and the Windward Islands in the 1790s. Mortality rates were among the highest in modern warfare. Michael Duffy has estimated that 51% of white British troops (42,250 men) died in the region from 1793 to 1801. No study has exhaustively examined mortality statistics for British armed services from 1793 to 1815, but Roger Buckley has argued that British army deaths alone “certainly top 75,000,” while Duffy pegs naval and transport deaths at 24,000. See, Roger Norman Buckley, *The British Army in the West Indies: Society and the Military in the Revolutionary Age* (Gainesville: Univ. Press of Florida, 1998), 275-278; David Geggus, “The Cost of Pitt’s Caribbean Campaigns, 1793-1798,” *The Historical Journal*, vol. 26, no. 3 (1983), 699-703; Duffy, *Soldiers, Sugar, and Seapower: the British Expeditions to the West Indies and the War against Revolutionary France* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1987), 253-57. More recently, J.R. McNeill has estimated that total deaths for British forces in the revolutionary period were probably somewhere in the range of 50,000-70,000. McNeill, *Mosquito Empires*, 248.

⁴ McNeill, *Mosquito Empires*. See also, Juanita de Barros, Stephen Palmer, and David Wrights, eds., *Health and Medicine in the Circum-Caribbean, 1800-1968* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

⁵ Karen Kupperman, “Fear of Hot Climates in the Anglo-American Colonial Experience,” *WMQ*, vol. 41, no. 2 (April 1984), 213-40. On race and medicine: Mark Harrison, “‘The Tender Frame of Man:’ Disease, Climate, and Racial Difference in India and the West Indies, 1760–1860,” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, vol. 79, no. 1 (Spring 1996), 68-93; Erica Charters, “Making Bodies Modern: Race, Medicine, and the Colonial Soldier in the Mid-Eighteenth Century,” *Patterns of Prejudice*, vol. 46, nos. 3-4 (2012), 214-31.

diseases in hot climates to the emergence of theories of contagion and modern medical practices in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries.⁶ Historians have examined the health and medical care of the British Army and Royal Navy in the Caribbean, including that of white and black soldiers, within the context of combat and garrison life.⁷ In addition, scholars have also analyzed the administration of provision to British soldiers and sailors within studies of individual campaigns in the revolutionary Caribbean.⁸

Scholarship on these discrete topics has tended to separate the study of health, medicine, and disease from analyses of naval and military administration and logistics.⁹ But for contemporaries, concerns over the health and medical care of naval and military forces were viewed through the lens of the logistical and administrative capabilities of the imperial state. Drawing from ideas about the links between medicine and the control of various population groups, naval and military medical regimes in the Caribbean were structured in order to achieve social discipline through proper bodily practices. Dietetics—including the proper consumption of food and alcohol—were especially central to evolving naval medical culture and surgeons’ treatment of the sick and wounded.¹⁰ Daily and seasonal operations of British naval and military forces in the

⁶ This scholarship is drawn together most fully in Mark Harrison, *Medicine in an Age of Commerce and Empire: Britain and Its Tropical Colonies, 1660-1830*, (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2010).

⁷ Buckley, *British Army in the West Indies*; Roger Norman Buckley, *Slaves in Red Coats: the British West India Regiments, 1795-1815* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1979); Janet W. MacDonald, *Feeding Nelson’s Navy: the True Story of Food at Sea in the Georgian Era* (London: Chatham, 2004); Martin R. Howard, *Death Before Glory: the British Soldier in the West Indies in the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, 1793-1815* (Barnsley, U.K.: Pen and Sword, 2015).

⁸ David Geggus, *Slavery, War, and Revolution: The British Occupation of Saint-Domingue, 1793-1798* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982); Duffy, *Soldiers, Sugar, and Seapower*.

⁹ For an important recent exception to this trend: Erica Charters, *Disease, War, and the Imperial State*.

¹⁰ Doctors and other reformers harped on how personal industriousness, hygiene, and cleanliness were as essential to maintaining health and proper moral order as good eating and temperance. These ideas were closely linked to emerging understandings of “population” studies. See Christopher Lawrence, “Disciplining Disease: Scurvy, the Navy, and Imperial Expansion, 1750-1825,” in *Visions of Empire*:

region also revolved around efforts to preserve men's health. War Office and Admiralty publications urged officers to pay close attention to what their men ate (and drank) and how and when they ate it. Further, the movements of squadrons and the positioning of army units were shaped by perceived necessities of procuring "fresh" provisions and other factors that aligned with contemporary medical wisdom. By the 1790s, in short, doctors had learned to think like commanders and officers, and commanders and officers had learned to heed the prescriptions of doctors.

Further, official ideas and practices about diet, disease, and discipline would seep beyond the boundaries of the Royal Navy and British Army and would have an impact on vast populations of non-British "necessitous subjects" in the wartime Caribbean.

Provisioning became an arena in which notions of the "adequate" sustenance of a wide array of actors had to be worked out by army officers, naval commanders, colonial governors, and legislators far from the locus of imperial government in London. The *raison d'être* for the maintenance of large naval and military forces in the region was to preserve the British sugar colonies from invasion and internal revolt and also to extend the plantation complex under the Crown through the conquest and occupation of foreign territories. The administration of provisions by British authorities was the vehicle that drove armies on campaign and navies afloat. Correspondingly, it also fed, clothed, and sheltered thousands of prisoners of war captured in the wake of naval and military

Voyages, Botany, and Representations of Nature, David Philip Miller and Peter Hanns Reill, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996), esp. 81-83, 93-96; N.A.M. Rodger, *The Wooden World: an Anatomy of the Georgian Navy* (Naval Institute Press: Annapolis, 1986), 105-109; N.A.M. Rodger, *The Command of the Ocean: a Naval History of Britain, 1649-1815* (London: Allan Lane, 2004), 309, 316, 487; Buckley, *British Army*, 311-318; Joyce E. Chaplin, "Earthsickness: Circumnavigation and the Terrestrial Human Body, 1520-1800," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, vol. 86, no. 4 (Winter 2012), 534-535; Patricia Kathleen Crimmin, "British Naval Health, 1700-1800: Improvement over Time?" in *British Military and Naval Medicine, 1600-1830*, Geoffrey L. Hudson, ed. (New York: Rodopi, 2007), 188-189.

successes. Further, large numbers of refugees—including slaves—from French and other foreign colonies flooded into British territories and forced officials to balance the dictates of “humanity” in terms of provisioning them against an interest in lowering expenses on caring for people who were not British subjects. Revolutions and rations, in tandem, spurred practical debates and policies and reflections over health, racial difference, and the responsibilities of states to subjects and strangers alike.¹¹

This chapter begins by examining the convergence of medical beliefs and official prescriptions about relationships among diet, disease, and social discipline. The second section shows how naval and military authorities attempted to ensure flows of preserved and “fresh” provisions in a region marked by scarcity and warfare, as well as how officers, doctors, and the rank-and-file regarded the fare that they were provisioned. The chapter then traces the experiences of a cavalry officer on campaign in revolutionary Saint-Domingue, exploring how choice and necessity operated in the crafting of his personalized regimen of diet, clothing, exercise, and medicine. The last two sections examine how British colonial and imperial authorities handled the provisioning needs of non-British subjects—namely, French royalist *émigrés* and prisoners of war—and how provisioning itself served as a vital mediator in relations between subjects and governments as well as between governments themselves.

¹¹ For an examination of the eighteenth-century Royal Navy in the Caribbean that emphasizes how it operated in the context of race and slavery, see Nicholas Rogers, “Archipelagic Encounters: War, Race, and Labor in American-Caribbean Waters,” in *The Global Eighteenth Century*, Felicity Nussbaum, ed., (Baltimore: JHU Press, 2003), 211-238.

Diet, Disease, Discipline

Medical beliefs about bodily health generally drew a strong connection between the importance of balancing the consumption of different foods and alcohol and its in relationship to climate and place. By the 1790s, medical writings offering prescriptions on bodily adaptation to the tropics had clearly filtered into British state administration and shaped publications by the War Office and Admiralty on the proper “uses” of soldiers and sailors in the tropics. These official prescriptions paid attention not only to the qualities and quantities of food and alcohol that fighting men should consume, but also to the gathering, preparation, and consumption of meals at different times of day and in specific places—barracks, warships, hospitals, and other controlled sites. From the rank-and-file and officer classes alike, though, authorities faced challenges in establishing regimes of good eating and temperate living—even in controlled medical environments. Vernacular understandings of diet, health, disease, and even pleasure among soldiers and sailors probably informed actual provisioning practices to an equal if not greater extent than official regulations and prescriptive literature.

At the end of the eighteenth century, prevailing medical wisdom coupled Hippocratic beliefs in health being determined by the body’s relationship to its physical surroundings—airs, waters, places—with prescriptions for proper bodily and behavioral practices. Nowhere was the connection between climatic and behavioral factors in determining health more explicitly linked than in the tropics.¹² Naval and military doctors with experience in the West Indies promulgated provisioning practices that they believed

¹² Kupperman, “Fear of Hot Climates.”

would mitigate the mal effects of hot climates. In 1798, naval surgeon Leonard Gillespie cataloged a typical congeries of factors that was believed to cause disease and high mortality among European sojourners in hot climates:

Unhealthy diet; unhealthy air of roads or harbours; sickly seasons; infection; bad air of ships, from too many persons being crowded together on board; exposure to the sun, to the rains, and to the dews of the night; irregularities on shore or on board; excessive fatigue, or almost total want of employment; uncleanness with regard to clothing, bedding, and men[']s persons; and dejection of mind.¹³

Many doctors with experience in the tropics argued that diet was especially important in preserving health. Scottish physician John Bell, who served as an army surgeon in Jamaica during the American Revolution, concluded that health “complaints” among soldiers in the West Indies were “owing more generally to irregularity and inattention, and to the nature of their diet, than to any particularly noxious power in the climate.”¹⁴

Gillespie urged commanders on long cruises or anchored at stations lacking in fresh provisions to procure these goods from nearby islands and to give them to sick and convalescent sailors.¹⁵ Gillespie also encouraged the consumption of fresh-baked “soft bread” instead of hardtack, noting that it was easily obtainable at Martinique, “should all the squadron anchor there at once,” and could be issued to convalescents at sea “daily,” if it were “baked on board.”¹⁶ There could be perils in relying on local food suppliers,

¹³ Leonard Gillespie, *Advice to the commanders and officers of His Majesty's fleet serving in the West Indies, on the preservation of the health of seamen* (London: J. Cuthell, 1798), vi-vii.

¹⁴ John Bell, *An inquiry into the causes which produce, and the means of preventing diseases among British officers, soldiers, and others in the West Indies. Containing observations on the Mode Of action of spirituous liquors on the human body; on the use of malt liquor, and on salted provisions; With Remarks on the most proper Means of preserving them. Also Notes, relating to some particulars in the British army in Ireland, and the West Indies*. (London: J. Murray, 1791), 43-45.

¹⁵ Leonard Gillespie, *Observations on the diseases which prevailed on board a part of His Majesty's squadron, on the Leeward Island station, between Nov. 1794 and April 1796* (London: G. Auld, 1800), 4-6.

¹⁶ Gillespie, *Advice to the commanders and officers of His Majesty's fleet*, 2-3.

though. In one extraordinary instance, George Brown, surgeon aboard the guard ship *Abergavenny* off Port-au-Prince, reported in May 1798 that a local “French Baker” was discovered “from Time to time put Arsenick in the Bread” intended for British sailors and soldiers. Brown blamed the bread for outbreaks of dysentery that had killed “a number of the men” over the previous year; the baker was tried and shot.¹⁷

For soldiers, preparing for the rigors of climatic adaptation to the West Indies began in ports in England and Ireland, where they huddled in crowded spaces aboard transport ships for two to four months, prone to typhus and other diseases.¹⁸ Many medical men believed that proper eating habits could maintain the health of soldiers in transit. Army surgeon Stewart Henderson suggested that soldiers’ pay be put at “stoppage” while en route to the West Indies, which would have the effect of making them purchase in British ports “a few necessities, such as tea, sugar, onions, mustard, potatoes, and pepper,” which would prevent “a scorbutic tendency in their habits.” Henderson noted that otherwise soldiers would be “living on a salted diet for several months” and thus “liable to be attacked with the disorders” of scurvy and bowel problems.¹⁹ Upon arrival in West Indian ports, transport ships might lie at anchor for extended periods, placing “unseasoned” soldiers and sailors at risk of contracting fevers. For seaman on recently arrived and “sickly” ships, Leonard Gillespie suggested reducing rations of salt provisions by one-third or one-fourth and replacing this portion with “vegetables to be put in soup; or orange or lime-juice, to be put with syrup or sugar, into

¹⁷ Medical Journal of George Brown, Surgeon, on board the HMS *Abergavenny*, 26 May 1797-16 June 1798, ADM 101/80/2, TNA.

¹⁸ Geggus, *Slavery, War and Revolution*, 276.

¹⁹ Stewart Henderson, *A letter to the officers of the army under orders for, or that may hereafter be sent, to the West Indies, on the means of preserving health, and preventing that fatal disease the yellow fever* (London: John Stockdale, 1795), 7.

the grog or wine.”²⁰ Finally, once soldiers and sailors were settled in the Caribbean, medical authorities invariably prescribed diets rich in so-called “fresh” provisions.²¹ Army doctor Colin Chisholm encouraged the consumption of vegetables, fruits, fresh meat (“animal food”), and fish (“whitefish”), eschewing as much as possible salted meat and other processed provisions.²²

War Office regulations encouraged European soldiers to acclimate quickly to local foods. According to Frederick Maitland: “It is material to have the Men early acquainted with the Vegetables of the Country.” Maitland added that soldiers “with a very little Management” could add to their dinners “a variety of Roots, very nutritive and pleasant,” particularly yams; he further noted “it is not difficult” for soldiers to acquire breakfast foods like cocoa, coffee, and sugar, which “are cheap, particularly the two last.” “Dinner,” on the other hand, “must be regulated, and consist of the Provisions issued.” On this point, Maitland approved of the War Office’s plan of issuing fresh beef twice per week in lieu of salt provisions, noting that “good American or Spanish Bullocks” provided the best meat. Soldiers and sailors sometimes became ill from consuming local food, though. Maitland warned officers not to allow soldiers to eat “unripe Plantains and a Variety of Trash, which bring on Belly-ach and Dysentery.” Maitland also cautioned that manioc, which was commonly mistaken for potatoes, was “a strong Poison,” and that, “it is possible that a whole Mess might be poisoned by such an Error. I have heard,

²⁰ Gillespie, *Advice to the commanders and officers of His Majesty's fleet*, 2. On the unhealthiness of anchoring in port for extended periods of time, see Rodger, *Wooden World*, 99.

²¹ On contemporary understandings of “fresh provisions,” see Chaplin, “Earthsickness,” 517.

²² Colin Chisholm, *An essay on the malignant pestilential fever introduced into the West Indian Islands from Boullam, on the coast of Guinea, as it appeared in 1793 and 1794* (London: C. Dilly, 1795), 25-30.

that at Guadeloupe the Negroes have at Times sold Manioc to the Soldiers, whether from Design or not I cannot say; but it is highly probable.”²³

Military authorities also paid attention to the times when meals were prepared and eaten in tropical climates. Maitland specified that breakfast should be “early in the Morning” and dinner “about One o’Clock.” He believed that early breakfast was particularly important: “Fasting long in this Climate is productive of very bad Effects.” Time of day also affected army regulations for food preparation. For fresh beef, the Board stipulated: “The Butchers should kill the Meat in the Night, and care taken that it be delivered early in the Mornings, to prevents its being Fly-blown.” And to save cooks from the ravages of the sun: “Care should be taken that Cooking should be performed in the Shade.” The preparation, serving, and consumption of meals were considered as being of central importance to keeping discipline and order among troops. According to War Office regulations: “The Men should be divided into Messes, and should have two regular Meals a Day; for Breakfast, Coffee or Cocoa, with Sugar; for Dinner, Salt Provisions, with Yams, and other Vegetables of the Country, and seasoned with the Spices of the Country.” Some soldiers brought wives from Europe and others married in the colonies, and barracks housed men and women as well as children born there, including orphans. Messes usually consisted of five or six men and sometimes their wives. Soldiers were given cooking utensils and expected to prepare all of their meals themselves. Army authorities favored the practice of “messing” because they believed that it encouraged regular routines. For soldiers, the nutritional advantages of micro-provisioning communities lay in the fact that messmates could pool money for

²³ *Regulations for the Use of His Majesty’s Troops*, 26-38.

supplemental food and drink. Finally, War Office regulations encouraged balanced and moderate eating and exercise, including “ample and regular” meals: “It is of no less Importance to the Officer, who ought equally to avoid abstemiousness in Diet, as he should Intemperance, in the small Degree approaching to Intoxication.”²⁴

Authorities prescribed; men imbibed. Drunkenness was widespread among the thousands of soldiers and sailors who had lots of time on their hands and senses to numb in port towns and garrisons throughout the islands. After all, alcohol was considered part and parcel of regular army and naval provisioning: soldiers were issued one pint of rum per day, which they supplemented with liquor from army canteens, taverns, and enslaved hucksters. More dangerous was the fact that low-grade alcohol referred to as “new rum” — basically, moonshine — often contained lead from distilleries.²⁵ Army doctor John Bell suggested malt liquor as a substitute for rum, noting that it was a “a powerful preventative of scurvy,” and that “few stomachs” could drink enough of it to get intoxicated. But Bell admitted that it was difficult to prevent soldiers from selling salt rations and other articles for spirits, especially given that there were “so many opportunities of having intercourse with negroes and hucksters.”²⁶ Leonard Gillespie urged watering down as another preventative measure on naval vessels — “rum should be issued with the dinner, mixed with six or seven waters, and the wine served in the afternoon.”²⁷ But while the British government made half-hearted efforts to lessen rum consumption by replacing it with rations of spruce beer or Fayal wine, soldiers and

²⁴ *Regulations for the Use of Regiments*, 13-4, 28-30. On messing, see Geggus, *Slavery, War, and Revolution*, 279; Buckley, *British Army in the West Indies*, 331-2.

²⁵ Buckley, *British Army in the West Indies*, 281-295.

²⁶ Bell, *An inquiry into the causes*, 57-64.

²⁷ Gillespie, *Advice to the commanders and officers of His Majesty's fleet*, 3

sailors in the West Indies continued to have extensive access to hard liquor throughout the wars against France.²⁸ Many doctors would simply come to view British sojourners as deficiently “moderate” compared to other inhabitants of the region. Surgeon Colin Chisholm observed among yellow fever patients at Grenada that French white creoles were less susceptible than the British due to their better “mode of living,” which included diets of “vegetables and small red-wine,” coupled with only modest amounts of “animal food and strong liquors.” Chisholm also thought that slaves were less liable to contract diseases because of their stronger “constitutions” and greater “temperance.”²⁹

Sickness and long hospital stints were the norm for service in the Caribbean. Provisioning the sick and wounded had been a major component of efforts to modernize British naval and military forces around the globe over the course of the eighteenth century. The Royal Navy gradually phased out the practice of renting “sick quarters” in towns and ports and instead constructed or refurbished naval hospitals in overseas stations, including Jamaica.³⁰ The British Army also implemented sanitary reforms and created new regulations for hospitals in the West Indies. But facilities remained dubious places for the recovery of health in an era when modern theories of contagion were only beginning to emerge.³¹ The problem of overcrowding was seemingly unavoidable in the islands; sick bodies overwhelmed tight, airless spaces. Officers inspecting the naval hospital at the Môle in March 1797 worried what would happen when the upcoming

²⁸ Geggus, *Slavery, War, and Revolution*, 278; Buckley, *Slaves in Red Coats*, 102-105; Buckley, *British Army in the West Indies*, 281-295.

²⁹ Chisholm, *An essay on the malignant pestilential fever*, 193-4, 220-221.

³⁰ This turn toward modernization was exemplified by the construction of the enormous Haslar Hospital in Gosport, England (1746-1761). See Rodger, *Command of the Ocean*, 308-9; Rodger, *Wooden World*, 109-112; Crimmin, “British Naval Health, 1700-1800,” 186.

³¹ Geggus, *Slavery, War, Revolution*, 278; Buckley, *British Army in the West Indies*, 274, 314.

“Sickly Season” augmented the number of patients from the current 154 men. They suggested turning another part of the building currently being used to house Army stores into a “Separate detached apartment for those Epidemical diseases so prevalent in this Climate, as we find that the Seamen afflicted with the Scurvy are very liable to contract those Contagious diseases when crowded together.”³²

Beginning in the mid-eighteenth century, the Admiralty’s Sick and Hurt Board prescribed different diets for convalescents in naval hospitals.³³ At Martinique in the 1790s, patients were divided into three dietary categories—“Low,” “Half,” and “Full.” Patients on “Low Diet” received eight ounces of “good and wholesome soft Bread” along with butter or eggs; water, rice gruel, or broth; toast and water; and “cooling drinks”—“Barley Water or Orange whey and water, or Vinegary whey or Balm or Sage Tea with good sound Madeira wine, in such quantities as the Surgeon shall order not exceeding half a pint a day to one Patient.” Patients on “Half” and “Full Diets” received water or rice gruel for breakfast, but also portions of “Mutton boiled or roasted,” and “light bread Pudding or in lieu of it Greens or Roots with fruits at the discretion of the Surgeon.” Patients on the latter two regimens also received “soft Bread” to go with “one pint of good sound Madeira or Spanish Wine or in lieu of it three pints of small Punch made with old Rum and good Muscovado Sugar.” Finally, contractors furnished food, utensils, bedding, nurses, and other necessities, a job for which they received three shillings

³² R.R. Bligh, George Bowen, and Thomas Bays to Vice-Admiral Hyde Parker, Naval Hospital at Môle-Saint-Nicolas, 14 March 1797, ADM 1/248, TNA.

³³ Rodger, *Wooden World*, 111.

sterling per patient per day, “and one Shilling extra for the first twenty days for those Men who may have the Small Pox.”³⁴

Doctors closely associated good digestion with health and believed that it played an important role in disease recovery. In practice, no one set of dietary prescriptions prevailed for naval and military convalescents. Doctors generally advised smaller rations of more easily digestible fresh foods and locally prepared meals. Army doctor Stewart Henderson suggested the following articles: “tea, sugar, rice, portable soup, sago or tapioca, lemon juice, not forgetting the best of all remedies, some good wine.”³⁵ Others emphasized going easy on the meats; Leonard Gillespie advised: “Beef, mutton, or poultry, prepared in the form of dry sausages, and supplied with a small quantity for the use of the convalescents, would be useful, and might be employed to relish soups.”³⁶ While treating yellow fever patients, army surgeon Colin Chisholm claimed that he rarely provided soups or meats to patients, but rather served dishes such as cassava with madeira wine, and “soft fresh egg.” Chisholm observed that it did not seem to matter if patients “took nourishment or not” when they were symptomatic, but once they showed “signs of recovery,” he gave them “such articles of food as were most palatable, most simple, most nourishing, and of smallest bulk,” in order not to overwhelm their weakened digestive systems.³⁷

Naval and military doctors experimented with different doses of food and alcohol in combination with other medicaments when treating patients afflicted with fevers and

³⁴ Victualing contract between the Commissioners for Sick and Wounded Seamen and Turnbull Forbes & Co., 31 August 1798, *McCarthy v. Barnes*, C 112/178, TNA.

³⁵ Henderson, *A letter to the officers of the army*, 8.

³⁶ Gillespie, *Observations on the diseases*, 6.

³⁷ Chisholm, *An essay on the malignant pestilential fever*, 193-4, 220-221.

other diseases. In 1798, naval surgeon William Warren described an outbreak of fever onboard the HMS *Alfred* that occurred two years earlier and “occasioned much fatality.” Attempting to figure out the “nature and treatment” of the disease, he drew from his own observations as well as those of his fellow practitioners. Warren cited familiar symptoms such as joint pain, perspiration, dehydration, nausea, and diarrhea—“the stomach rejecting everything offered.” Warren contracted a “pretty severe attack” and resorted to taking two emetic pills of rhubarb and calomel to induce bowel movements. While the pills worked, Warren subsequently suffered from three days of “debility” characterized by “profuse perspiration, difficulty of respiration, faltering of the voice, sudden and frequent languor and palpitation of the heart.” The surgeon then prescribed himself a cocktail based on “Good Madeira” for relief: “My common drink was an infusion of tamarinds with a small wine glass of brandy to a quart.” This provided some relief, but Warren’s recovery was never total: “On the eighth day I began to fancy food and regain strength in a small degree, which was never wholly restored while in the country.”³⁸

Doctors’ journals and diaries from the West Indies often displayed another association—that between lack of social discipline and early death. Inspecting one hospital ship off Martinique in 1802, Leonard Gillespie lamented that it was not “so healthy as the other Ships, the indiscipline and consequent intemperance which reigns in Ships where military law does not exist, as in the *Thalia*, has been followed by an epidemic sickness.” Patients experienced “ardent fever,” “acute” headache, inflammation, “vomiting, Diarrhea, parched foul tongue and early approach of Delirium,” all of which culminated in “a fatal termination generally by black vomit or stool.” For the

³⁸ Brian Lavery, ed. *Publications of the Navy Records Society, Vol. 138: Shipboard Life and Organization, 1731-1815*, (Aldershot, U.K.: Ashgate, 1998), 520-21.

convalescents on the *Thalia*, the grim reaper paid scant deference to hierarchy. Gillespie noted that two army officers had died from the fever a few days after attending a “Turtle feast” on Martinique, where he assumed they “likely committed some excess.”³⁹

As mortality statistics from the first phase of war against France (1793-1802) became more widely available in Britain, the health of soldiers and sailors drew commentary beyond naval, military, and medical circles. West Indian lobbyist and former Tobago resident Sir William Young devoted a chapter to the subject in his *West India Common-Place Book* (1807). Young had gleaned statistics on mortality among white and black soldiers in the Windward and Leeward Islands (1796-1802) from a relative who happened to be the army’s commissary on the stations. Surveying the ghastly numbers, Young exclaimed: “What a havoc of death is this!” He was critical of several aspects of the government’s organization of the expeditions, including sending men out during the “sickly season” in the early part of the year, as opposed to having them arrive in the drier month of December and giving them time to acclimate; selecting sites for garrisons that were not sufficiently dry and airy, thus placing men in marshy areas full of vapors and dews; providing rations that were too heavy in salt provisions; and failing to adequately regulate the consumption of low-quality “new” rum that was prevalent in the islands.⁴⁰

Young did share in the fundamental belief of the authorities he was critiquing that maintaining the health of soldiers and sailors was inextricable from the vicissitudes of warfare. For instance, he noticed that there was a comparative decline in mortality for soldiers when the region was more politically stable: “1802, the last year, affords grounds of estimate, when a year of peace admits of care of the soldiery, in avoiding exposure to

³⁹ Surgeon Leonard Gillespie’s Private Diary, 11 September 1802, ADM 101/80/12, TNA.

⁴⁰ Young, *West-India Common-place Book*, 217-231.

night dews, and meridian suns, in regulating diet, and in mitigating fatigue.”⁴¹ Young was on to something. Securing foodstuffs and otherwise regulating soldiers’ and sailors’ bodily practices required careful logistical coordination on the part of army officers and naval commanders in wartime. Naval and military provisioning regimes were peculiarly adapted to the exigencies of the Caribbean disease environment, which involved trying to ward off the evils of fevers and scurvy with diets rich in “fresh” provisions. These prescriptions were in turn connected to the ability of naval and military commanders to ensure supplies of foodstuffs in arenas fraught with conflict and changing geopolitical boundaries. For naval and army commanders, wartime provisioning regimes were therefore shaped by two factors: establishing steady lines of supply of preserved foodstuffs across the Atlantic; and, procuring “fresh” local produce on a regular basis—even across enemy lines.

Contractors & Commanders

British naval and military provisioning networks drew together vast amounts of animal and material goods stretching across the British Isles— grain, pigs, cattle, salt, wood, iron—converging on southern England for processing and packaging as food for fighting men. Victualing bases were located at Deptford, Portsmouth, Plymouth, Chatham, and Dover, and they included bakeries, breweries, flourmills, slaughterhouses, and cooperages. Flour, beef, and pork were the most important staples that flowed into these sites of production. Biscuit (“hardtack”) baked in England required massive amounts of wheat flour, and though ships across the globe tried to procure fresh-baked

⁴¹ Ibid., 219.

bread whenever possible, biscuit was more vital as both a longer-stored commodity and a more “concentrated” form of sustenance. For salt provisions, hogs and cattle were rendered into rations through seasonal processes of droving, slaughtering, salting, and packing across England, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland. Hogs were generally reared near London and fed on “waste barley and malt from breweries and distilleries” before being slaughtered at Smithfield market. Cattle were driven from as far away as Scotland and western Wales before being fattened in London to make up for flesh lost in transit. Meat was then salted and packed at Deptford Yard or by private contractors.⁴² But it would be easy to overstate the sophistication of this system: it functioned poorly at times. Local scarcity in the Caribbean dictated improvisational methods of procuring foodstuffs for naval and military officers, doctors, and soldiers and sailors. Even members of the officer classes complained about extraordinarily high costs for food despite the opportunities for career advancement and prize money that West Indian wartime service offered.

On average, 15,000 seamen were stationed in the West Indies from 1793 to 1815. While the Royal Navy possessed the more sophisticated administrative and logistical infrastructure, the British Army fed greater numbers. In 1801, Great Britain provisioned a “conservatively estimated” 400,000 soldiers across the globe.⁴³ According to David Geggus, William Pitt’s government sent “well over 60,000 soldiers to the West Indies to reinforce the 6,000 already stationed there” in the 1790s.⁴⁴ Provisioning soldiers and

⁴² The Admiralty’s Victualing Board undertook naval provisioning and, after 1793, the supply of provisions for the army overseas as well. The Board operated its own system of debt-finance and oversaw the purchase of raw and processed food materials from contractors. The only victualing base located outside of Europe was in the Leeward Islands. Roger Knight and Martin Wilcox, *Sustaining the Fleet*, 19-58.

⁴³ Historians have recently calculated that victualing and maintaining sailors cost £6 per man per month. In 1800, “a year of high food prices,” victualing comprised 35 percent of total naval expenses. Knight & Wilcox, *Sustaining the Fleet*, 29, 50-55, 144.

⁴⁴ Geggus, “The Cost of Pitt’s Caribbean Campaigns,” 699.

sailors was immensely costly.⁴⁵ The army alone consumed food on an industrial scale. Returns from seventeen commissaries located throughout the eastern Caribbean show quantities of foodstuffs and beverages issued to soldiers and families from April to June 1810. In three months, more than 1.3 million pounds of flour and 330,000 pounds of rice alone were issued. Interestingly, overall quantities of locally purchased “fresh beef” (345,818 pounds) surpassed those of salted pork (344,405 pounds) and nearly matched those of salted beef (416,002 pounds). Alcohol flowed in staggering quantities as well: rum rations (34,372 gallons) were actually surpassed by wine (50,408 gallons)—though the former was no doubt the more potent intoxicant.⁴⁶

Getting all this food and alcohol to the Caribbean in wartime was a major logistical challenge for the imperial state. Complaints about poor-quality flour, bread, and salt provisions were common. For instance, while Irish curers and merchants had specialized in salted beef and pork and dominated West Indian markets for most of the eighteenth century. But rising costs and concerns over the quality of Irish provisions

⁴⁵ In March 1810, the deputy commissary at Barbados drew £88,134.10.10 sterling on the Treasury for the purchase, transport, and storage of foodstuffs and related expenses: List of Bills drawn on the Right Honorable the Lords Commissioners of His Majesty’s Treasury by Joseph Bullock, Commissary General in the Windward and Leeward Islands &c. from the 2nd to the 29th March 1810, WO 57/56, TNA. Colonial governments were expected to chip in for expenses related to maintaining soldiers on island garrisons, which frequently caused disputes between colonial assemblies, governors, and metropolitan authorities. Sums were not trifling. In 1802, estimates for annual colonial expenses on the “Military Establishment” of Jamaica were pegged at £194,999.14.7½ currency and broken down under the following: subsistence for 3,000 Men, “including Carriage” (£134,000); “Island Pay” & lodging money for officers and their wives and children (£25,000); annual hospital allowances for 3,000 men at \$4 each (£3,999.14.7½); articles for barracks (£4,500) and other expenses for that department, including the barracks master’s salary (£12,000); wood and candles (£6,500); water supply (£6,000); baggage and transport (£2,000); and engineers (£1,000). These expenses were exclusive of Jamaica’s obligation to pay an additional 2,000 infantrymen and maintain the 20th Dragoons (£110,142). Altogether, Jamaican authorities estimated a total of £305,141.14.7½ currency on military expenditures annually. “Rough Statement of the Sums paid by the Public of Jamaica towards the Maintenance of her Military Establishment, Annually,” f. 159, CO 137/108, TNA.

⁴⁶ “Statement of Provisions Rum &c. received and Purchased, issued &c. by the Deputy & Assistant Commissaries in the Colonies and Islands [per] their Returns of receipts issued and remains, from 25th of April To 24th June 1810,” WO 57/56, TNA.

would lead to their diminished standing in the market, especially for salted beef. In 1791, army doctor John Bell, noting that the “greater part of the salted provisions for the navy and army in the West Indies, are from Ireland,” criticized Irish curing techniques and urged the use of “salt of a sound quality, freed from its impurities.” Bell argued that only an act of the Irish Parliament would force merchants to do so. As evidence, he recounted witnessing an outbreak of dysentery during the American Revolution among soldiers at Port Antonio, Jamaica, when the salted rations had given off “a peculiarly offensive smell.”⁴⁷

Atlantic-wide supply networks also relied upon local relations between naval military officers and merchants in order to function. On most stations overseas, agent victualers served as liaisons between the Victualing Board in England and commanders-in-chief on stations. Agents handled day-to-day accounts with local contractors. But at stations without victualing bases, such as Jamaica, all business related to contract and supply fell to commanders.⁴⁸ Naval officers at Jamaica encountered difficulties with contractors almost immediately following the outbreak of war in 1793. In March 1793, one commander relayed to the Admiralty that the contractor William Bramwell had difficulties in supplying fresh beef to the squadron because of rising local demand for cattle due to the booming expansion of the Jamaican sugar economy following the collapse of Saint Domingue two years earlier.⁴⁹ Naval and military hospitals also faced

⁴⁷ John Bell, *An inquiry into the causes*, 40-56, 104, 108.

⁴⁸ Knight and Wilcox, *Sustaining the Fleet*, 19-37.

⁴⁹ Commodore Ford to Philip Stephens, *Europa*, Port Royal Harbor, Jamaica, 10 March 1793, ADM 1/245. Unwilling to resort to purchasing meat at market until a new contract was created, Ford prevailed upon Bramwell to fulfill the contract and to seek monetary relief from the Victualling Board. In order to persuade the Board, Ford had enclosed signed oaths from three butchers on the current rise in the price of beef at Kingston.

frequent shortages in provisions and other articles throughout the war years.⁵⁰ In February 1797, Vice-Admiral Hyde Parker noted that 34 head of cattle had arrived at Môle-Saint-Nicolas in occupied Saint-Domingue from North America, which he divvied up between the Army and Navy. Their arrival was timely, as British hospitals had been without “Fresh Provisions” for a long time—“the difficulties in procuring Vegetables are such, as to render it almost impracticable even, at an enormous expence.”⁵¹ In 1797, inspectors of the hospital at the Môle described the “Patients put on the different Diets” and found “them all perfectly satisfied,” but felt that the contractors’ agents had fulfilled their duties only as best they could from the “precarious” state of local markets. The officers suggested that a new contract be drawn up to take into account this “uncertainty,” so that “the Patients can have Justice done them and the Contractors not be injured by the present Contract.”⁵²

Some officers were sympathetic to the merchants who were tasked with supplying massive amounts of perishable food to uncertain markets in tropical locales; others were more critical. After all, naval officers’ reputations and careers were at stake. Delays in supply or poor-quality foodstuffs could keep ships in port rather than on profitable “cruizes” in the region. Hyde Parker complained to the Admiralty from Port Royal in December 1798: “Five Line of Battle Ships, and Four Frigates, are in Port waiting for

⁵⁰ See for example the letter of Dr. Clifton, Director of Hospitals at Martinique, from 12 May 1795, printed in [Henry Dundas] *Facts relative to the conduct of the war in the West Indies: collected from the speech of the Right Hon. Henry Dundas, in the House of Commons, on the 28th of April, 1796, and from the documents laid before the House upon that subject* (London: J. Owen, 1796), 107. See also, Buckley, *British Army in the West Indies*, 314; Crimmin, “British Naval Health, 1700-1800,” 196.

⁵¹ Vice-Admiral Hyde Parker to Evan Nepean, *Queen*, Môle-Saint-Nicolas, 2 February 1797, ADM 1/248, TNA.

⁵² R.R. Bligh, George Bowen, and Thomas Bays to Vice-Admiral Hyde Parker, Naval Hospital at Môle-Saint-Nicolas, 14 March 1797, ADM 1/248, TNA.

Bread.”⁵³ Parker repeatedly requested that an agent victualer be appointed at Jamaica in order to smooth out matters with contractors and ensure steadier lines of supply.⁵⁴

Subsequent commanders at Port Royal persisted in complaints about the quality and timeliness of food supply. Vice-Admiral Hugh Seymour summed up matters in an 1801 letter to the Admiralty: “[I]t is well known that the West India Islands, admit to their Markets articles of food of an inferior quality, to those which the Seamen in his His Majestys Fleet are used to be supplied.”⁵⁵

Bread supply was a persistent problem for naval commanders on the Jamaica station, stemming in large part from difficulties in keeping up adequate stores of flour from grain-producing regions in Europe and North America.⁵⁶ Stationed off the Môle, Hyde Parker argued with Kingston provision contractors Donaldson, Forbes & Co. over supplies of bread and other provisions for almost two years. Parker accused the contractors of delays and “negligence” in supplying bread and rum to the squadron, noting that orders should be fulfilled within forty-eight hours. Parker partially excused the contractors for the insufficient supplies of bread owing to “the failure of Arrivals from America” with flour. But he also accused them of fraud in weighing the goods, noting that their agent at the Môle had been sending the “Soft Bread to the Ships at fourteen Ounces to the pound.”⁵⁷ Writing to the Commissioners for Victualling, Parker

⁵³ Hyde Parker to the Commissioners for Victualling His Majesty’s Navy, 4 December 1798, ADM 1/249, TNA.

⁵⁴ On Parker’s request for an agent victualer, see Hyde Parker to the Commissioners for Victualling His Majesty’s Navy, *Queen*, Môle-Saint-Nicolas, 24 January 1797, ADM 1/249, TNA.

⁵⁵ Hugh Seymour to Evan Nepean, *Sans Pareil*, Port Royal Harbor, Jamaica, February 1801, ADM 1/251, TNA.

⁵⁶ On the U.S. grain supply, see Hunter, “Wheat, War, and the American Economy.”

⁵⁷ Hyde Parker to Messrs. Donaldson, Forbes, & Co., *Queen*, Môle-Saint-Nicolas, 17 January 1797, ADM 1/249, TNA.

expressed astonishment that the bread was so “mouldy” and filled with “vermin,” considering the contractors baked 2,800 pounds weekly at Kingston.⁵⁸

Donaldson, Forbes & Co. defended their services by letter a few days after receiving Parker’s missive. Regarding delays, they had three excuses: “the very large” and “unexpected Force” that Parker and Admiral Bligh had sent to Saint-Domingue; the capture of the “outward” and “homeward”-bound packet ships, which hindered communication between the Kingston firm and the commission house they worked through in London; and, “above all,” the interruption of the North American provisions trade. The merchants explained that their failure to supply rum was because they could find no vessels to ship it in and that their stores at the Môle were not large enough to house three-months’ supply. They assured Parker that they were utilizing Atlantic-wide trade contacts, having written three months prior “to our Friends at home [about] the absolute necessity of sending a part of our Supply of Bread from England to guard against Accidents.” They had also written letters in “Triplicate to Norfolk, Philadelphia and New York, in the most pressing terms for Supplies.” Worried over the interruption of U.S. trade and “the long Silence of our Friends at home [in Britain],” they then took the precautionary measure of sending one of their vessels, the *Jane*, from the Môle to Norfolk, to procure a cargo of bread and flour, “and to convoy, if no previous Supply had been sent, one or more American Vessels with similar Cargoes.”⁵⁹

Parker was not swayed. He ordered some of his officers and pursers to make surveys. On the *Canada*, 110 bags, or 11,460 pounds of bread, were deemed “to be

⁵⁸ Hyde Parker to the Commissioners for Victualling His Majesty’s Navy, *Queen*, Môle-Saint-Nicolas, 24 January 1797, ADM 1/249, TNA.

⁵⁹ Donaldson, Forbes, & Co. to Hyde Parker, Kingston, Jamaica, 22 January 1797, ADM 1/249, TNA.

weevily and decayed, so as not to be fit for Men to eat,” and another 100 bags, “we recommend to be picked, and the bad, seperated [sic] from the good.”⁶⁰ At the merchants’ storehouses at the Môle, surveyors found, “by far the greater part of it [bread] is weevilly, musty, and certainly none of it fit to be issued in its present state,” but if “carefully pick’d under the Inspection of a Master, some if it, though of inferior quality, might be selected for immediate use.”⁶¹ On the sloop *Phoenix*, bread was described as “new and free from Vermin, appears to be mixed, but is mostly of a bad Quality, and in our Opinion, much inferior to Contract.” Surveyors expounded on the compositional characteristics of the bread: “what it is made of, we feel quite at a loss to say.—with regard to its nutritive qualities, we conceive ourselves inadequate to Judge.”⁶²

Donaldson, Forbes & Co. disagreed with the reports, and reminded Parker and the Victualling Board of the imperfect nature of large-scale provisioning in the wartime West Indies. Regarding flour on one vessel, they wrote: “[W]e cannot bring ourselves to think [that] finding a Barrel of musty Flour on board that or any other Ship can be construed into a Fraud.” They went on: “Flour is a perishable Article, and in such times as the present it is not possible always to have it so fresh as could be wished.” They acknowledged that for surveyors and ships’ pursers, judging “one or two, or even three Barrels of Flour” substandard was normal. However, they also argued that ships’ purser and officers were often at pains to “find fault” with provisions, and “to give a great deal

⁶⁰ Report on Bread on Board HMS *Canada*, Môle-Saint-Nicolas, 25 February 1797, ADM 1/249, TNA.

⁶¹ Report on Bread at the Contractor’s Stores, Môle-Saint-Nicolas, 28 February 1797, ADM 1/249, TNA.

⁶² Report on the bread on board the sloop *Phoenix*, Môle-Saint-Nicolas, 12 March 1797, ADM 1/248. See also, Report on the bread on board the American sloop *Barviatt*, Môle-Saint-Nicolas, 9 March 1797, ADM 1/248, TNA. On the *Barviatt*, surveyors found that in “20 Bags is a Sound and wholesome Bread, and in our Opinion very little inferior, to the Contract.” On the other hand, two other “Sorts, contained in 264 Barrels and 74 Bags, is at present sound, and free from Vermin, but of a very inferior quality, and by no means, equal (in our opinion) to what the Contractors ought to supply.”

of trouble where there is little or no cause.”⁶³ The merchants thus attempted to utilize shared understandings of the effects of climate on foodstuffs in order to mitigate what they considered overly zealous administrative scrutiny of their products.

Disagreements would persist between Parker and the contractors. In December 1798, Parker wrote of bread “so full of weevils, and vermin, and rotten, that it went to dust on being handled, not having the least substance, or nourishing quality in it, so that the Bread we were obliged to make use of the whole time we were out, was as bad as any I have seen condemned, and nothing but mere necessity occasion’d my allowing it to be issued to the Ship’s Company.”⁶⁴ About one month later, the merchant Donaldson examined “on the Spot” some bread on the *Merlin* and did not find it so wanting—“the quality was such as is usually Brought from the United States for Sale at this Market,” and described the bread as “sound and sweet.”⁶⁵ A couple of weeks later, Donaldson rebutted another negative survey of flour for the Jamaica squadron: “Four Barrels of it are perfectly good and fresh, there are a few Weevils on the Top of the Barrels, which there generally is, in the very freshest Flour imported.”⁶⁶

⁶³ Donaldson, Forbes, & Co. to Hyde Parker, Kingston, Jamaica, 22 January 1797, ADM 1/249, TNA.

⁶⁴ John Cocket to Hyde Parker, *Thunderer*, Port Royal Harbor, Jamaica, 1 December 1798, ADM 1/249, TNA.

⁶⁵ Donaldson was not surprised to hear that the captain of the *Merlin* looked with envy on the bread delivered to the *Rattler*, for the latter’s stores were made up of bread “baked here, of Fresh American Flour,” better than what was given to the *Merlin* or any other ship “in England or Elsewhere.” Alexander Donaldson to Hyde Parker, Kingston, Jamaica, 15 January 1799, ADM 1/249, TNA.

⁶⁶ Donaldson mentioned that while two other barrels “appear to be a little Sea damaged on the Heads,” on the plus side, “Salt-water may have penetrated [only] an Inch, or half an Inch into the Flour.” Alexander Donaldson to Hyde Parker, Kingston, Jamaica, 27 January 1799, ADM 1/249, TNA. For other correspondence regarding the disputes, see Hyde Parker to Donaldson, Forbes & Co., *Queen*, Môle-Saint-Nicolas, 15 March 1797, ADM 1/249; Hyde Parker to Alexander Donaldson, *Adventure*, Môle-Saint-Nicolas, 4 July 1797, ADM 1/249; Hyde Parker to Alexander Donaldson, Admiral’s Pen, 6 November 1798, ADM 1/249; Hyde Parker to Alexander Donaldson, 16 November 1798, ADM 1/249; Hyde Parker to Alexander Donaldson, Admiral’s Pen, 2 December 1798, ADM 1/249, TNA.

Procuring “fresh” provisions to maintain soldiers’ and sailors’ health also shaped daily naval operations in the region.⁶⁷ In 1794, one naval commander remarked shortly after British forces had captured Port-au-Prince: “the Sickness and Mortality among the Troops and Seamen is almost without Example though the virulence within these few days has rather abated both in the Army and Squadron.” This commander ordered: “Fresh Beef to be purchased for the use for the Sick, and Vegetables for the Ships Companies in general, to stop the further Progress of Disease, as well as to assist those who were in a convalescent State, without which I am persuaded many valuable Lives would have been lost.”⁶⁸ Fresh provisions notwithstanding, fevers would never totally abate throughout the war years. In October 1797, Vice-Admiral Hyde Parker on the Jamaica station reported that he had sent a squadron to cruise near the Dry Tortugas, but that crews were forced to return from sickness; one ship, the *Carnatic*, had “buried 84 Men between the 4 August & 18 September in Fevers.”⁶⁹ Parker felt that increasing the squadron’s access to pasture land onshore could resolve the problem of securing fresh meat. He lamented that scurvy could only be cured “from a Course of Fresh Meat Diet & Vegetables, which cannot be obtain’d at this place, there being no pasture for the maintenance of a number of Cattle.” Several merchants had offered to furnish fresh beef, but Parker deemed their prices too exorbitant and the beef’s quality dubious—possibly fit for the army or even local

⁶⁷ Knight and Wilcox, *Sustaining the Fleet*, 64-66; Crimmin, “British Naval Health, 1700-1800,” 195.

⁶⁸ Commodore Ford to Philip Stephens, *Europa*, Port-au-Prince Road, 9 July 1794, ADM 1/245, TNA.

⁶⁹ Vice-Admiral Hyde Parker to Evan Nepean, *Queen*, Môle-Saint-Nicolas, 6 October 1797, ADM 1/248, TNA.

“Inhabitants,” but not the navy. Surveying the failure of previous “Adventurers,” Parker doubted that any local contractors could fulfill the squadron’s demand.⁷⁰

Ships and squadrons cruised for weeks at a time and often touched on foreign shores to purchase vegetables, beef, eggs, and other goods. The north side of cattle-rich Santo Domingo was an especially busy stop for warships from all the imperial regimes. Near the border of Saint-Domingue, Monte Cristi, or the “Mount,” along with other Spanish settlements large and small had long served as centers of considerable—and often illicit—transnational trade in provisions for naval and military forces.⁷¹ British squadrons based in Port Royal relied upon this traffic in the wars against revolutionary France. In April 1796, Admiral William Parker reported that winds and currents had forced his squadron to anchor at Manchineel Bay and La Isabela for three months, noting approvingly, “the Inhabitants certainly did bring down to the shore and offer for Sale” goods including “Poultry, Eggs, Piggs, Goats, and even Cattle.”⁷² In February 1797, Hyde Parker ordered the *Hannibal* with 96 scorbutic men to stop at La Isabela, “in the hope of procuring Fresh Beef and other refreshments from the Spaniards.”⁷³

Spain’s entry into the conflict on the side of the French Republic threatened British access to fresh provisions from Santo Domingo. In December 1796, William Parker nevertheless reported favorably on local Spanish traders and officials: “I must do

⁷⁰ Vice-Admiral Hyde Parker to Evan Nepean, *Queen*, Môle-Saint-Nicolas, 6 October 1797, ADM 1/248, TNA.

⁷¹ On smuggling at the “Mount” during the Seven Years’ War, see Thomas M. Truxes, *Defying Empire: Trading with the Enemy in Colonial New York* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2008), 72–86.

⁷² Parker admitted that he did not restrain officers and other men under his command from purchasing these goods. However, he assured one local Spanish official named Don Garcia that occasional purchases could not be “construed a supply of Produce to His Britannic Majestys Ships,” and that no treaties had been violated. [William] Parker to Don Garcia, *Swiftsure*, Môle-Saint-Nicolas, 7 April 1796, ADM 1/247, TNA.

⁷³ Vice-Admiral Hyde Parker to Evan Nepean, *Queen*, Môle-Saint-Nicolas, 2 February 1797, ADM 1/248, TNA.

them the Justice to say that, since my arrival they have amply supplied the Squadron with Cattle.” Parker had requested a face-to face meeting with one local official named Don Garcia: “As I wish, while I remain here to refresh my Ships Companies with fresh Provisions, I am to request you will exert yourself in encouraging the Planters to drive Cattle down to the Shore where you may assure them Protection for their Persons, & payment for every Article they may bring for Sale.” Fearing that French Republican or allied Spanish authorities would “watch our proceedings,” Don Garcia would not meet with Parker immediately, but he assured the commander that they would rendezvous soon—a practice that had apparently grown customary between the locals and waterborne British authorities: “It is possible that I may be compelled to come on board by Night. I suppose you are acquainted with the Signals agreed upon between us & the Commodore.”⁷⁴

Jamaican commanders got more creative afloat and on *terra firma* in ensuring supplies of fresh produce. In July 1797, Hyde Parker, noting his difficulties in procuring “Vegetables and Wine” due to the “very confined” situation of the squadron since the French capture of Monte Cristi, proposed cultivating a garden near the British-occupied Môle. Parker requested that since there was a “want of Labourers, as none but Black Men can stand working in the Sun,” he be allowed to hire slaves for the task.⁷⁵ The Admiralty instead directed Parker to purchase vegetables via contract.⁷⁶ Nevertheless, Parker’s

⁷⁴ William Parker to Evan Nepean, *Queen*, Manchineal Bay, Hispaniola, 23 December 1796, ADM 1/247, TNA.

⁷⁵ Vice-Admiral Hyde Parker to Evan Nepean, *Queen*, Môle-Saint-Nicolas, 19 July 1797, ADM 1/248, TNA.

⁷⁶ Vice-Admiral Hyde Parker to Evan Nepean, *Queen* at Sea, 30 November 1797, ADM 1/248, TNA.

proposal suggested how racist ideas of labor had come to inflect the administrative apparatus of the Royal Navy in the Caribbean.⁷⁷

Though less deadly than fevers, scurvy—generally understood as a “dietary disease” by the mid-eighteenth century—remained a persistent problem for British naval forces in the West Indies. Again, “fresh” provisions were generally considered the best preventatives and cures. In 1756, the Victualling Board was ordered “to issue fresh meat and vegetables to ships in port, both in home waters and abroad.” James Cook’s successful voyages to the Pacific in the 1760s and 1770s gave further impetus to plans to eliminate scurvy through dietary reforms. Naval authorities eventually settled on a combination of fresh provisions and citrus as the most effective means to combat the disease. In 1795, lemon juice was distributed throughout the fleet under the auspices of the Admiralty’s Sick and Hurt Board, and in 1808 the Victualling Board ordered substitutions of certain portions of salt rations for fresh meat, vegetables, lemon juice, and sugar for sailors on ships in port or returning from long cruises, which significantly reduced the prevalence of the disease in the navy.⁷⁸

Administrative reforms to combat scurvy were more patchwork and uneven in the West Indian theater than scholarship currently indicates.⁷⁹ At least throughout the first

⁷⁷ Mark Harrison writes: “Whites had come to see themselves as a managerial class unsuited for labor in the islands’ pathogenic climate.” Harrison, “‘Tender Frame of Man,’” 79.

⁷⁸ Rodger, *Command of the Ocean*, 484-487; Brian Vale and Griffith Edwards, *Physician to the Fleet: the Life and Times of Thomas Trotter, 1760-1832* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2011), 110-123; Crimmin, “British Naval Health, 1700-1800,” 183-200. For scurvy in the mid-eighteenth century, see Rodger, *Wooden World*, 100-103. On scurvy as a disease with “multifocal causes and remedies,” particularly understandings of scurvy among circumnavigating sailors as being caused by absence from land, or “earthsickness,” see Chaplin, “Earthsickness.” On the diagnosis and treatment of scurvy within the context of evolutions in contemporary medical thinking related to social discipline and population studies, see Lawrence, “Disciplining Disease,” 80-106.

⁷⁹ N.A.M. Rodger argues that in this period, “Everywhere in the Navy the disease became very rare.” Rodger, *Command of the Ocean*, 485.

phase of war against France, officers' correspondence from the Jamaica station shows that the eradication of the disease remained substantially incomplete. Near the Môle in July 1797, Hyde Parker noted, "Scurvy still rages" despite his efforts to secure "Vegetables and Wine" for the squadron; two ships had recently returned to port with 200 afflicted seamen apiece.⁸⁰ In 1803, naval surgeon Primrose Blair informed another Jamaican commander, John Duckworth, that scurvy was making "very rapid Progress" among the crews of the squadron. Blair worried about scorbutic sailors' "general Habits of Body," including their propensity to turn the "most trifling Scratches" into "inveterate Ulcers." He suggested that each ship going to sea carry quantities of fruit and vegetables, and that ships at harbor should be supplied with fresh beef. Blair acknowledged that this might bear heavy expense, but justified it both "on the Score of Humanity" as well as the practical point that it would reduce the numbers of men in hospitals.⁸¹ Duckworth agreed and contracted for citrus juice at eight shillings per gallon.⁸²

For naval commanders and other high-ranking officers and medical men, purchasing foodstuffs for their own consumption could prove difficult in a region with such a high cost of living. This was especially rankling for those who felt the need to

⁸⁰ Vice-Admiral Hyde Parker to Evan Nepean, *Queen*, Môle-Saint-Nicolas, 19 July 1797, ADM 1/248, TNA.

⁸¹ Primrose Blair to Rear Admiral Duckworth, Port Royal, Jamaica, 12 July 1803, ADM 1/253, TNA. In 1803, on the other hand, Blair boasted that in his seven years' service in attending to the "Sick afloat" as well as to the "Economy" of all the naval hospitals on land in Jamaica and the Windward Islands, he had "regulated the Supplies of Fruit and Vegetables for the Ships of the Squadron" and saved the government £7,000 sterling per year. Primrose Blair to the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty, Port Royal Harbour, Jamaica, 18 December 1803, ADM 1/253, TNA.

⁸² Rear Admiral Duckworth to Evan Nepean, *Hercule*, Port Royal, Jamaica, 19 July 1803, ADM 1/253, TNA. About a year earlier during an interval of peace, the Admiralty had urged parsimony, instructing Duckworth to issue fruit and vegetables to sick sailors only. Rear Admiral Duckworth to Evan Nepean, *Leviathan*, Port Royal, Jamaica, 15 May 1802, ADM 1/252, TNA.

fulfill the social obligations of “gentlemen” and entertain others.⁸³ Admiral William Parker complained to the Admiralty about running even “a moderate Table” while commander-in-chief at Jamaica from 1794 to 1796. According to Parker, naval officers spent four to five pounds per day purchasing provisions at local markets, where goods “chiefly brought in the American vessels” had become “exceedingly dear,” thanks to large numbers of British soldiers and French refugees who crowded the ports. Parker recalled one American ship captain asking fourteen to sixteen dollars “for a small sheep of about 18 lbs” and about the same for a dozen fowls and ducks “half starved from a long voyage.” Parker contrasted his situation with that of army officers, who were “allowed any expence” for their “Table” from the War Office and could also petition for “Island pay” (about fifty pounds per year) from the colonial assembly. Army officers, Parker went on, held administrative appointments from which they might draw additional pay, and they could plant vegetable gardens in occupied territories.⁸⁴

After returning to England in mid-1796, Parker pressed his point with the Admiralty. He wrote that upon arriving in Jamaica, he had “Six Army Officers on Board & as many Pilots & Guides for three Months.” Four of the officers slept in Parker’s cabin, while the remaining two “were in the Ward Room but dined with me alternately.” The pilots and guides, twelve in number, were “French Gentlemen,” assigned to mess with warrant officers, who seldom had “fresh stock.” Parker felt that it was his duty to make the French feel “comfortable,” so he provided wine and porter, and “every Day

⁸³ On the high cost of living in occupied Saint-Domingue, see Geggus, *Slavery, War, Revolution*, 280. On the emergence of surgeons as “gentlemen” in social status, see Lawrence, “Disciplining Disease,” 85.

⁸⁴ Vice-Admiral William Parker to Evan Nepean, *Swiftsure*, Môle-Saint-Nicolas, 5 April 1796, ADM 1/247; William Parker to Evan Nepean, *Raisonable*, Môle-Saint-Nicolas, 27 August 1795, ADM 1/246, TNA.

when at Sea” he would provide them with “like proportion of fresh Stock Viz. Sheep, Pork & Poultry that was to be used at my Table, where, One, & sometimes two were also invited every Day.” Moreover, Parker claimed that he would receive even more guests when his flagship sailed between the Môle and Le Cap and would encounter the army transports arriving from Ireland: “I was run to a very great expence for when the Ship was at Anchor my Table was generally well fill’d by Army Officers both English & French waiting upon the General, that I’ve often exceeded twenty at Table.” Parker asked to be reimbursed £1100 sterling, noting bitterly that he had heard General Adam Williamson’s yearly table money amounted to £5,000, and that even an army *major* stationed at the Môle had been reimbursed five pounds per diem.⁸⁵

Counterbalancing William Parker’s cries of poverty, prize money obtained through the capture of enemy and neutral trade ships—floating treasure chests when laden with plantation produce—were a route to riches for naval commanders on the West Indies stations.⁸⁶ Hyde Parker netted more than £200,000 sterling in a few years as commander at Jamaica—tropical spoils that transformed him into a landed gentlemen back home.⁸⁷ But prize money did not always trickle down to everyone. In 1803, naval surgeon Primrose Blair complained to the Admiralty that he received only 20 shillings per diem for his expenses. Unlike some naval surgeons who took part in cruising voyages, Blair had received what he considered a meager £200 sterling in prize money, because he was forced to remain in port and manage hospitals and hospital ships. As a

⁸⁵ Rear Admiral William Parker to Evan Nepean, Greenwich, England, 10 October 1796, ADM 1/247, TNA.

⁸⁶ On prize money in this period, see Rodger, *Command of the Ocean*, 522-525.

⁸⁷ Clive Wilkinson, “Sir Hyde Parker, (1793-1807),” *ODNB*, www.oxforddnb.com, accessed 6 November 2014.

result, Blair noted that he ran a “most parsimonious Table indeed,” receiving pay “hardly sufficient to furnish me with a Dinner.”⁸⁸

Sailors and rank-and-file soldiers were not merely passive consumers of provisions, but rather expressed preferences through a variety of means. Most obviously, they might refuse rations. Naval surgeon Leonard Gillespie lamented that sauerkraut — famously issued by James Cook on circumnavigational voyages — was no longer issued on naval vessels because seamen “made use of it with reluctance.” Gillespie also noted that sailors in the West Indies voted with their stomachs even more directly when it came to oatmeal: they “seem to make it a point of honour to abandon it to the hogs.” Gillespie cited another instance of sailors’ expressing choice in food when anatomizing an outbreak of yellow fever on the Leeward Islands station. He surmised that it was caused by the “too abundant usage of animal-food,” noting: “every man in health had a pound of fresh beef every day; which ... after a passage of some weeks, was very reasonably suspected of not being wholesome.” Gillespie cited the example of the *Vanguard*, whose captain had “humanely” purchased fresh beef from the Spanish mainland colonies during the hurricane season. When “epidemic sickness” broke out on the ship, the entire crew, including the surgeon and officers, blamed the meat, “insomuch that many of them in health preferred salt provisions.”⁸⁹ When it came to provisioning soldiers, Jamaican authorities had to be mindful about differences among the men receiving “island” (colonial) pay versus pay from “Government” (London). In 1804, Governor Nugent wrote to Whitehall: “It has not been customary to issue Wine to the Troops upon this

⁸⁸ Primrose Blair to the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty, Port Royal Harbour, Jamaica, 18 December 1803, ADM 1/253, TNA.

⁸⁹ Gillespie, *Observations on the diseases which prevailed on board a part of His Majesty's squadron*, 5-6, 161.

Establishment, & as the 3,000 Men victualled by the Island receive Rum, the remaining Numbers, who are to be subsisted by Government, would murmur were they to be upon a different Footing from the others.”⁹⁰

Nonetheless, soldiers and sailors faced little choice in what they consumed beyond what they could purchase, barter for, or steal. They were vital nodes at the end of Atlantic-wide and local supply networks of processed and fresh comestibles intended not for the pleasure of consumers, but rather to keep men in fighting shape. Naval commanders and army officers often worked in close coordination as quasi-mercantile actors in order to ensure that these supply networks functioned well. Their correspondence and accounts attest to frequent logistical and administrative snags, but mostly provide evidence of how this system operated within relatively controlled and enclosed environments such as warships, garrisons, and hospitals. Tracing how one cavalry officer in a zone of conflict procured food, clothing, and shelter for himself reveals a much more fluid picture of how some individuals crafted personalized provisioning regimes based on idiosyncratic beliefs regarding health in the tropics.

Mercenary Lifeways

Englishman Thomas Phipps Howard entered the mercenary corps known as the York Hussars in 1794. He served for twenty-one years as a lieutenant and captain. The Hussars were composed mainly of French, German, and British natives. Howard was somewhat cosmopolitan himself: he had lived in Switzerland for one year and was fluent in French, “indicating,” in the words of historian Roger Buckley, “that he came from

⁹⁰ Nugent to J. Sullivan, 21 July 1804, Jamaica, f. 64, CO 137/12, TNA.

Britain's educated middle class." European imperial regimes relied heavily on mercenaries as hired guns for use in theaters of war around the globe in the eighteenth century. Howard served in one ill-fated campaign under British forces against French revolutionary arms in the Netherlands. He was then sent for service in Saint-Domingue from 1796 to 1798. By this time, the British occupation was winding down, and Howard's regiment was mainly involved in protecting British posts against formerly enslaved revolutionary forces that had consolidated under the command of Toussaint Louverture. Howard left a detailed private journal of his time in Saint-Domingue, probably with an eye toward future publication. (It never happened.) This document is a rich source on the ravages of yellow fever and other diseases contracted by the invading forces. The journal also sheds light on how concerns related to provisioning shaped long-term strategies and daily operations among competing forces in Saint-Domingue. More interestingly, Howard's journal enables us to reconstruct the occupation of Saint-Domingue as a form of provisioning encounter between different regimes of health—British, French, royalist, revolutionary, white, black, free, enslaved. Howard's experiences with and musings on the interconnections between food, clothing, shelter, and the various forms of medical care that he encountered in Saint-Domingue provide a window on how European soldiers attempted to survive service in the tropics.⁹¹

The transport ship that carried Howard and the York Hussars across the ocean first landed at Bridgetown, Barbados, in April 1796. The surrounding hinterlands of port towns in the Lesser Antilles were often easily stretched beyond their capacity to supply

⁹¹ On Howard's career, the York Hussars, and the British occupation of Saint-Domingue, see Roger Norman Buckley, ed., *The Haitian Journal of Lieutenant Howard, York Hussars, 1796-1798* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1985), xv-liv.

the floating cities constituted by naval squadrons, military transport ships, and merchant vessels.⁹² Upon his arrival, Howard was disappointed to find that islands markets contained little fruit: “it being in the first place very scarce & in the second much inferior to what we had been accustomed to in Europe; as well as every other necessary of Life which is not so much to be wondered at when we consider that this little Island now feeds at least 50,000 Foreigners every Day.” After a few days in Barbados, he pessimistically remarked: “You meet on landing several Coffee Houses & Taverns where for a most exorbitant Price, at least while we lay there, you are regaled with a very bad Dinner.”⁹³

Howard’s visits to town probably at least relieved some of the boredom as the corps awaited transport to Saint-Domingue. Officers and rank-and-file soldiers were mostly confined onboard as it was deemed better for their health than residing onshore.⁹⁴

Looking to enliven rationed fare, Howard and other officers would send enslaved servants into port towns to purchase vegetables, fruits, and other slave-grown produce at Sunday markets. Howard would quickly receive a lesson in how slaves might use any kind of increased physical mobility as an opportunity to escape their masters. On one Sunday in April, Howard wrote: “send my Servant Onshoar to purchase fresh Provisions as we expect to sail for St. Domingo every Minute.” The next day, he remarked: “my Servant not yet returned from the Town.” And by Tuesday: “The Servant not returned

⁹² Dirks, *Black Saturnalia*, 71.

⁹³ Buckley, ed., *The Haitian Journal of Lieutenant Howard*, 25. No wonder the high costs: in addition to an influx of French royalist *émigrés* from Martinique, Howard reckoned that floating in the harbor there were “at a moderate Calculation 400 Sail of Men of War, Frigates, Transports and Merchantmen.”

⁹⁴ Soldiers would typically train on land only from three to eight o’clock in the morning each day in order to avoid the heat of the sun before returning to the ships. Duffy, *Soldiers, Sugar, & Seapower*, 61.

therefore conclude is run-away.”⁹⁵ The laconic nature of Howard’s entries suggest that such escapes were not regarded as unusual.

The Hussars soon departed for Jamaica and then Saint-Domingue. Howard grew fond of messing with his fellow officers whenever possible in the war-torn colony. He noted that breakfast “in this Country is all the same as an European Dinner—as well for the Number of hot Dishes as the Quantity of wine drank.” He even became one of the “Founders” of a dining club called the St. Domingo Cavalrie Club, consisting of British, French, and German officers in his regiment and others. He noted: “This Society has been Instituted in Commemoration of our Services in this Island, & our attachment to a beloved Sovereign; Loyalty being the Motto of the Club.” The members made plans to gather four times per year in Port-au-Prince while on service in the island, and would thereafter meet twice per year at Limner’s coffee house on Conduit Street in London. Regular mess routines would prove difficult to establish for most of Howard’s time in the island, though. Stationed near Port-au-Prince toward the end of his service in Saint-Domingue, he noted that the regiment, while staying in a plantation great house, “formed a regular Mess, the first since we had left Southampton.”⁹⁶

Howard’s experiences with various permanent and temporary shelters were likewise irregular and improvisational. Toward the end of his service, his regiment was stationed in a broad, contested plain above Port-au-Prince called the Cul de Sac, which before the revolution had been the site of some of Saint-Domingue’s richest coffee and

⁹⁵ Buckley, ed., *The Haitian Journal of Lieutenant Howard*, 28.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 115, 119, 126. For a reference to Limner’s as a coffee house (Howard did not specify the type of establishment), see *The Picture of London for 1818; Being a Correct Guide to all the Curiosities, Amusements, Exhibitions, Public Establishments, and Remarkable Objects, in and Near London* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1818 [19th ed.]), 415.

sugar plantations. While there, the regiment encamped on the grounds of the Le Pine sugar estate. The officers lodged in the great house, which testified to the opulence and pretensions of Saint-Domingue's *grand blancs* in the pre-revolutionary period: "We Arrived there about 1 oclock in the Afternoon & were greatly Surprised to find the House very large & one of the best we had yet seen in the Colony, it being built & fitted-up totally in the European Age. The Rooms [were] papered with Marble floors, etc., etc." Other accommodations were less grand. Encamped at another nearby sugar estate, Rose Blanche, Howard noted that the great house and sugar works "had been burnt to the Ground." The officers set themselves up in a stable, and the rest of the men lodged in "two large Sugar Magazines." According to Howard, the party tried to make the most of things: "For the first two or three Days we found ourselves very hard put to it for Provisions, however having procured a black Man Cook from the Bourg of Croix de Bouquet, we began to find ourselves more comfortable."⁹⁷

Food and water scarcity were real concerns for armies on campaign. British-allied and Republican forces were locked in constant conflict over supplies. In 1797, Howard witnessed Toussaint's forces attempt an extended siege of Fort Churchill, near St. Marc. Following the arrival of about 500 French royalist reinforcements, Toussaint's men retreated, owing at least in part, Howard wrote, "I conjecture, [to] an absolute want of Provisions." Lands could be easily stripped of sustenance by hungry armies. Howard wrote after his regiment arrived at Mirebalais following a long march: "in the Morning we sent out foraging Parties for Provisions: not a single Article except Water being to be found in the Place." Luckily, one group returned to the encampment later in the day "with

⁹⁷ Ibid.,119.

some Pigs, Fowls, Bannans, etc., etc., as well as Provender for our Horses.” Securing food and water for horses was nearly as constant a concern for the cavalrymen as finding food for their own consumption. The following day, Howard reported that he went “out on a foraging Party & got a large quantity of Mais [Maize] or Indian Corn for our Horses”—the group had to travel as far as eight miles to find it.⁹⁸

Rival forces in Saint-Domingue also fought and died over animal flesh. Toussaint’s army especially prized cattle as valuable sources of fresh meat, not surprisingly, since revolutionary forces had less extensive access to seaborne trade networks than their British adversaries. Hemmed by mountains on either side, the broad plain of the Cul de Sac served as a natural corridor for the passage of cattle from the Spanish side of the island to Port-au-Prince. Toussaint’s forces used the surrounding mountains as bases for raiding the plain. Howard wrote: “it is in the fastnesses of these Mountains that the Enemy have taken Post, who as they find Opportunity make Excursions into the Plain & steal, burn & ass[ass]inate every thing & body that falls in their way.” One morning as Howard’s regiment moved from one part of the Cul de Sac to another, he wrote, “a large Party of Brigands, Horse & foot, attacked an Escort who were convoying about one hundred & fifty Head of Cattle, & owing to the Superiority of their Numbers made themselves Masters of the whole.” While a party of British light infantry and horse militia subsequently killed many of Toussaint’s raiders, Howard was dismayed to note that the captured bullocks “had been already driven into the Woods &

⁹⁸ Ibid., 87-8, 94.

notwithstanding the strict Search that was made after them, very few have yet been discovered.”⁹⁹

Soon after this skirmish, Howard related another instance of conflict over cattle that showed how enemy combatants moved in concert with the grazing needs of mobile herds. Spanish drivers had to push cattle long distances across the border with Santo Domingo and generally encountered poor grazing land along the way. Upon arriving at the Cul de Sac, Spanish drivers would search for good forage land on former plantations in order to fatten cattle for market. Howard observed, “by the time the Beasts come into our possessions they are in general so very lean & fatigued that were they immediately to drive them to market they would fetch little or nothing.” The drivers knew that they were under the relative protection of British forces picketed throughout the plain. One driver wisely requested a military escort from the plain to the port town of St. Marc, where he hoped to sell his herd to the “Kings Purveyor.” Howard approved of the plan, remarking, “the Road from Santo to Archahaye, by which they were to pass was dangerous owing to the country’s being much overgrown with wood & the Brigands so nigh.” Revolutionary soldiers to the number of 700 to 800 did attack the train. This time, British forces recovered all the bullocks except two.¹⁰⁰

Howard’s perceptions of the foodways of Toussaint’s forces were shaped by the fact that the men had been formerly enslaved. He remarked, “they have been so accustomed to frugality of Diet that three or four Bannans with a drink of water is sufficient to carry a Negro through a long Day’s fatigue.” Since he believed that the so-called Brigands that he was fighting against had been “long Accustomed to live all their

⁹⁹ Ibid., 120-21.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 123-25.

Lives on a Vegetable Diet,” Howard felt that they held a strategic advantage: “Bannans are to be found every where in the Plains, so that it is next to an impossibility to cut off their Provisions.” He also mentioned the prevalence of sweet potatoes and “several other kind of Herbs peculiar to the Tropicks” among items that Toussaint’s men consumed.¹⁰¹ In Howard’s understanding, interrelationships of race, labor, and sustenance constituted the political economy of militaries in Saint-Domingue.

Howard explicitly linked racial fear and food consumption in one vivid encounter recorded in his journal. It occurred while his regiment went on a long march from the towns of Montrouis to Arcahaie, during which they passed in and out of woods on a road “continually mounting & descending, & in some Places so stony that it was with difficulty we could keep our Horses on their Legs.” There were few, if any, whites remaining in the area, which was thick with enemy forces. The party’s horses hesitated to go forward along the broken path with the onset of night and the outbreak of thunderstorms. The party pressed on, but not without trepidation: “Our greatest fear through all these difficulties was that of losing our Road & taking one, perhaps, that might lead us directly amongst the Brigands, who give no Quarter to their Prisoners and would therefore have immediately put us to some cruel Death.” In deep forest about six miles from their destination, Howard was leading the party and scouted “a great Fire” some distance ahead. Sensing danger, he knew that it could not be from a white habitation. But the party was now eighteen or twenty miles away from where they had begun, and they did not want to re-traverse the “same horrid Road.” Howard wrote that

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 79-80. For the clothing of Toussaint’s forces, Howard remarked: “they for the most part go naked except perhaps a peice [sic] of Cloth tied round their mid[d]les.”

he “offered Myself as Spy” and snuck ahead in the bushes to ascertain the cause of the fire. The rest of the party remained behind, “mounted & armed with Pistols & Sabres.”¹⁰²

According to Howard, he “crept from Bush to Bush” until he came upon “a black Fellow cutting with a long Knife the Carcase of something very Bloody & seven or eight Negroes sitting around the Fire seemingly in very deep Discourse.” Howard, in “Horror,” surmised that a murder had taken place, and that the black men were cannibals. (Drawing from contemporary European cultural stereotypes about the “savagery” of the region’s various inhabitants, he called it “a thing not at all uncustomary amongst the Carribbee Negroes.”) He rushed back to his comrades and told them what he saw. Building up their courage, the mercenaries determined that the only plan of action was to rush them “& then fall on them Sword in Hand & force our Passage as fast as our Horses would carry us.” They apparently created a commotion, for the black men soon fled into the woods. Howard and the other mercenaries would discover that the abandoned carcass was “that of a Calf or some small Beast they had stole & were going to make a Meal on.” Relieved that the threat had passed, the Hussars pressed toward Arcahaie. One can only imagine the disappointment that the party of black men—soldiers, or perhaps people caught between warring sides—must have felt at having to abandon their meaty repast.¹⁰³

More than food, shelter, or any other matter, disease and death relentlessly stalked the pages of Howard’s journal. He personally witnessed hundreds (if not thousands) of instances in which men succumbed to fevers and other illnesses. Howard developed his own understandings of disease prevention and recovery that accorded with but also departed from official prescriptions. Similar to contemporary medical authorities,

¹⁰² Ibid., 65-6.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 66-67.

Howard believed that surviving in the tropics necessitated a number of behavioral adaptations, including moderation in diet and exercise and careful attention to clothing. He first observed that Europeans who arrived during the “sickly Months,” from June to September, when the sun was always “nearly Verticle,” were the most vulnerable to disease. As if intending to write an advice manual, he suggested methods of acclimation to the climate: “Eat often but little at a time; rise very early & partake of the cool of the Morn; either by riding or walking; stay as much in the House during the influence of the Sun as possible; go to bed early; bathe often in luke warm Water; [and] Cloathe Yourself light & make use of Glysters & refreshing Drinks.” Howard also believed that food and disease were closely related. During an outbreak of yellow fever from August to September 1796, he blamed rations of salt provisions for causing extreme mortality rates among his own men, “notwithstanding every precaution I could take.” He did not believe, however, that all “fresh” provisions were salubrious—oranges and soursops he thought were best, but figs, bananas, alligator pears, pineapples, and melons could be “very unwholesome” when overly ripe.¹⁰⁴

Howard was critical of what he deemed the insufficient measures taken by the British government to preserve soldiers’ health on the expedition. He particularly felt that there had been a general unpreparedness on the part of British authorities to provision units that had departed garrisons and were out in the field. In June 1796, Howard was part of one disastrous campaign to take the town of Bombarde, located a day’s march from Môle-Saint-Nicolas. The York Hussars were part of a contingent carrying heavy cannon over difficult terrain to lay siege to the town. He commented, “so ill were Measures taken

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 38 (quoted), 43 (sickly season), 64 (salt provisions).

for supplying the Troops with Provisions & Water, that their Distress was beyond the power of words to express.” Dehydration plagued the soldiers as they left the Môle at nine o’clock in the morning and were exposed to the “Meridian Sun” until four o’clock in the late afternoon, having “no water in their Canteens or any to be met with on the Road.” Howard further painted the scene: “At every three or four hundred y[ar]ds you meet Men lying on their backs, their Tongues lolling out of their Mouths & in the agonies of Death for want of Water.” He reported that some men resorted to drinking their own urine to stay alive, but alas, “upwards of 50 Men die[d] in a March of 12 Miles.”¹⁰⁵

In another passage, Howard proffered theories on the differential health effects of bodies being at rest versus being in motion. He criticized the rigorous transport of “heavy Baggage” that soldiers were often called upon to perform, since it meant that they could not also carry tents “& proper Provisions.” As a result, “The Men are obliged to sleep in the open fields, exposed to the heavy showers known by the Name of West India Rains: not to be conceived in Europe; and the Damps arising after them, & exhalations of which, nothing can be more prejudicial to Health.” Interestingly, Howard believed that few men actually fell sick while marching, “which may be accounted for from their Minds being employed & bearing the Body up against it.” Rather, it was at the first halt—“for men cannot always be marching”—that they “fall down by hundreds, mostly attacked with intermittents [fevers] which are dreadful in this Climate, generally proving fatal & thus any future Expedition is at least for some time rendered impracticable.” Howard was here articulating a rebuttal to the “fallaciousness of an opinion adopted by Gen: Simcoe, on his

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 42. Michael Duffy confirms Howard’s lurid account of the difficulties of the march: *Soldiers, Sugar, and Seapower*, 249.

arrival here & greatly approved by many, that the Deseases so prevalent amongst the Soldiers arose from their inaction.”¹⁰⁶

One episode in Howard’s journal showed that medical practice was not solely the domain of European actors in Saint-Domingue. One Sunday in August 1797, Howard and a fellow officer were invited to dine onboard the HMS *Abergavenny*, a guard ship anchored in the harbor at Port-au-Prince. The two guests determined to head back to shore in a cutter around five o’clock, before the usual onset of “Evening Rains” and thunder and lightning. About ten minutes into their journey, however, “it began to blow, Thunder, Light[ning] & Rain in the most frightful Manner.” The two men were forced to retreat back to the ship, though not before a frightening two-hour interlude in which their small craft was “drove out directly to sea” by strong wind. While the cutter eventually made it safely back to the *Abergavenny*, Howard would blame the incident for “a very severe fit of illness” that lasted for ten or twelve days from his being “completely soaked by these Rains.” After recovering, he mentioned, “a kind of dulness hung over me which I could not possibly shake off. I eat with no Appetite & could enjoy no kind of Society whatever.” Looking to shake the melancholy, Howard met with a friend and went to “a Wine House & drank our Bottle each, which could by no means be called a Debauch.” He noted, however, that he felt as drunk as if he had consumed a half-dozen bottles. (His friend assured him that it must have been bad wine.) After messing with his fellow officers the next night, Howard “was seized with one of the most horrid fevers this Country would engender.” He received medical care from the chief army doctor, but

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 95-6.

when his fever would not abate, everyone around him, including himself, figured that he would soon die.¹⁰⁷

As Howard lay seemingly on death's doorstep, a new character emerged in the pages of his journal—"My black Girl," named Victoire Dieudonne. Probably an enslaved mistress, Dieudonne had apparently been at his bedside unstintingly throughout the fever. At a critical moment, Howard recorded that Dieudonne, "without saying any thing to the Doctors went & prepared a Dose after the method of her Country [in Africa], which without saying any thing to any body she got me to swallow." This "Dose" put Howard immediately to sleep for about two hours, after which he awoke "flooded" in sweat: "Shirt after shirt was changed 'till towards the Morning Guns when I fell in a fine sleep & waked in the Morn:, a compleat Convalescent." While not directly commending Dieudonne's ministrations, Howard described the bout of sweating as "a fortunate Crisis," for he believed that intense perspiration usually signaled the beginning of a patient's recovery. He noted that a "slight Disentery" would have been a good sign, too, since "it compleatly carries off the offending Humours." Instead, Howard developed a "Dozen large boils on my back that formed Heads from which issued a quantity of thick purulent Matter," which he noted were also "esteemed in the West Indies very wholesome," albeit incredibly painful.¹⁰⁸

Victoire Dieudonne, silenced in the journal before the incident, is never brought up in its pages again. Why Howard would be so reticent to mention her—even if he intended to publish—is not entirely obvious. Other contemporary white male diarists like Thomas Thistlewood and John Gabriel Stedman were much more explicit in recording

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 115-6.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 116.

their sexual exploits and corresponding exploitation of black women in Caribbean slave societies.¹⁰⁹ More to the point, Howard's retelling of the incident suggests that for European travelers in the tropics, there could coexist some belief in the efficacy of African medicine and ambivalence about whites' occasional reliance on black healers. Howard was careful to note *twice* that Dieudonne had given him the dose "without saying any thing" to anyone nearby, implying that she would not have received official sanction to do so. But Howard also did not record whether or not he protested Dieudonne's actions; maybe he was too delirious to remonstrate or call for assistance, or perhaps he believed from his own observations that African-based medicine could be effective. For her part, Dieudonne clearly wanted to keep Howard alive, likely valuing some access that the officer provided to a better lifestyle. She might even have viewed him as a ticket out of Saint-Domingue and to the relative safety of Jamaica or somewhere else. Her own motivations in helping Howard as well as her conceptions of medicine were ultimately subsumed within the perspective of his journal. Howard accepted the dose and implicitly acknowledged its efficacy. But then his entry re-inscribed African medicine within European conceptions of disease recovery that revolved around humoral theory, climatic adaptation, and moderation in the consumption of food and alcohol.

Howard departed Saint-Domingue for Jamaica in late 1798. This picaresque account of his service has shown how different provisioning regimes overlapped and competed with one another in the conflict zone. In the experiences recorded in his journal, there were often no clear boundaries between white and black, free and slave,

¹⁰⁹ On Thistlewood, see Trevor Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire: Thomas Thistlewood and His Slaves in the Anglo-Jamaican World* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2004). For Stedman's published exploits: John Gabriel Stedman, *Narrative of a Five Years' Expedition Against the Revolted Negroes of Suriname, in Guiana, on the Wild Coast of South America, from the Year 1772, to 1777* (London: J. Johnson and J. Edwards, 1796).

British and French, monarchy and republic. Howard moved fluidly—if not always easily—between different modes of eating and maintaining health: messing with officers of different nationalities; disagreeing with superiors about why soldiers fell sick so often on marches; getting drunk when he felt like it in port towns; having his life saved by “country” medicine from a black woman. Mirroring his soldierly status—serving under the forces of the British Crown, but not under British colors himself—Howard was likewise mercenary in crafting his lifeways. He was not subject to any one strict provisioning code, but rather chose or accepted among forms of food, clothing, shelter, and medical care as preference and necessity alternately offered and dictated. Other actors in the region lived under much more constrained circumstances. They were more subject to the whims of naval, military, and colonial authorities in how they asked for and received provision.

Refugees

Britain’s West Indian colonies experienced a refugee crisis on an unprecedented scale in the late-eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. American loyalists and their slaves had first fled to the region in large numbers in the years following 1783. Colonial governments could expect help from the British Treasury in temporarily feeding and housing the loyalists and eventually providing plots of land and implements of husbandry to settle them. The situation would play out differently in the 1790s when it came to refugees who were not British subjects. One group in particular, French royalist *émigrés* washed up on the shores of the British Caribbean colonies following the outbreak of the French Revolution. Their numbers multiplied in the wake of the British Crown’s military

successes and setbacks in the region. Most of the *émigrés* clustered in port towns and many of them brought slaves with them. Families and individuals obtained public relief for subsistence and lodging money from the coffers of the Sick and Hurt Board, the Transport Office, and the Treasury. Reducing expenses on feeding, clothing, and sheltering the *émigrés* became a major concern for British authorities in Jamaica—and a frequent subject of official disputes. While some French planters would eventually establish coffee estates in the interior of Jamaica, most others departed (or were expelled) for the U.S., Cuba, or other sites outside of the British Empire.¹¹⁰

Dominica was flooded with French royalist refugees after the initial failure of the British invasion of Martinique in June 1793. Governor James Bruce had originally thought that the island was only going to receive 150 Royalists “with a Month’s Provisions” arriving in army and naval transports. However, Bruce wrote in June 1793 that there were no fewer than 5,000 refugees “of all descriptions” in Roseau: “So crowded is the Town, that numbers lye in Sheds and under the Galleries of the Houses.” The governor wished that many of the refugees could have been sent to Antigua and other islands in order to spread the burden of provisioning them. Colonial authorities also considered this influx a threat to the maintenance of social order in racially divided societies: “Such numbers [of refugees] not only endanger the present safety of the Island,

¹¹⁰ For the American loyalist diaspora, see Maya Jasanoff, *Liberty’s Exiles: American Loyalists in the Revolutionary World* (New York: Vintage, 2012). For the most complete account of French royalist refugees in Jamaica, see Philip Wright and Gabriel Debien, “Les Colons de Saint-Domingue Passes a la Jamaïque (1792-1835),” *Bulletin de la Societe d’Histoire de la Guadeloupe*, no. 26 (1975). On *émigrés* in Jamaica and other parts of the British Caribbean and Atlantic world, see also, Ragatz, *Fall of the Planter Class*, 236-8; Geggus, *Slavery, War, and Revolution*, 271-3; Patrick Bryan, “*Émigré*: Conflict and Reconciliation: the French *Émigré* in Nineteenth Century Jamaica,” *The Haiti-Jamaica Connection* (University of the West Indies, Mona, Jamaica, 2004), 17-30; Ashli White, *Encountering Revolution: Haiti and the Making of the Early Republic* (Baltimore: JHU Press, 2010). On the emergence of the concept of the “refugee” in this time and place, see Kit Candlin, “The Expansion of the Idea of the Refugee in the Early-Nineteenth Century Atlantic World,” *Slavery & Abolition*, vol. 30, no. 4 (December 2009), 521-544.

from the very great number of Mulattoes and Negroes, but cause a scarcity of Provisions.” Acting on his own initiative, Governor Bruce purchased 600 barrels of flour from two U.S. vessels that had ferried a number of refugees to the island. He also kept ports open to neutral vessels carrying provisions, noting the need to feed large numbers of troops who would “keep such a number of Armed Mulattoes and Negroes in awe.”¹¹¹

Official goodwill toward the *émigrés* did not last long in Dominica. The island was already contending with a body of American loyalist refugees and their slaves who had fled to the island in the 1780s.¹¹² In November 1793, Governor Bruce wrote to Whitehall: “The great number of those unfortunate [American] Loyalists consume an immense quantity of Flour and Fish. I am still obliged to issue Six Thousand pounds of Flour, and Three Thousand Five hundred pounds of Fish per Week.” Bruce informed the metropolitan authorities that he was compelled to make ad hoc decisions on what to feed the French refugees. He utilized what had become the standard administrative unit for reckoning human necessity—the soldier’s ration—though he would not grant it to them: “Repeated applications have been made to me to allow the better sort of People a Soldiers Ration, which I would not consent to. Their wretched condition is truly deplorable—Many of the first class having spent the little Money they brought with them.”¹¹³ In small islands with limited resources, humanity had its limits. Bruce and subsequent Dominica

¹¹¹ James Bruce to General Bruce, Dominica, 25 June 1793, CO 71/25, TNA. British officers had been encouraged by royalist colonists to attempt the invasion: Duffy, *Soldiers, Sugar, and Seapower*, 35-37.

¹¹² Maya Jasanoff finds that 225 whites and 444 blacks went to Dominica following the cession of East Florida to Spain in 1784. Jasanoff, *Liberty’s Exiles*, 354-55.

¹¹³ Bruce to Dundas, Dominica, 8 November 1793, no. 46, CO 71/25, TNA.

governors systematically reduced the number of French refugees and slaves receiving rations until it was almost zero within a few years.¹¹⁴

Jamaica received much larger numbers of *émigrés* and slaves from Saint-Domingue and other French possessions than did the islands of the eastern Caribbean. The refugee situation in Jamaica presented a much more complicated case for British officials stemming from how expectations for provision had been established during interactions between British forces and locals during the occupation of Saint-Domingue (1793-1798). British military forces and administrators were centered in the towns of Môle-Saint-Nicolas in the northwest; Saint Marc, Arcahaie, and Port-au-Prince in the center; and Jacmel and Jeremie in the South.¹¹⁵ French royalist slaveholders and families quickly flocked to these towns, seeking protection and provision. They immediately put stress on British supply lines. In November 1793, a British army officer at Jeremie reported that there were two “different Camps” of about 1,600 French people in the southern part of the island, including “Servants & poor Emigrants,” with even more flooding in from Port-au-Prince and Aux Cayes. The officer wrote that the refugees “have hitherto been accustomed to be supplied with every kind of necessary exclusive of Provisions, I mean Wine, Candles, Soap, & Cloathing &c.” He sourly noted that the provisions were “considerably more than what is allowed to Soldiers; and even that is a Ration which we rather wish than expect to be able to bring to them [the French] immediately.” He worried that this “considerable expence” would make it difficult for the

¹¹⁴ See for instance, J. Matson to Portland, No. 5, 12 October 1796; and J. Matson to Portland, No. 9, 22 Nov. 1796, CO 71/29, TNA.

¹¹⁵ Geggus, *Slavery, War, and Revolution*, 228-233.

British expeditionary forces to provide “Salt Provisions both for the Camps & our own Troops.”¹¹⁶

Môle-Saint-Nicolas, a backwater before the invasion, was the town most “transformed” by the British occupation. By 1793-94, most of its 2,500 residents were refugees from surrounding parishes—and half of them were slaves.¹¹⁷ In late 1793, officer William Dansey reported from the Môle that the flood of refugees who responded to a British proclamation “is very distressing to me at this place, as they construe it into an invitation to come here for assistance and protection, that is Provisions, and safety from their Enemies.” Dansey described the “influx of Refugees” as “a great burthen,” considering that the army was already doling out one-month’s pay for French soldiers at the garrison (£700-800 sterling). Overwhelmed, Dansey created a “Board of Police,” consisting of the former attorney general at Le Cap and five other men: “they are to meet three days in the week for the purpose of examining all Refugees, and of hearing all complaints amongst the Inhabitants which it is impossible for me to attend to or decide on without such Assistance.”¹¹⁸ Back in Jamaica, Governor Adam Williamson opened Jamaica’s ports to neutral traders in late 1793 because the occupation of Saint-Domingue “has encreased the demand for provisions to a very great extent; as Rations are obliged to be furnished to a very considerable body of french at the advanced posts, at the Garrison of the Môle, and others who took refuge under the British Government.”¹¹⁹

¹¹⁶ Letter from Jeremie, Saint-Domingue, 18 November 1793, f. 49-50, CO 137/92, TNA.

¹¹⁷ Geggus, *Slavery, War, and Revolution*, 232-233.

¹¹⁸ William Dansey to Adam Williamson, Môle-Saint-Nicolas, 25 October 1793, f. 341-347, CO 137/91, TNA. On Whitelocke’s proclamation, see Geggus, *Slavery, War, and Revolution*, 107-8.

¹¹⁹ Adam Williamson to Henry Dundas, King’s House, Jamaica, 18 January 1794, f. 173, CO 137/92, TNA.

British officers in Saint-Domingue faced difficulties in comprehending provisioning crises throughout the distant corners of the occupied zone. This was largely due to the fact that they were hemmed in to port cities and had to communicate and receive supplies mainly via sea routes.¹²⁰ In March 1794, one harried officer reported from Leogane in the south-central part of the colony that he was “almost exhausted with Fatigue and attention to all the wants and applications of every one.” The officer explained that the toll of issuing 5,000 rations per diem to “Men, Women and Children” had reduced army stores of provisions to five-days’ worth for everyone. While the officer requested additional supplies from elsewhere, he understood that his request might not be fulfilled: “I have sent to the Mole, tho’ I am told they have not much, also to Jeremie, which I also understand has but little.”¹²¹ French claims upon British forces for salt rations and other provisions even came from places outside the occupied zone. At St. Marc, Major Thomas Brisbane reported in December 1793, “people are constantly flocking in from Port au Prince” to British camps. Meanwhile, two nearby towns had recently come under Spanish occupation, which distressed the inhabitants: “I am pestered very much with the people of petite Riviere & Veritte” for food and other necessities. Brisbane at first prohibited the exportation of corn from the occupation center of Arcahaie, but when the commandant of Petite Riviere sent him a “very supplicating Letter,” Brisbane relented and allowed corn and wine to be sent there.¹²²

Great Britain’s efforts to take control over the entirety of Saint-Domingue and reinstitute plantation slavery were, of course, spectacularly unsuccessful. But official

¹²⁰ Buckley, *The Haitian Journal of Lieutenant Howard*, xxviii.

¹²¹ Commander William Smith to Adam Williamson, Leogane, 22 March 1794, f. 72-3, CO 137/93, TNA.

¹²² Copy of Major Thomas Brisbane’s Letter to Major James Grant, St. Marc, 27 December 1793, f. 216-217, CO 137/92, TNA.

protocols for rationing both whites and slaves in the colony demonstrated the increasing administrative convergence of provisioning for military forces and slave labor forces. At Jeremie, handouts “For White People” consisted of the following for one man per week: a bottle of rum; 9 lbs. flour; 6 lbs. beef or 4 lbs. pork; 2 lbs rice or pease; and 6 oz. butter. Slaves, on the other hand, received weekly rations similar to what would be doled out on plantations: a bottle of rum; 7 lbs. biscuit; 4 lbs. salt fish or 14 herrings. Additionally, “some wine” was provided for sick whites and blacks, “[a] few Shoes for poor White People or free Negroes,” and “Oznabrigs and Hatts for the Negroes.” These last items were intended to shield slaves from the sun and rain while they were being put to agricultural work under the watchful encouragement of the occupying forces.¹²³

French families and their slaves had begun seeking refuge in Jamaica early in the occupation, and they would take with them the expectations for receiving provision that they had developed in Saint-Domingue. In April 1795, Governor Balcarres wrote to Adam Williamson, who was then on campaign in Saint-Domingue, that there were 229 French families in Kingston, with 107 families receiving subsistence money, and another 122 “on the Eve of applying for Relief, having expended the Property, which they brought with them.”¹²⁴ The general evacuation of British forces in late 1798 generated an even greater influx of *émigrés* into Jamaica.¹²⁵ In October, Balcarres counted 1,217 free people—enumerated under separate headings of male and female whites, *gens de couleur*, and free blacks—and 1,600 slaves (700 male and 900 female). The governor assured Whitehall that only 200 had been admitted by his authority and with the advice of

¹²³ Enclosure No. 17, Rate of the Ration at Jeremie, 25 November 1793, f. 56, CO 137/92, TNA.

¹²⁴ Balcarres to Adam Williamson, Spanish Town, Jamaica, 27 April 1795, f. 22-23, CO 137/95, TNA.

¹²⁵ Wright and Debien, “Les Colons,” 89.

the council; the rest had been allowed entry “either from a defect of the Laws, or on the ground of Humanity.” According to Balcarres, one effect of the influx was that it “has increased every necessary of Life to such an enormous height, as to make me apprehensive of the most poignant misery to those unhappy Emigrants.” Balcarres estimated that the cost of lodging had risen “ten-fold” in Kingston, with the “hire of two small up-stairs Rooms” at 100 dollars per month and three-months’ rent demanded up front.¹²⁶

British authorities as well as French officials initially combined to administer provision to the *émigrés* in Jamaica. Governor Williamson had split their provisioning under two authorities: subsistence money came from the agent (or commissary) for prisoners of war at Jamaica under the Admiralty’s Sick and Hurt Board (later Transport Board); and “Lodging” pay was doled out by several French emigrant administrators who received funds from the British Treasury.¹²⁷ Subsequently, Governor Balcarres, naval commanders on the Jamaica station, and the Secretary of State of the Colonies in London would recoil at the notion of placing French refugees on the same footing as prisoners of war and parolees.¹²⁸ Governor Balcarres and Admiral William Parker worked together to check the two lists against one another and remove *émigrés* who had left Jamaica for the U.S., Cuba, and other locales. Facing pressure from metropolitan authorities to reduce provisioning expenses related to the refugees, governors were confronted with material and moral quandaries about what constituted adequate provision. Occasionally, they admitted mistakes: “Many very hard cases however occurred & Families were struck off,

¹²⁶ Lord Balcarres to the Duke of Portland, 29 October 1798, f. 167, CO 137/100, TNA.

¹²⁷ Lord Balcarres to the Duke of Portland, Jamaica, 24 November 1796, f. 56-62, CO 137/98, TNA.

¹²⁸ Wright and Debien, “Les Colons,” 96. See for example, Lord Balcarres to the Duke of Portland, Jamaica, 15 April 1799, f. 348, CO 137/101, TNA.

who upon Minute Investigation ought not to have lost the Secours.” Nonetheless, the Balcarres proudly reported reductions in lodging money and other provisioning expenses across the board.¹²⁹ Misunderstandings would also crop up between Jamaican governors and figures in Whitehall attempting to square metropolitan policy and dictates with colonial practice and necessity. For instance, officials at Whitehall demanded that “all those who are capable of procuring subsistence for themselves” be struck off, to which an exasperated Balcarres replied in April 1797:

If I follow the exact Letter of your Grace’s order in this point, I must strike from the List all married women who are not infirm, as also such of their Daughters who are grown up. I must consider the whole as Individuals, and not as Families. Boys of 16 years of age have always been struck off, and young women on their marriage; and I have, I may say, almost uniformly refused to add any new Person to the List. I, therefore, beg to request your Grace’s Instructions whether it is meant to continue on the List the wives and unmarried Daughters of those Men who by age or infirmities are rendered incapable of procuring their own livelihood: it being understood that whenever a married woman or her Daughter procures by their own industry a livelihood for themselves, they are of course to be struck off the List.¹³⁰

Balcarres was nonetheless quick to remind his superiors that he kept a firm hand on expenses. He refused many entreaties from recently arrived French families, pretending,

¹²⁹ Lord Balcarres to the Duke of Portland, Jamaica, 24 November 1796, f. 56-62, CO 137/98, TNA. For future payments made to French emigrants, see Duke of Portland to Balcarres, Whitehall, 14 January 1797, f. 6-7, CO 137/98, TNA. Balcarres commended his own actions alongside Parker’s in reducing the average monthly subsistence account from “at least” £2,550 sterling to less than £1,550. (Enclosed accounts would show average subsistence expenses of £1,374.11 sterling for subsistence and £345.2.4 for lodging.) Regarding the administrative confusion, Balcarres wrote: “I had a right to assume that the whole was understood at Home; the reverse being the case, any fault for the want of elucidation cannot remain at my door.” Lord Balcarres to the Duke of Portland, Jamaica, 14 April 1799, f. 342-344, CO 137/101, TNA. In another letter to Whitehall, Balcarres remarked on the “obscurity” of the initial reasoning for categorizing emigrants as prisoners of war and granting them parole “the same as if they were Enemies.” Balcarres had complained about this “bitterly” to Portland as “containing improper Principles within my Government,” which led to Innes’ dismissal as agent for prisoners. Balcarres kept the standard double allowances for prisoners despite his disapproval of the emigrants being placed under that administration: “As it seemed a very good way, and very simple, I made no alternation; and they now receive their subsistence according to that Rate.” Lord Balcarres to Charles Long, Jamaica, 20 February 1797, f. 346-347, CO 137/101, TNA. See also, Lord Balcarres to the Duke of Portland, Jamaica, 14 April 1799, f. 342-344, CO 137/101, TNA.

¹³⁰ Lord Balcarres to the Duke of Portland, Jamaica, 7 April 1797, f. 197, CO 137/98, TNA.

“that I had received positive orders to admit no more, of any description, upon that List.”¹³¹

Correspondence between Balcarres and his superiors in Whitehall grew increasingly philosophical over the questions of what constituted adequate provision, and for whom. In April 1799, he wrote to the Duke of Portland that he could not reduce the bounty given to “the old, infirm, and incapable ... without encroaching upon the very means of their Existence.” The governor went on: “What the difference may be between a decent existence, as we understand the Word, and that Quantum which is barely sufficient to preserve life, I know not.” Lacking clear directions from his superiors, Balcarres attempted to shave off one-quarter of the total monthly expenses through a combination of feigned threats and concrete actions. He promised refugees much less than they would actually receive as a means “to alarm their feelings with a greater Prospect of misery than was likely to take place; in order that they might find some comfort from my receding in part.” Some emigrants would be struck off entirely, such as “Infants born within a certain period (four years).”¹³² In 1800, Balcarres would cease payments altogether, except for “some special cases of misery alone excepted, on which special cases I shall receive His Majesty’s Pleasure.”¹³³ Balcarres’ successor, Lord Nugent, would continue similar policies.¹³⁴

The number of French emigrants who wished to rely solely on British handouts was probably few. Many French had begged Balcarres to give them passage “to the

¹³¹ Lord Balcarres to the Duke of Portland, Jamaica, 29 October 1798, f. 167, CO 137/100, TNA.

¹³² Balcarres to the Duke of Portland, Jamaica, 29 April 1799, CO 137/102, TNA.

¹³³ *Enclosure*, Balcarres to Mssr. De Lavilleon, King’s House, Jamaica, 18 April 1799, CO 137/102, TNA.

¹³⁴ Nugent to Lord Hobart, Jamaica, 19 January 1802, f. 6-7, CO 137/107, TNA. About de la Villeon: “whose Partiality there were many Complaints.” Nugent to Lord Hobart, Jamaica, 4 March 1803, f. 58, CO 137/110, TNA.

United States, with their Slaves: and some to various other parts of the World.”¹³⁵ Many French whites and *gens de couleur* eventually left Jamaica with slaves for those locales. Others remained in the island and were gradually absorbed into local society.¹³⁶

Subsistence and other matters related to provisioning would always be central to how Jamaican authorities dealt with the remaining *émigrés*. Some who stayed sought to regain a measure of their former status by appealing to the British government for help in creating new properties in Jamaica. In October 1798, planters formerly from Grand Anse now residing in Kingston petitioned the Privy Council for support in establishing coffee estates. They noted that their slaves carried over from Saint-Domingue represented the “remains of an ample fortune,” but now, “may prove more ruinous than useful in a Town, where negroes can hardly procure to themselves their own Existence, considering the great number of them Swarming in Kingston.”¹³⁷ Jamaican whites generally wanted French slaves removed from the island altogether. Governor Balcarres planned to enlist all French male slaves over twelve years of age into an army corps. French emigrant families would be allowed to keep male slaves under twelve as well as females. Eligible slaves not fit for service would be sold at Martinique. Balcarres also proposed a corps of “all French Officers who have served His Majesty in Saint Domingo with Credit to themselves, but who at present have no means of subsistence.” The governor believed that this plan would “soften the miseries of numbers of Families who will be reduced to

¹³⁵ Balcarres to the Duke of Portland, Jamaica, 2 January 1800, CO 137/103, TNA. No French would be allowed above the rank of captain in this corp.

¹³⁶ Ragatz, *Fall of the Planter Class*, 236-8; Patrick Bryan, “*Émigré*: Conflict and Reconciliation,” 17-30; Ashli White, *Encountering Revolution*.

¹³⁷ Petition of Planters of Grand Anse, Kingston, Jamaica, 22 October 1798, f. 187, CO 137/100, TNA.

the last scene of distress, several of whom now exist solely on the support of one Male Negro, who brings them commonly 1 Dollar per Day.”¹³⁸

For Jamaican governors, the provisioning of former French slaves who had served under British arms in Saint-Domingue presented a prickly topic. In December 1798, Balcarres wrote to Portland that there had been fifty or sixty black soldiers who had “borne Arms in the British Service” and who were now arrived at Fort Augusta (some with families), receiving rations “at the usual Rate.” About another 150 black soldiers had “got ashore at Kingston ... with their Wives and Children, who are at least 100 more.” Balcarres noted that this latter group “live as they best can” without government aid. With no intention of adding the black soldiers to the list of *émigrés* receiving local support, Balcarres planned to attach them to the black 6th West India Regiment and transport them to Honduras. He wrote of his need to make a quick decision: “I lament being forced to act without due Instructions, and solely upon local considerations.”¹³⁹

Balcarres’ invocation of “local considerations” in the decision to reassign and transport the black soldiers was representative of the general process by which policies were drawn up and (usually) implemented in provisioning *émigrés*. Far from the locus of imperial government in London, British army officers, naval commanders, and governors in Saint-Domingue and Jamaica had to respond on the spot to waves of necessitous new subjects—white, black, *gens de couleur*. French slaveholders, families, and occasionally even slaves could press British authorities for rations and other allowances for a short period of time and thus get help in surviving the tumult of revolution and the rigors of

¹³⁸ Balcarres to the Duke of Portland, Jamaica, 2 January 1800, CO 137/103, TNA. No French would be allowed above the rank of captain in this corp.

¹³⁹ Balcarres to the Duke of Portland, Jamaica, 1 December 1798, f. 49, CO 137/101, TNA.

exile. However, British authorities would reduce rations and subsistence pay as a mechanism to force the majority of *émigrés* to leave Jamaica. This policy stemmed from more than a commitment to economical principles of administration. Rather, Jamaican governors had to balance the needs of hungry refugees against the concerns of Jamaican legislators who feared the spread of racial revolution. Jamaica's planter elite had already been made uneasy by housing vast numbers of non-Britons who needed to be fed, clothed, sheltered, and disciplined in a polyglot and fractious part of the world.

Prisoners of War

From 1793 to 1815, prisoners of war made up by far the majority of temporary subjects of the British Empire in the Caribbean. Prisoners were categorized and sorted according to official regulations alongside *ad hoc* decisions by naval and military authorities. Categorizations took various forms—inmate and parolee; nation and race; healthy and sick—and determined daily and weekly provisioning schedules that were intended to create discipline and order among captives. In practice, neat administrative categories proved slippery to implement. Prisoners held in confinement as well as those on parole could negotiate, undermine, and resist the terms of provision proffered by colonial and imperial authorities. Furthermore, the treatment of prisoners of war constituted an important plank in diplomatic relations between warring states. Opposing forces coordinated for the regular exchange of prisoners and made efforts to ensure that captives of their own nationality were being treated fairly behind enemy lines. Prisoners of war could occasionally leverage the fact that their treatment was a sensitive matter of state and petition for improvements in their qualities of life.

Official instructions regarding prisoners of war came from the Admiralty's Transport Board, which had taken over matters on the subject from the Sick and Hurt Board in 1795. From 1793-1815, the numbers of prisoners of war held by the British in the West Indies grew massive, due in large part to the French government's policy of suspending prisoner exchanges, which had long been customary in early modern warfare.¹⁴⁰ Victualing and otherwise maintaining captives in the wartime Caribbean was a major expense. In Kingston, monthly expenses from 1796 to 1798 on French prisoners "in health" ranged from £3,472.1.8½ currency to £8,102.12.4; for Spanish prisoners, monthly costs went from £1,274.17.3 currency to £6,345.14.7.¹⁴¹ Admiral John Duckworth remarked from Port Royal in 1803: "the enormous Expenditure under the Head of Prisoners makes me Shudder."¹⁴² Anticipating the arrival of 3,000 prisoners at Jamaica later that year, Duckworth "anxiously" wished the Admiralty would "Order how they are to be removed."¹⁴³ The majority of them were ultimately transported to Great Britain, where they were either confined on floating hulks or quartered in large camps and prisons

¹⁴⁰ Prisoner exchanges were suspended under the National Convention and later the Napoleonic Consulate. However, the Directory (1795-1799) did allow for prisoner exchanges for a brief period. Rodger, *Command of the Ocean*, 475, 501.

¹⁴¹ Extract of a letter from Lieut. John Flinn, Agent for Transports, to the Commissioners for the Transport Service &c., dated Jamaica, 29th April 1798, p. 499-506, ADM 97/127/3, TNA.

¹⁴² Duckworth to Evan Nepean, *Shark*, Port Royal, Jamaica, 5 Dec 1803, ADM 1/253, TNA. In March 1804, Duckworth noted that the "success attendant upon His Majesty's Squadron under my Command" would inevitably lead to "an unexpected Influx of Prisoners as well as Vessels of War." John Duckworth to Evan Nepean, *Shark*, Port Royal, Jamaica, 2 March 1804, ADM 1/254, TNA. Provision contracts could be lucrative. Merchants Turnbull, Forbes & Co. drew one bill for £10,899 sterling that covered 151,650 individual rations for prisoners at British-occupied Martinique in 1798. Statement by William Webb, agent for Turnbull, Forbes, & Co., on bills of exchange drawn on the Transport Office for the care of Prisoners of War, Martinique, 1 October 1798, *McCarthy v. Barnes*, C 112/178, TNA. Turnbull, Forbes also victualed sick prisoners at Martinique, racking up £2,044.5 sterling from October to December 1798 for the following expenses: 13,223 rations for sick French, Spanish, and Dutch prisoners (£1,983.9 at £3 sterling per ration); 756 "extra allowances" for 39 afflicted with smallpox (£37.16); and 46 burials (£23). "The Honorable the Commissioners for Taking Care of Sick and Wounded Seamen to Turnbull, Forbes & Co., 1798," *McCarthy v. Barnes*, C 112/178, TNA.

¹⁴³ Duckworth to Evan Nepean, *Shark*, Port Royal, Jamaica, 5 Dec 1803, ADM 1/253, TNA.

in the hinterlands.¹⁴⁴ In the eyes of West Indian naval and military commanders, “good” prisoners of war were ones who had departed for somewhere else. In November 1805, one Jamaican commander noted: “it ever has been the Custom to send to England in every opportunity of Convoys as many Prisoners as Possible,” especially ones from privateer ships, which had the added benefit of reducing the manpower of enemy fleets.¹⁴⁵ For merchants, provision contracts could be lucrative. Turnbull, Forbes & Co. drew one bill for £10,899 sterling that covered 151,650 individual rations for prisoners in British-occupied Martinique in 1798.¹⁴⁶ Turnbull, Forbes & Co. also victualed sick prisoners at Martinique, racking up £2,044.5 sterling from October to December 1798 for the following expenses: 13,223 rations for sick French, Spanish, and Dutch prisoners (£1,983.9 at £3 sterling per ration); 756 “extra allowances” for 39 afflicted with smallpox (£37.16); and 46 burials (£23).¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁴ Rodger, *Command of the Ocean*, 501. Transported prisoners were provisioned during the voyage in government-owned or hired vessels; see for instance, Hyde Parker to the Transport Office, *Queen*, at sea, 19 January 1798, p. 444-453, ADM 97/127/3, TNA. In 1802, merchants at Fort Royal, Martinique, furnished “Oznabrigs, Trowsers, Shirts & bags” in order to “Cloath prisoners of War going to England on board an hired Indiaman commanded by a Lieutenant in the navy;” Certification of George Blaney, Fort Royal, Martinique, 6 July 1802, *McCarthy v. Barnes*, C 112/178, TNA. For French parolees awaiting transport from Jamaica in 1804, Admiral John Duckworth issued ten weeks’ subsistence pay so that they could purchase their own salt provisions for the voyage; Duckworth to Evan Nepean, *Shark*, Port Royal, Jamaica, 26 March 1804, ADM 1/254, TNA. Many towns in the British Isles actually welcomed prisoners of war as a boost to the local economy. From England, William Naylor, who had served as an agent for prisoners of war during the American Revolution, wrote to the Commissioners of the Sick and Hurt Board in 1793 and asked that Ormskirk north of Liverpool be given a “Preference” as a place for parolees in the new conflict—“particularly on account of plenty & cheapness of Provisions” in the town. William Naylor to the Commissioners of the Sick and Hurt Board, Ormskirk, England, 8 March 1793, ADM 97/127/3, TNA.

¹⁴⁵ Dacres to William Marsden, *Hercule*, Port Royal, Jamaica, 16 November 1805, ADM 1/255, TNA.

¹⁴⁶ Statement by William Webb, agent for Turnbull, Forbes, & Co., on bills of exchange drawn on the Transport Office for the care of Prisoners of War, Martinique, 1 October 1798, *McCarthy v. Barnes*, C 112/178, TNA.

¹⁴⁷ “The Honorable the Commissioners for Taking Care of Sick and Wounded Seamen to Turnbull, Forbes & Co., 1798,” *McCarthy v. Barnes*, C 112/178, TNA.

Upon receiving prisoners from naval vessels, agents were supposed to procure from the officers who handed them over lists of prisoners' names and "Qualities." Agents then prepared two entry books—one for seamen, the other for "Officers and Soldiers of Marching Regiments or other Troops serving by Land."¹⁴⁸ Authorities generally strove to keep apart prisoners of different nationalities because they thought that it would help maintain social order. In 1798, the Transport Office informed one agent at Jamaica: "When you receive into your Custody Prisoners taken in the Service of more Nations than One, you must be particularly careful, in Keeping separate and distinct Accounts for each, not only as to what may relate to their Victualling, but also separate General Entry Books, Quarter Books &c." Transport agents were further supposed to make distinctions between categories of *state* versus *nation*: "You are to consider all Prisoners according to the Flag under which they were taken, and not to the Countries of which they are Natives."¹⁴⁹

Discerning and dividing among captives of different nationalities often proved difficult. Owing to the vast distances that separated metropolitan administrative centers from colonial theaters of war, confusion often prevailed at the local level about which groups even constituted potential prisoners whom could be taken captive. Upon the outbreak of hostilities between Great Britain and Spain in late 1796, Vice-Admiral Hyde Parker wrote to a deputy agent for prisoners of war, "repeated Applications have been made to your Office for Subsisting Spaniards brought into Jamaica by His Majesty's Ships of War, but for want of Instructions on that Head you could not act." Parker took

¹⁴⁸ Instructions to Agents on Prisoners of War, ADM 98/101, TNA.

¹⁴⁹ Ambrose Serle, John Schank, and John Marsh to Edward Gibbons, Transport Office, 4 August 1798, p. 464-474, ADM 97/127/3, TNA.

initiative and ordered that the Spanish captives to be taken in, “victualling them as other Prisoners of War.”¹⁵⁰ Conversely, Parker later disagreed with the agent of prisoners in Jamaica about hiring another ship “for the Reception of Spanish Prisoners, on the Ground of your Directions to keep the Nations asunder” — he hoped instead to house the Spaniards at Bath Prison intermixed with other nationalities.¹⁵¹

Confining and guarding large numbers of prisoners in jails or onboard prison ships presented major logistical challenges. Hiring ships was expensive in the region, but naval officers sometimes had no other recourse, since real estate was at a premium as well. The British government generally sought to avoid purchasing prison ships, given how prone wood-bottomed vessels were to the marine organism called the “worm” (*teredo navalis*).¹⁵² Agents were encouraged to advertise publicly to hire ships on the lowest possible terms.¹⁵³ Disputes between naval officers and local governments on this point were not unusual. Admiral Hyde Parker pressed Governor Balcarres to reopen the prison at Bath to alleviate the “very enormous Expence in hiring Hulks to keep the Prisoners afloat.” Balcarres refused because the building was located on a notoriously “unhealthy” spot for white troops, and he encouraged Parker to exchange prisoners more frequently instead.¹⁵⁴ Prison ships would come to house more inmates than terrestrial

¹⁵⁰ Hyde Parker to H.A. Genet, *Queen*, off Monte Cristi, 9 December 1796, p. 430, ADM 97/127/3, TNA.

¹⁵¹ Hyde Parker to the Transport Office, *Queen*, at sea, 19 January 1798, p. 444-453, ADM 97/127/3, TNA.

¹⁵² On the worm, see Rodger, *Command of the Ocean*, 765.

¹⁵³ Rufus George, Ambrose Serle, John Schank, John Marsh to Kean Osborn, Transport Office, 6 March 1797, p. 396-402, ADM 97/127/3, TNA.

¹⁵⁴ Hyde Parker to the Transport Office, *Queen*, at sea, 19 January 1798, p. 444-453, ADM 97/127/3; Balcarres to Hyde Parker, King’s House, Jamaica, 16 January 1798, p. 446-449, ADM 97/127/3, TNA.

prisons. In 1804, Admiral John Duckworth counted thirteen ships floating off Port Royal holding about 3,600 French prisoners, with two carrying well over 700 apiece.¹⁵⁵

Prison hulks were the floating detritus of the fleet—aged, broken-down, unseaworthy—and life aboard them was cramped, disease-ridden, and deadly.¹⁵⁶ A couple of anecdotes illustrate the general misery of life onboard them. In Jamaica, the agent for prisoners of war, Kean Osborn, had controversially chartered a ship, the *Winchester*, in which some officials accused him of having a pecuniary interest. But according to Osborn, the vessel it would replace, the *Mary*, “had been for a long time in a leaky condition and the Surgeon stated by Letter of 15th February the Indecency and Inhumanity of putting more prisoners on board.”¹⁵⁷ Other officials testified: “The absolute necessity of a Vessell being immediately hired, appears evident, from the Prison Ship [*Mary*] Sinking, as Soon as the prisoners were removed.”¹⁵⁸ Not surprisingly, prisoners resisted their confinement on hulks through escape and even more desperate measures. One Transport agent inspecting ships at Port Royal reported, “many more [prisoners] have swam from the Prison Ships than [escaped] from the Prison.” Some prisoners tried to end their captivity by attempting to destroy prisons from within. One agent in Jamaica reported that prisoners “are continually cutting the Ships Decks, Sides, and Beams, and

¹⁵⁵ Duckworth to Evan Nepean, *Shark*, Port Royal, Jamaica, 26 March 1804, ADM 1/254, TNA.

¹⁵⁶ While I have not recovered government documentation on prison-ship mortality rates in the Caribbean from 1793 to 1815, mortality figures for American prisoners during the American Revolution onboard the infamous hulks floating in New York Harbor, on which as many as 11,000 men might have died, suggest that death totals for those held in confinement in tropical waters were enormous. Robert E. Cray, Jr., “Commemorating the Prison Ship Dead: Revolutionary Memory and the Politics of Sepulture in the Early Republic, 1776-1808,” *WMQ*, vol. 56, no. 3 (July 1999), 565-590.

¹⁵⁷ Kean Osborn’s remarks on Lt. Flinn’s representations to the Commissioners of the Transport Service, p. 343-344, ADM 97/127/3, TNA.

¹⁵⁸ William Young and Peter Osborn to Hyde Parker, Agent’s Office for Prisoners of War, Kingston, Jamaica, 25 October 1798, p. 336-7, ADM 97/127/3, TNA.

destroy them so the Beams fall in the hold.” He observed: “It has been known that they have bored Holes through the Ships Bottoms, in order to sink them.”¹⁵⁹

Prisoners were given rations of salt beef four days per week and salt fish one day per week, along with a daily piece of hardtack and a quarter pint of rum. Supplementing their diets were quantities of butter or olive oil, “Roots or Greens,” and rice. (Prisoners also could be given yams on the day when salt fish was issued, plus pepper and salt to season roots and vegetables.) Food was to be “dressed” by a prisoner appointed by the agent who would be paid “in Money half the price of the daily Contract rate for Victualling.”¹⁶⁰ Some archival traces show that prisoners were not entirely passive consumers of provisions and other articles. William Webb, an agent for the contractors Turnbull, Forbes & Co., mentioned in a letter to a merchant in Guadeloupe, “Pork the Prisoners like & comes Cheaper than Beef.” Webb therefore advised that prisoners be issued pork twice per week in addition to beef three days per week.¹⁶¹ Prisoners’ expressed preference for pork evidently shaped the ration schedule in this particular site of captivity and might have provided some small relief from the monotony of prison life.

Authorities wielded food as a means to discipline prisoners by pegging their rations to their conduct. Agents were to inspect provisions “every Morning” and provide notes on them to the contractor every night. Transport agents were ordered: “You are to cause to be hung up in the most conspicuous parts of the Prison, the Regulations which you will be furnished with, shewing as well what Provisions the Prisoners are entitled to

¹⁵⁹ Extract of a letter from Lieut. John Flinn, Agent for Transports, to the Commissioners for the Transport Service, Jamaica, 29 April 1798, p. 499-506, ADM 97/127/3, TNA.

¹⁶⁰ Instructions to Agents on Prisoners of War, ADM 98/101, TNA.

¹⁶¹ William Webb to Justin McCarthy, Basse Terre, Guadeloupe, 2 August 1798, *McCarthy v. Barnes*, C 112/178, TNA. Webb had earlier written to McCarthy: “I would wish you to buy some Pork to Issue to the Prisoners and sell some of the Beef.” William Webb to Justin McCarthy, Basseterre, 26 August 1797.

as the Behavior expected on their Part, and you are to see that they comply therewith.” Prisoners were to be mustered “thrice a Week,” and those who refused to do so “are to be checqued out of their Provisions till they submit to do it.” Those who attempted escape and were recaptured were “to be kept in closer Confinement than the others” and put on “half Allowance of Provisions.” Those who colluded with escapees or professed their willful ignorance about comrades on the lam would also face punishment: every member of an escapee’s mess (and “knowing of it”) would receive reduced rations, while mess commanders, “without discovering such Escape,” would be put on half allowance for ten days. Alcohol allowances were also regulated in order to increase discipline. Agents were advised to “prevent the introduction of Spiritous Liquors” among prisoners in order to maintain “good order” and lessen opportunities for bribing guards into facilitating escapes. Utensils, lodging, and bedding were likewise part of the disciplinary provisioning order. Contractors doled out “Mess Bowls, Platters, Canns and wooden Spoons,” and “if either of these Articles are lost or willfully damaged,” replacement items would be paid for “by putting the Parties who lose or destroy them, on half allowance of Provisions.” Prisoners were allowed one hour per day in good weather to stroll in an “Airing Ground.” Their bedding was aired once per week during this time and checked for “Tools or other Things which can be used to facilitate the Escape,” as well as to see if pillows or other articles had been “purloined, or willfully damaged.” Prisoners found guilty of the latter offense were put on half rations until the cost of the lost or damaged articles had been recouped.¹⁶²

¹⁶² Instructions to Agents on Prisoners of War, ADM 98/101, TNA.

Unlike their counterparts confined to prisons and hulks, parolees lived in private dwellings and collected twice-weekly subsistence stipends from Transport officials for purchasing provisions at local shops and markets. Parolees were higher-status captives than other prisoners of war, though parole was not limited strictly to the aristocratic classes.¹⁶³ Subsistence pay was broken down according to rank and physical condition: “In Health. Commissioned officers at Three Shillings Sterling a Man a Day. All others at one Shilling and six Pence Sterling a Man p. Day. In Sickness. Commissioned officers at six Shillings Sterling a Man a Day. All others at three Shillings Sterling a Man, and Six Pence a Day extraordinary for the first twelve days of such as shall have the small Pox.” Instructions noted that there had been “great abuses” on the part of parolees pretending sickness to obtain “additional Subsistence,” so it was therefore ordered that extra money not be given to those with “Slight Cases, or in Chronic Disorders,” but rather reserved for those “in acute Distempers, where nursing is required.”¹⁶⁴

British authorities had little recourse in keeping “asunder” parolees of different nationalities. Registers of parolees in Kingston show their diversity in age, gender, nationality, ethnicity, and other characteristics. There were soldiers, naval seamen, privateersmen, French citizens, servants, slaves, surgeons, wives, and children. For example, seven prisoners listed in a register of parolees in Jamaica were captured on six different vessels and received weekly subsistence pay of £6.9.2: Madame de Poitier (wife of a navy captain); J.J. Bogarin (French army captain); J.E. LaRoche (surgeon); George

¹⁶³ Instructions allowed for the following ranks and persons on French men-of-war to be granted parole: captains, lieutenants, ensigns, masters, pilots or mates, “garde marines,” boatswains, gunners, carpenters, “ecrivaines,” surgeons, surgeon’s mates, chaplains, and “Volunteers Gentlemen of Family.” From merchant ships and privateers, ranks eligible for parole were narrower: captains, “passengers of rank,” second captains, “chiefs of prizes,” lieutenants—but only “in the proportion of 2 to every 100 Men”—pilots, surgeons, chaplains, and clerks. Instructions to Agents on Prisoners of War, ADM 98/101, TNA.

¹⁶⁴ Instructions to Agents on Prisoners of War, ADM 98/101, TNA.

Juhl (no description); Monsieur Lasmartres (supercargo); Monsieur Dubreuil (captain); and Cadet Bordieu (captain). Other captives listed in the registers were identified as Dutch, Spanish, Italian, Greek, and Genoese; many of them were undoubtedly members of the mercenary corps that proliferated in the region during times of war.¹⁶⁵

Similarly to how rations were employed to discipline prisoners held in jails and ships, authorities attempted to use subsistence pay as an instrument to control the mobility of parolees. While subsistence pay was doled out to parolees twice per week, “none of them are to be paid such Subsistence if they do not appear at the time and Place assigned for the purpose, unless their Health will not permit them.” If parolees were deemed to “willfully disobey this Direction,” they would be “chequed” their subsistence pay the first time, “but if they persist in doing it, after proper Admonition, they are to be returned to the nearest Prison with a proper Guard.” Parolees who wandered farther than one mile from their homes would be recaptured at a reward of ten shillings and then “sent with a proper Guard, to the nearest Place where Prisoners of War are confined, and there Subsist with half the Prison Allowance of Provisions.”¹⁶⁶

While parolees were supposedly objects of close surveillance by colonial and imperial authorities, they frequently found ways to circumvent official control in the porous and polyglot port towns of the West Indies. In 1798, the Transport Office dispatched Lieutenant John Flinn to check up on prisoners in Kingston. He reported:

It is shameful to see the Parole Prisoners here, particularly the Spaniards, Boys, Mulattoes, Mustees; Almost every description of men and Colour, people that can neither read nor write, get three shillings Sterling per day.—the greatest Number are called Passengers, though I am convinced they are Common Men, Landsmen, Shipwrights, and Servants to

¹⁶⁵ Registers of Prisoners of War on Parole (October 1796), Jamaica, 1796-1798, ADM 103/578, TNA.

¹⁶⁶ Instructions to Agents on Prisoners of War, ADM 98/101, TNA.

Gentlemen: Some keep Public Houses, entice Negroes to run away from their Masters, and receive stolen Goods; others keep gaming Houses, drunk and rioting at night through the Streets; many of them every morning at day light on the Wharfs, conversing and associating with the Spaniards from Cuba, which the Inhabitants very much dislike, and are well convinced they send Intelligence to the Enemy[.] they dread the Consequence such a number of them being about Kingston: the Spaniards murdered two Englishmen some time since: they even work on board Ships in the Harbour, and frequently neglect attending for their Subsistence. They go Masters and Mates of Vessels from here to Cuba, on the Illicit Trade, and I am told sometimes to St. Domingo.¹⁶⁷

Even if Flinn's claims were exaggerated—he might have been trying to get a colleague in trouble—his report nevertheless suggested the ways in which parolees undermined disciplinary structures and generated anxiety among officials. British administrators constantly worried about parolees' being vectors carrying the "contagion" of rebellion and revolution to Jamaica and other British possessions from Saint-Domingue and elsewhere.

It would be difficult to create a balance sheet for how well the British government provisioned prisoners of war in the West Indies. David Geggus has noted that during the first few years of the British occupation of Saint-Domingue, combatants of all types—British, French, white, black, royalist, revolutionary—gave either no quarter or subjected prisoners to harsh abuse.¹⁶⁸ Evidence elsewhere is more ambivalent and suggests that the treatment of prisoners, while not necessarily inhumane, was seldom beneficial to prisoners' health and wellness. For instance, army surgeon Colin Chisholm believed that French refugees and prisoners of war in the Windward Islands grew more susceptible to

¹⁶⁷ Extract of a letter from Lieut. John Flinn, Agent for Transports, to the Commissioners for the Transport Service &c., dated Jamaica, 29th April 1798, p. 499-506, ADM 97/127/3, TNA.

¹⁶⁸ David Geggus argues that Toussaint's rise to power in the Republican ranks in 1797 inaugurated a period in which prisoners on both sides were better treated. Geggus, *Slavery, War, and Revolution*, 282-84.

disease because of compulsory changes to their diets under British confinement.¹⁶⁹ Still, there existed some mutual expectations among enemy combatants that they would treat captives well in order to maintain diplomatic relations between warring states. When black revolutionary André Rigaud on Saint-Domingue alleged that the British were not adequately maintaining prisoners under their charge, Admiral Parker emphasized to his deputy commissary that their good treatment was important to civil relations in the region: “I trust these [complaints] are ill founded, as nothing can be more displeasing to my Feelings.”¹⁷⁰

Provisioning prisoners of war continued to be a central facet of diplomatic relations between warring states when hostilities commenced between Great Britain and the U.S. in 1812. British agents for prisoners of war stationed in various port cities in the islands and in North America frequently communicated with one another in order to coordinate and ensure the adequate care of captives. In July 1813, Lieutenant John Barker wrote from Barbados to British agent Thomas Barclay in New York that he had already sent off 313 American prisoners in a cartel bound for the United States. Barker had made an agreement with an American agent to transport the remaining 200 prisoners that remained in his custody, “on condition of my putting Provisions on board for one Month.”¹⁷¹ However, matters would force Barker’s hand and cause him to send off the remaining prisoners more hastily. He reported about one month later that “both the Prison Ships at this Depot were wreck’d, in consequence of which I am necessitated to send the

¹⁶⁹ Chisholm, *An essay on the malignant pestilential fever*, 193-4, 220-221.

¹⁷⁰ Hyde Parker to Deputy Commissary of Prisoners at Jamaica H.A. Genet, *Queen*, Môle-Saint-Nicolas, Saint-Domingue, 16 November 1796, p. 426, ADM 97/127/3, TNA.

¹⁷¹ Lieut. John Barker (Agent for Prisoners of War) to Thomas Barclay [New York], Transport Office, Barbados, 10 July 1813, Box 6, Thomas Barclay Papers, NYHS.

remainder of the Prisoners away, having no place for their confinement.” Barker soon chartered a vessel and had the captives shipped back to Providence, Rhode Island.¹⁷²

As ever, notions of treating prisoners well were inseparable from the need to keep down costs. British agent for prisoners of war James Turner, based in Port Royal, informed his colleague Thomas Barclay that American cartel ship captain David Harrison “from motives of humanity has taken from my custody forty five American Prisoners of War without any expence to His Majesty’s Government; and I beg further to acquaint you that these Prisoners were in a very sickly state and greatly debilitated from long confinement, so much so that it became absolutely necessary they should go to a northern climate.” Turner implied that he wished that Barclay would remunerate the American captain for this service if he happened to meet him in New York.¹⁷³ In addition to “humanity,” Turner would emphasize in a later letter that he was also keeping a close watch on the bottom line. He noted that while no “regular Cartel” system had been established between Jamaica and the United States since the outbreak of war, he had still been able to send off some prisoners by “casual opportunityes, and without the most trifling expence to his Maj’s. Government.”¹⁷⁴

Prisoners of war held by the British government often protested their conditions through official petitions. Prisoner petitions from the Caribbean are difficult to find. However, a petition written in 1814 by American prisoners onboard the *Salem* for British General Agent for prisoners Thomas Barclay in Blandensburg, Maryland, provides

¹⁷² Lieut. John Barker (Agent for Prisoners of War) to Thomas Barclay, Transport Office, Barbados, 11 August 1813, Thomas Barclay Papers, NYHS.

¹⁷³ James Turner to William Moore, Port Royal, Jamaica, 2 April 1813, Box 6, Thomas Barclay Papers, NYHS.

¹⁷⁴ James Turner to Thomas Barclay, Port Royal, Jamaica, 8 May 1813, Box 6, Thomas Barclay Papers, NYHS.

information on what they must have looked like. The prisoners protested that the British administrators had put a stoppage of one half of their pay from the U.S. government as security for blankets loaned to the captives. The prisoners claimed that only one quarter of the men had requested blankets, and that the remainder would rather have the \$1.14 so that they could “procure ourselves Soap tobacco and other necessarys we stand greatly in need of.” The Americans further noted: “On the other hand the provisions that is allowed by our Government is very scant not being any more than bearily to Subsist on and Sometimes very indifferent; Therefore should we be deprived of that Necessary we should Suffer every Inconvenience that Could attend us.” While there is not documentation on whether British authorities heeded this particular request, this petition does intriguingly hint at how prisoners agitated for better treatment from governments that held them captive by noting the insufficient treatment received from their own government.¹⁷⁵

British subjects held prisoner by the United States government also pressed British authorities for increased subsistence pay and other perquisites. In 1814, two British subjects named Hugh Thompson and Jacob Moreno, who had formerly resided on Antigua and St. Thomas but were currently paroled in New Orleans, wrote to Thomas Barclay, British general agent of prisoners of war, stationed in New York. Thompson and Moreno had been captured on a merchant voyage from St. Thomas to La Guayra (in present-day Venezuela) on the Spanish Main by a U.S. privateer from Baltimore. After landing in New Orleans, they found themselves “without the means of support, without

¹⁷⁵ Prisoners of War on the prison ship *Salem* and Thomas Webb, Agent for Prisoners on the *Salem*, to Thomas Berkley, General Agent for Prisoners of War, 13 April 1814, Box 7 (folder: Jan. 1813-Dec. 1813, April 1814), Thomas Barclay Papers, NYHS.

friends, or even an acquaintance.” Since cartel ships were infrequent in New Orleans, Thompson and Moreno asked Barclay to procure from the U.S. government passports so that they could take passage on a neutral vessel to one of the West Indian colonies or Pensacola. Thompson and Moreno mentioned that they held valuable property in the bodily form of five fellow prisoners captured on the same vessel—Antiguan slaves presumably owned by one or both of them. Feeding themselves and their slaves was an immediate concern for the two white men. Following up with Barclay one week later, Thompson and Moreno again requested passports out of New Orleans, adding, “if our request cannot be complied with an addition to our subsistence money will be verry acceptable, not to say necessary.”¹⁷⁶

As with the case of the American prisoner-petitioners onboard the *Salem*, it is difficult to determine what happened to Thompson, Moreno, and their five slaves. Archival sources do not disclose whether their plea for assistance fell on receptive or deaf administrative ears. The more salient takeaway is that individuals and groups being held prisoner in the wartime circum-Caribbean sometimes made claims upon both their own government and that of their captors. Opportunities for both captives to receive better provision and captors to provide it depended on careful negotiations that needed to be carried out through official channels and private correspondence. Diplomatic matters about prisoners of war revolved around understandings of what constituted the proper “necessaries of life” and how they should be provided to temporary subjects. Disciplinary policies were in this way intertwined with motives of “humanity.” Governmental “life preservers” such as increased subsistence pay or rations could only be thrown out in

¹⁷⁶ Hugh Thompson and Jacob Moreno to Thomas Barclay, New Orleans, 25 March 1814; Hugh Thompson and Jacob Moreno to Thomas Barclay, New Orleans, 1 April 1814, Box 7, Thomas Barclay Papers, NYHS.

relatively calm diplomatic seas, which ensured that the treatment of prisoners of war was one arena of international relations in which warring states found common ground more often than not.

Conclusion

Contending with both debilitating mortality among white British soldiers and pressure from French Republican forces that had been arming and freeing slaves in warzones from Saint-Domingue to Guadeloupe, the British Government embarked on a major reform in the makeup of its army in the Caribbean. In April 1795, the War Office began raising corps of black soldiers in the islands, mainly by purchasing slaves from estates and directly off slave ships. The decision to form the so-called West India Regiments stemmed from officials' perceptions that black soldiers would be better able to withstand the local disease environment than whites. For their part, West Indian planters were by and large less interested in the practical considerations of whether black troops would help protect them from French invasion and more fearful of what kind of example this would present to blacks still held in enslavement. In Jamaica, raising and subsisting—or “maintaining”—the 6th West India Regiment even became a major point of political dispute between colony and metropole in 1797-98.¹⁷⁷

However, this was certainly not the first time that black troops—enslaved or free—had been formed in the British colonies. Redcoat regiments had long relied upon armed blacks, generally referred to as “pioneers,” to cart provisions and perform other heavy labor. One body of pioneers composed of former slaves mostly from Georgia had

¹⁷⁷ Buckley, *Slaves in Red Coats*, 43-62 (disputes over raising regiment), 97-105 (ability of blacks to outlive whites).

been attached to various regiments in Jamaica since the end of the American Revolution. In 1797, Governor Balcarres noted in a dispatch to Whitehall: “At the distance of 14 years, it is not surprising that most of those Pioneers...should have failed, either by Death, or by being worn out.” Balcarres explained that this depletion in manpower had forced several regiments on the garrison to expensively hire new ones—“no Regiment can do well here without Pioneers.” Hiring expenses would run about £2,000 currency per year in total, and Balcarres wrote, “the question [is] not well defined, whether the Expence is to fall upon Great Britain or on the Island.” He subsequently struck a deal with the legislature to split costs over payment for food and clothing for new pioneers between metropolitan and colonial coffers. Balcarres calculated that each pioneer would effectively be maintained at twenty-five pounds currency per year, “which, considering the Pioneer receives his Ration and Cloathing, is a very good Return indeed to any Contractor who may chuse to speculate.”¹⁷⁸

Balcarres’ letter chronicled some of the frankly mundane matters that made up the daily docket for Jamaican governors in an era otherwise marked by momentous transformations in the political and racial order of the greater Caribbean. But the details of the missive also highlighted quieter evolutions in colonial and imperial governance that linked together the administration of provision and the categorization of individuals and groups along overlapping—and sometimes competing—variables of health, age, sex, race, and labor. His letter showed that the soldiers’ “ration” of food and clothing had

¹⁷⁸ Balcarres to the Duke of Portland, 28 January 1797, Jamaica, f. 150-151, CO 137/98, TNA. War Office regulations noted: “No Cause has been more productive of Disease in the West-Indies, than the Duties of Fatigue. Whenever they are of such a Nature as that they can be performed by Negroes, care should be taken to have Negroes in readiness for that Purpose. The Negroes should be employed to drag Guns, bring Water, carry Provisions, and do all Duties performed by Pioneers.” *Regulations for the Use of His Majesty’s Troops*, 16.

become the go-to administrative unit by which to reckon human necessity. Furthermore, the letter demonstrated that official notions of “who should get what?” were intertwined with the equally important question of “who should pay for it?” His mention of the lucrative potential that rationing pioneers offered to “any Contractor who may chuse to speculate” underscored the fact that provisioning regimes blurred boundaries between public and private, state and mercantile. As Chapter Three will examine, the private provisioning networks through which planters rationed slaves with imported food and clothing were also coming under the public gaze.

CHAPTER THREE

“In the Wreck of a Master’s Fortune:”

Slave Provisioning and the Politics of Planter Debt

Absentee planter James Chisholme waged battle for nearly twenty years against rising expenses for slave provisions on his Jamaica estates. His correspondence with managers was riddled with anxieties on the subject. In 1794, Chisholme ordered his attorney for Trout Hall estate in Clarendon to “endeavour to Lessen the expences, particularly in regard to jobbing and Salt provisions.”¹ Reviewing colonial accounts one year later, Chisholme singled out one expense—four pounds given to “negroes to buy provisions”—and wrote: “I thought we had raised corn enough there and at momee gully to feed all the negroes.”² In late 1799, he mentioned: “I observe very heavy Charges for Saltfish from Kingston I request we may have no more of that as I send out so many herrings.”³ By March 1810, Chisholme was urging a new attorney, “nothing but the strictest attention to keeping down the Supplies and yearly Contingencies, can save me from Ruin.”⁴ Later that year, he was still hectoring his managers: “I am convinced more Labour might be got from my own negroes without any breach of humanity and I also am satisfied there might be a Considerable saving in the annual Supplies.”⁵

¹ James Chisholme to James Cragg, Bath, England, 27 November 1794, Nisbet Papers, f. 20, MS 5476, NLS.

² James Chisholme to James Cragg, 29 November 1795, f. 32a, Nisbet Papers, MS 5476, NLS.

³ James Chisholme to James Cragg, Portland Place, London, 3 December 1799, Nisbet Papers, f. 68a-69, MS 5476, NLS.

⁴ James Chisholme to William Anderson, London, 7 March 1810, Nisbet Papers, f. 197a-98, MS 5476, NLS.

⁵ James Chisholme to William Anderson, London, 6 June 1810, Nisbet Papers, f. 202, MS 5476, NLS.

Chisholme was far from unique among West Indian proprietors in his obsession that provisions and other expenses associated with “maintaining” slaves were eating into diminished revenues from sugar and other produce. While the sugar business had boomed in the 1790s, ensuing market gluts led to economic uncertainty and sometimes disaster for planters and merchants alike. War between Great Britain, France, and eventually the United States threatened shipping and raised prices on provisions and other plantation necessities. Planters often complained as Chisholme did that market gluts, trade restrictions, and wartime conditions affected their ability to run estates with “humanity” in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries.⁶ Meanwhile, abolitionists, who were gaining access to official and private colonial documents, analyzed slave provisioning with greater empirical sophistication than in earlier years. Antislavery commentary focused not only on the cruelty and carelessness of planters and managers, but also on how the financial distress of sugar estates affected the nutrition of slaves. Abolitionist James Stephen described conditions on indebted estates in the 1820s: “the negroes are hardy and prolific enough to have maintained and increased their numbers, but for the multitudes that periodically perish ... in the wreck of a master’s fortune.”⁷ Stephen and other abolitionists never excused planters for malnourishing slaves, but their criticisms reflected an understanding that slave life and planter debt were intertwined.

As the Introduction of this dissertation has noted, historians have given extensive attention to the subject of the economic “decline” of British Caribbean slavery in the late-

⁶ Ragatz, *The Fall of the Planter Class*, 286-330; Ward, *British West Indian Slavery*, 42-46; Ryden, *West Indian Slavery*, 99.

⁷ Stephen, *The Slavery of the British West India Colonies Delineated*, vol. 1, 105-106.

eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries.⁸ A related branch of scholarship has examined transformations in capital flows between Britain and the West Indian colonies and debated the significance of planter indebtedness from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries.⁹ Numerous case studies have reconstructed provisioning costs and other expenses on individual estates while examining managerial adaptations to economic adversity.¹⁰ Further, historians and literary scholars have unpacked how from the 1780s to the 1830s the antislavery movement relied on sentimental depictions of the suffering of enslaved humanity in order to persuade the British public of the irresponsibility of planters in their treatment of slaves and the need for Parliament to assume the role of

⁸ For an overview of the historiographical debates on “decline,” see the Introduction.

⁹ Historians have reached contradictory conclusions about evolutions in West Indian planters’ dependence on metropolitan capital. Richard Pares downplayed the significance of mortgage lending until the period after 1763 and instead emphasized the importance of local creditors: Pares, *Merchants and Planters* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1951), and Pares, *A West India Fortune* (New York: Longmans Green, 1950), esp. chapters 10 and 11. Jacob Price later coined the phrase “ontogeny of debt” to describe the process by which smaller debts morphed into mortgages: Price, “Credit in the Slave Trade and Plantation Economies,” in *Slavery and the Rise of the Atlantic System*, B.L. Solow, ed. (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1991), 293-339. More recently, Simon D. Smith has challenged Pares’ findings through detailed analysis of the business of the Lascelles merchant family and argued that mortgage lending was common as early as the 1730s: S.D. Smith, “Merchants and Planters Revisited,” *The Economic History Review*, vol. 55, no. 3 (Aug. 2002), 434-465; Simon D. Smith, *Slavery, Family, and Gentry Capitalism in the British Atlantic: the World of the Lascelles, 1648-1834* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2006), esp. 139-225. While Smith argues that increasing foreclosures in the late-eighteenth century likely reflected “planned restructuring” of merchant portfolios rather than indications of Ragatzian “decline,” he cautions that no “unequivocal verdict” on the significance of debtor-creditor relations can be arrived at without more quantitative research. Similarly, Trevor Burnard finds that Jamaican planters’ debts were “manageable” at least up to the American Revolution and notes that “well-run” estates could be profitable into the 1810s: Burnard, “‘Et in Arcadia Ego:’ West Indian Planters in Glory, 1674-1784,” *Atlantic Studies*, vol. 9, no. 1 (March 2012), 19-40. For other foundational works on West Indian debtor-creditor relations, see K.G. Davies, “Origins of the Commission System in the West India Trade,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, Fifth Series, vol. 2 (1952), 89-107; S.G. Checkland, “Finance for the West Indies, 1780-1815,” *The Economic History Review*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (1958), 461-469.

¹⁰ For changing managerial strategies in this period, see Ward, *British West Indian Slavery* (1988); Justin Roberts, *Slavery and the Enlightenment*. For case studies of plantation accounts: Ulrich B. Phillips, “A Jamaica Slave Plantation,” *The American Historical Review*, vol. 19, no. 3 (April, 1914), 543-558; Douglas B. Hall, “Incalculability as a Feature of Sugar Production during the Eighteenth Century,” *Social and Economic Studies*, vol. 10, no. 3 (September 1961), 340-352; Ward, “The Profitability of Sugar Planting;” Justin Roberts, “Uncertain Business: a Case Study of Barbadian Plantation Management, 1770-93,” *Slavery & Abolition*, vol. 32, no. 2 (2011), 247-68.

“paternalist” through programs of amelioration and general emancipation.¹¹ Finally, a growing body of scholarship has begun to examine planters as more activist political figures, particularly outside the formal domain of the West Indian Lobby.¹²

Unfortunately, scholars have largely quarantined the management and financing of West Indian estates from the political history of slavery in the British Empire. Inadequate slave provisioning was both a material fact and a political problem. Separating these two realities obscures the extent to which moral concerns over the treatment of slaves were bound up in evolving ideas about the political economy of the empire. For contemporary actors, commerce and finance especially were understood as possessing moral as well as material dimensions.¹³ Abolitionists seized upon the inadequate provisioning of slaves as one of the most obvious examples of gross negligence on the part of the planter class and argued that conditions in the colonies required greater regulation from Parliament. Planters responded to their critics by arguing that debt relationships to metropolitan merchants had the effect of curtailing slaves’

¹¹ On the “protection” of slaves in the antislavery and amelioration movements: D.J. Murray, *The West Indies and the Development of Colonial Government 1801- 1834* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965); David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1969); Vincent Brown, *The Reaper’s Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Univ. Press, 2008), chapter five. On the West Indian planter class and the imperial politics of slavery from the Seven Years’ War onward: Brown, *Moral Capital*; Petley, “Rethinking the Fall of the Planter Class,” *Atlantic Studies* 9, no. 1 (2012); Trevor Burnard, “Powerless Masters: the Curious Decline of Jamaican Sugar Planters in the Foundational Period of British Abolitionism,” *Slavery & Abolition*, vol. 32, no. 2 (June 2011), 185-98; Burnard, “Harvest Years? Reconfigurations of Empire in Jamaica, 1756-1807,” *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, vol. 40, issue 4 (2012), 533-55.

¹² Recent studies have shed light on the politics of ameliorative proposals emerging in the colonies: David Lambert, *White Creole Culture, Politics, and Identity during the Age of Abolition* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2005), esp. 43-47, 65-72; Christer Petley, *Slaveholders in Jamaica: Colonial Society and Culture during the Era of Abolition* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2009), esp. 48-50; Christa Dierksheide, *Amelioration and Empire: Progress and Slavery in the Plantation Americas* (Charlottesville: Univ. of Virginia Press, 2014). On forms of paternalistic self-fashioning in planter correspondence, see also Byrd, *Captives and Voyagers*, 78-84.

¹³ For contemporary debates on morality and commerce, see Emma Rothschild, *Economic Sentiments: Adam Smith, Condorcet, and the Enlightenment* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Univ. Press, 2001).

ration allowances. By doing so, planters turned provisioning into contested political ground. Debates over proper rations for slaves were thus about defining what constituted *fair* commercial practices (who deserved to profit and by how much) as well as *ethical* commerce (what kinds of economic activity were legitimate).

Political discourse on the relationship between slave provisioning and planter debt focused on how the fundamental uncertainties and speculative nature of the sugar industry tended to negatively affect the material well-being of slaves. On this point, planters and abolitionists shared a sophisticated understanding of the functioning of plantation provisioning supply chains and the system of debt-finance that underpinned West Indian enterprise. Of particular importance to contemporary observers were the industrial scale of provisioning on sugar estates and the nature of mortgage lending that was largely dependent on slaves serving as living debt-collateral. For both credit-hungry planters and the metropolitan commission merchants who held slaves as debt securities, ensuring steady supplies of provisions from colonial as well as transatlantic sources increasingly became an arena of dispute in correspondence and in courts of law. Abolitionists would criticize not only this system of rationing through debt-finance, but also planters' complaints that they were helplessly hindered by it in their efforts to run estates on "humane" principles. Here, plantation account books served as more than a means of tallying expenses. Rather, they were transcribed, published, scrutinized, and wielded as evidence by planters and their foes alike in public debates about how well slaves were "maintained."

This chapter threads an examination of the ordering and procurement of slave provisions and other plantation supplies within the discursive fabric of the abolition

debates. The first section examines the large-scale ordering of plantation necessities from metropolitan commission houses and also how planters viewed the goods in terms of their own consumer preferences and (much more problematically) those of their slaves. The next section examines how planters, attorneys, and commission merchants haggled over colonial food expenses; provides an analysis of costs for slave provisions incurred on two Tobago sugar estates; and concludes by tracing how debts that had accumulated on these two estates spurred a specific instance of colonial legislative reform linking slave provisioning to the politics of finance. The chapter concludes with an examination of disputes between proslavery and antislavery polemicists over who or what was to blame for the apparently worsening malnourishment of slaves laboring in an industry sinking into heavy indebtedness and ultimately decline.

Ordering Supplies

As commodity chains, plantation supply networks were conservative in terms of product innovation and other aspects of operation. Resident planters and attorneys sought to order supplies for multiple estates in order to achieve economies of scale and reduce provisioning costs. Planter-consumers displayed little apparent interest in trying out new goods or even attempting innovation in methods of ordering through different merchant houses. For planters and managers, concerns over quality in slave provisions were always related to cost, and they sought to acquire the most durable and preserveable foodstuffs, clothing, and other necessities at the lowest prices. Rations of salt fish were valued especially in terms of how well they fueled slave labor on the cheap. Commission houses actively attempted to heed planters' and attorneys' wishes for different qualities of

provisions during the 1790s—the sugar industry’s most profitable decade—but planters’ consumer choices became more constrained during ensuing years of mounting debt and declining profits. It was actually in these years of diminishing prospects that planters were forced to seek innovation in the kinds of provisions that they purchased and where they procured them from.

Sugar estates and other West Indian properties under common ownership were generally referred to as “concerns,” which were often linked together under the management of individual attorneys. Attorneys’ managerial portfolios could be extensive. At the time of his death in 1813, Jamaican grandee Simon Taylor owned four sugar estates and three cattle pens with 2,138 slaves and managed many other large properties on the island for absentee proprietors.¹⁴ Taylor and other attorneys prepared and transmitted supply lists in late spring and early summer in advance of the crop season, which commenced at the start of the following year, with the expectation that provisions and other supplies would arrive before Christmas, when slaves were issued special rations of salted beef and pork, tobacco, clothing and other “indulgences.”¹⁵

Supply lists typically delineated *provisions*—encompassing foodstuffs, clothing, soap, and candles—from *stores*, which included agricultural implements, tools, nails, barrels, hoops, staves, lamp oil, bedding, boilers, and other items.¹⁶ Supply lists followed

¹⁴ While it remains unclear exactly how many estates Taylor managed at any given time, his Jamaican contemporaries and associates, brothers John and William Shand, managed as many as fourteen estates in addition to the ones they owned. Sheridan, “Simon Taylor,” 289-296 (Shand brothers); Higman, *Plantation Jamaica*, 205-212.

¹⁵ In April 1803, attorney John Shand wrote to a London commission house from Jamaica: “Lists shall be transmitted in due time with observations on the quality of the Goods received the present year where they shall appear necessary.” John Shand to Abraham Henry Chambers, Vere, Jamaica, 2 April 1803, *Chambers v. Goldwin*, C 112/163, TNA. On needing supplies in “December at latest,” see John Shand to Abraham Henry Chambers, Spanish Town, Jamaica, 15 January 1803, *Chambers v. Goldwin*, C 112/163, TNA.

¹⁶ Bryan Edwards, *History, Civil and Commercial* (1798), 224-5.

a general pattern, which is illustrated by two drawn up in 1804 for the Jamaican sugar estates Exeter (176 slaves) and Greenwich (159 slaves) in Vere Parish. For Exeter, the attorney started with 68 items in no particular order, including 50 barrels of herring, four barrels of beef, three barrels of pork, and other minor foodstuffs, plus materials for clothing slaves, including 1400 yards “osnaburghs,” 700 blue “pennistones” (rough woolens), 14 dozen “negro hats,” 14 dozen “Kilmarnock caps,” 22 pounds of “osnaburgh thread,” and 1000 “osnaburgh needles.” The list also included 41 medical items, including cinchona (“pale bark in powder”), rhubarb, antimonial powder, glauher salts, opium, hartshorn, “blue mercurial pills,” “1 eight ounce pewter syringe,” and two lancets.¹⁷ Clerks in colonial and metropolitan counting houses scrutinized lists and invoices in order to track costs and avoid the omission of crucial items.¹⁸

Planters determined the quantities of supplies needed by reckoning the expected size of the sugar crop along several variables: the numbers and health of slaves on estates; the perceived fertility and cultivability of soils; and local weather and other climatic conditions. Planters generally attempted to avoid purchasing more expensive supplies such as boiling and distilling equipment whenever possible. In 1800, one Barbados attorney wrote: “I have ordered nothing this year but the common stores of provision & cloathing—last year’s expence was enormous but the heavy articles are by us still.”¹⁹ But attorneys often complained about how hard it was to get calculations right

¹⁷ List of Supplies for Exeter and Greenwich Estates for 1804, *Chambers v. Goldwin*, C 112/163, TNA.

¹⁸ Simon Taylor often expressed dissatisfaction with supplies, prompting cousin Robert to write in 1812: “I am very sorry you have been so much disappointed about your Supplies and can assure you most positively that the omission does not lay with us—And to Convince your Clerks of it—I have ordered one of the Copies of the order for your Holland Supplies to be sent out.” Robert Taylor to Simon Taylor, London, 7 May 1812, STP, ICS 101 13/A/307.

¹⁹ Sampson Wood to [John Lane], 19 July 1800, Newton Family Papers, MS 523/416, Senate House Library, University of London.

for ordering supplies. Indeed, attorney correspondence is littered with two assurances: one, promises that the “next crop” will be large; and two, that the blame for cost exceeding revenue lay with bad weather and other uncontrollable factors as opposed to personal mismanagement. In the wake of a failed sugar crop in drought-prone Vere Parish, one Jamaican attorney mused to a London commission house: “Hardly any revenue is so precarious as that from a Vere estate, one year a large quantity of sugar of the best quality, the next, a few hogsheads of an indifferent staple not half sufficient to buy food for the starving negroes.”²⁰

On estates owned by absentee planters, attorneys were expected to report to commission houses about the quality of supplies received in the colonies. Sending his supply list to a London mortgagee in July 1804, attorney John Shand noted, “Those received last year I particularly examined.” He believed that the supplies were all “good” and “reasonable,” with the exception of the salted provisions, further writing: “The blue Muslin cloths per the two plantations were different probably from the one [the] overseer putting down.” He also found that the “hats were also of very inferior quality,” desiring that better ones would be sent out for the following crop.²¹ Planters preferred not to resort to local markets to obtain “Negro hats,” jackets, “oznabrugs,” and other rough woolens and cloth worn by slaves and typically doled out once per year. In 1790, one Jamaican planter wrote: “The price of Negro Clothing &c are terrible dear here I dare say I shall

²⁰ John Shand to Abraham Chambers, Jamaica, 6 October 1804, *Chambers v. Goldwin*, C 112/163, TNA. The same attorney had written in January 1803: “At the season when you will receive this letter great part of the supplies specified will have become superfluous—partly from my being obliged to purchase others in Kingston & more from the crop being reduced far below the scale which the original list was intended to meet.” John Shand to Abraham Henry Chambers, Spanish Town, Jamaica, 15 January 1803, *Chambers v. Goldwin*, C 112/163, TNA.

²¹ John Shand to Abraham Henry Chambers, 14 July 1804, *Chambers v. Goldwin*, C 112/163, TNA.

save near 50 pct by getting my supplies from home.”²² Clothing rations might be reduced or skipped entirely from year-to-year because of planters’ parsimony or due to negligence on the part of supply merchants. In March 1804, Tobago planter George Morison complained that slaves under his management had received no clothing the previous year except “very bad Jackets...which did not last one month.” Morison underscored how even in the “worst of times” it was vital to ensure the shipping of clothing because “there has been none to purchase” at local markets.²³

Similar to how they operated in trades in luxury and bespoke goods, commission houses relayed information to tradesmen on planters’ consumer preferences and informed planters of new goods and brands being proffered in European markets.²⁴ Writing to cousin Simon about an order for “Negro Hatts” and other provisions and supplies, London merchant Robert Taylor noted: “I mean to send you a few Samples of different Articles with the Prices, that you may fix on the exact quality of the Goods, you wd. wish have Sent you inspected.”²⁵ Robert also forwarded Simon a book — “a Copy of Mr. Irvines observations on Negroe Clothing, which I think will enable you to decide on the particular kind of Goods, by its proper Name, which you would wish to have sent out in future.”²⁶ Robert Taylor was clearly heeding the frequent complaints voiced by Simon on the quality of slave clothing that had been sent out over the years from the commission house of George and Robert Hibbert, who had formerly serviced Simon’s Jamaican

²² Charles Ruddach to Charles Steuart, Clarendon, Jamaica, 10 June 1790, Steuart Papers, MS 5036, NLS.

²³ George Morison to J.L. Johnson, Tobago, 21 March 1804, *Morison v. Morison*, C 104/178, TNA.

²⁴ On luxury goods, see Hancock, *Oceans of Wine*. For commission merchants performing a similar role in the line for plantation necessities, see Evans, “The Plantation Hoe,” 77.

²⁵ Robert Taylor to Simon Taylor, London, 12 October 1797, STP, ICS 101 13/A/85.

²⁶ Robert Taylor to Simon Taylor, London, 3 November 1797, STP, ICS 101 13/A/89.

concerns. Citing one earlier batch of slave clothing that Simon had found particularly offensive, Robert Taylor blamed the Hibberts for placing too much trust in tradesmen: “There appears to me to be a great deal too much discretion, left to Tradesmen, they in general, send out what quality of Goods they think proper.”²⁷

Planters employed clothing as a means to reinforce plantation hierarchies through the rationing of better garments and accessories to higher-ranking or “special” slaves.²⁸ One 1806 account for “Sundry Merchandize” shipped from Liverpool to a cotton estate in Demerara listed 77 “Mens Stout Blue Jackets” (£24.1.3) along with 6 “lined Jackets for Drivers”—the latter being of a higher-quality. Similarly, 15 dozen men’s and women’s “Negro Hats” (£13.25) were sent along with 6 “fine Felt Hats for Drivers” (£1.10).²⁹ In the minds of many planters, slave clothing further served as the “dress” of paternalism in ways both literal and figurative. In 1817, George Watson Taylor, inheritor of Simon Taylor’s Jamaican properties through marriage to Taylor’s niece, wrote from England to his attorney that he wanted an “additional supply” of clothing to be purchased for the “breeding women & young Children” on one estate. Taylor ordered his manager to inform the slaves that they could expect such perks in due time from their future owner, who was then a minor: “I trust to your impressing from time to time upon the minds of

²⁷ Robert Taylor to Simon Taylor, London, 12 October 1797, STP, ICS 101 13/A/85. Planters preferred not to buy ready-made clothing, textiles, or articles used for sewing and mending garments locally. One Jamaican planter remarked in 1790: “The price of Negro Clothing &c are terrible dear here I dare say I shall save near 50 pct by getting my supplies from home;” Charles Ruddach to Charles Steuart, Clarendon, Jamaica, 10 June 1790, Steuart Papers, MS 5036, NLS. See also McDonald, *Economy and Material Culture*, 123-4.

²⁸ Planter-doctor David Collins suggested, “that drivers should have each of them a cloth coat, of a colour different from the other negroes, as a distinguishing ensign of their authority.” Collins, *Practical Rules*, 129-30. See also McDonald, *Economy and Material Culture*, 126.

²⁹ Invoice of Merchandise shipped to Demerara by John Bolton & Co. on account of Ichabod Brush, Liverpool, 18 March 1806, Bradish Family Papers, Box 1, NYHS. In the same shipment, there were also six pieces of “all cotton check” totaling 289 yards—probably given to enslaved seamstresses to patch holes or ornament the drab cottons and woolens worn by field slaves.

the Negroes, what we really feel, a sincere desire on our part, in which we shall educate young Master Simon, to contribute as much as possible to their time, comfort & happiness.”³⁰

For foodstuffs, West Indian clients generally associated price and quality with different ports of origin. London’s reputation for salt provisions paled in comparison to those from Scottish and Irish ports. London commission houses thus often coordinated separate shipments of salt fish, beef, pork, and other specialty provisions.³¹ In 1804, Jamaican attorney John Shand wrote to a commission house: “In regard to Salted provisions Cork is the best market for beef pork butter as any House in the city will give you a line to the factors who are accustomed to supply Jamaica estates.” For salt fish, on the other hand, Shand preferred Scottish sources: “Glasgow is the most eligible market for herrings the barrels are larger than those from Ireland, the quantity of salt cramed in greatly less & the price generally lower.”³² Simon Taylor echoed this sentiment in 1813: “I wish my herrings always to come out by way of Glasgow, never having found those shipped either from Leith or England answer the purpose nearly so well.”³³ One Barbados attorney requested that no more beef, pork, or herring be procured in London—“the two former we use at our own table both were of a horrid quality as to the Herrings they rotted, before we could use them for the Negroes.” He noted: “Herrings fresh from Greenock are best.”³⁴

³⁰ George Watson Taylor to William Shand, London, 6 August 1817, STP, ICS 101 8/D/11.

³¹ See for instance, Simon Taylor to Chaloner Arcedeckne, Kingston, Jamaica, 24 January 1767, VAN-ARC, Reel One [microfilm].

³² John Shand to Abraham Chambers, *Chamber v. Goldwin*, C 112/163, 14 July 1804, TNA.

³³ Simon Taylor to Robert Taylor, Kingston, Jamaica, 23 January 1813, STP, ICS 101 13/B/36.

³⁴ Sampson Wood to [Thomas Lane?], Barbados, 26 September 1801, Newton Family Papers, MS 523/456, Senate House Library, University of London.

Salt beef and pork, primarily consumed by whites in the British West Indian colonies, increased in cost over this period, mainly due to rising wartime consumption by naval and military forces. Simon Taylor often harped on rising prices for Scottish and Irish provisions: “I know Articles differ in Price according to the demand there is for them, but the exorbitant Charges for the Herrings will do in Scotland what the Irish Factor will find at Cork, that there will in future be no orders sent for any thing from them and they must then export them on their own Acct. and people take the Chance of the Markett here.”³⁵ Taylor believed that increased wartime demand for salt beef and pork for naval and military forces upset rhythms of slaughtering and curing in Ireland and led to the production of inferior provisions.³⁶ In 1806, he described one Irish provision house as having “used to be a good one but I do really believe they have not real good Beef in Ireland as they used to have.” He went on: “The Consumption for the Navy is such they have been obliged to kill their Cattle before they were in proper order.”³⁷ Taylor’s impressions were borne out by statistics published by the Jamaica Assembly in 1793 (Table 3.1) and 1799 (Table 3.2).³⁸

³⁵ Simon Taylor to Robert Taylor, Holland Jamaica, 21 March 1803, STP, ICS 101/1/F/14.

³⁶ Writing to London merchant Robert Hibbert, Taylor recalled that Irish mess beef had cost merely 45 shillings in the war year of 1762, but had risen to £8.16 per barrel in 1804. Simon Taylor to Robert Hibbert, Kingston, 12 June 1804, STP, ICS 101 1/F/57. See also, Simon Taylor to Robert Taylor, 16 March 1803, STP, ICS 101/1/F/12. On the Irish provisions trade in the post-American Revolution period, see L.M. Cullen, *An Economic History of Ireland since 1660* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1982), 55-9, 103.

³⁷ Simon Taylor to Robert Taylor, Kingston, Jamaica, no date [1806], STP, ICS 101/1/H/31.

³⁸ Figures in Table 1 are found in: *Proceedings of the Hon. House of Assembly of Jamaica, on the Sugar and Slave Trade, in a Session which Began the 23d of October, 1792* (London: Printed and Published, by Order of the House, by Stephen Fuller, Esq. Agent for Jamaica, 1793), 25. For figures in Table 2: “An account of the prices of Irish provisions at Cork, and other ports in Ireland, for the several years under-mentioned,” *Journal of the Assembly of Jamaica*, vol. 10, 436.

Table 3.1: Average prices of salted Irish provisions at Kingston, Jamaica, 1772-75, 1778-91

	BEEF	PORK
1772-1775	£2.14.9	£2.13.3
1778-1791	£3.7.0	£2.18.0

Table 3.2: Average prices of salted Irish provisions at Kingston, Jamaica, 1792-99

	1792	1793	1794	1795	1796	1797	1798	1799
HERRING	22s. 9d.	24s.	24s.	26s.	28s.	30s.	30s.	32s. 6d.
BEEF	62s. 6d.	72s.	90s.	94s.	103s.	108s.	142s.	143s.
PORK	64s.	74s.	76s.	76s.	86s.	100s.	105s.	110s.

Salt provisions ideally needed to last through the crop season and into the next summer. When poorly salted or packaged goods arrived in the colonies, planters might pressure commission merchants either to find new tradesmen or to force current ones to improve their products. One Jamaican planter wrote to a London house in June 1783 about the reception of “very bad” and high-priced beef: “it is necessary again to request you to be particular in your directions that all your Articles for different Correspondents should be of the best—no disappointment can equal the receipt of articles of bad quality in this Country nor should you ever pardon a Tradesman so imposing on you.”³⁹ Planters despised the omission of goods or the reception of poor-quality slave provisions because the only alternative sources were found in pricier colonial markets. In May 1807, Simon Taylor wrote to cousin Robert: “I am in very great want of the Herrings ... for those

³⁹ Letter to Henry Jackson, 22 June 1783, *Douglas v. Harrison*, C 110/141, TNA.

which came out last year were so very bad and the blls having been 2/3 filled with Salt the first did not last half the time they should and I have been at very great Expençe in getting American fish.”⁴⁰

Canadian salted fish gained a reputation for inferior quality compared to European and U.S sources. Canadian provision merchants appeared to have actively sought to overcome this reputation in the minds of planter-consumers in the post-American Revolution period. In 1794, Simon Taylor received a letter from one of his family relations in Scotland, Robert Graham, who had been approached by someone with a nephew in Halifax “in the mercantile line.” This young man wanted to establish relationships with correspondents in Jamaica who would order salted herring. But Graham warned the young merchant, “when I was in Jam^a. the Northward [i.e., British North American] Herrings, were much inferior in Quality to those from Scotland & Ireland, and that they did not keep near so well.” Nonetheless, Graham reported to Simon Taylor that he was assured, “of late they were much improved both in curing & packing.”⁴¹ The avidity with which the Halifax merchant sought to change the Jamaican planters’ mind suggests the importance of the West Indian market to the fledgling fisheries of British North America.

Aside from preservability, planters generally expressed preferences for plainness and uniformity in slave provisions. On this point, the brands of individual curers and merchant houses served as a means to ensure quality control on both sides of the ocean.⁴²

In 1813, Robert Taylor was “foiled in procuring Herrings at Glasgow” for cousin

⁴⁰ Simon Taylor to Robert Taylor, Jamaica, 7 May 1807, STP, ICS 101 1/I/26.

⁴¹ Robert Graham to Simon Taylor, 21 December 1794, STP, ICS 101 10/A/107; William Glen to Robert Graham, Forganhall, 10 December 1794 (enclosure), STP, ICS 101 10/A/107.

⁴² On brand reputations in the lines for plantation goods, see Evans, “Plantation Hoe,” 83-4.

Simon's Jamaica concerns and instead purchased 999 barrels of pilchards (sardines) at the same port from Lark, Mellhuish & Co., that had been "put up by the most approved Curers." Robert Taylor forwarded a letter to Simon in which the merchants hoped to allay "some doubts" in the minds of skeptical planters about the quality of the fish: "The yellow appearance of the Pilchards is to be attributed to the mode of Cure, and to no other cause, and the mode adopted by our friends is the precise mode, by which Pilchards are prepared for the West Indies." Robert Taylor wrote to Simon that if he found the pilchards undesirable, "it will be proper to insert the Brand mark of the Curer in the Surveys," so that they would not resort to them again.⁴³ Robert was likely wary of earlier complaints about pilchards voiced by his cousin, who had written about one shipment of "rotten" herring: "It would be better to send out even pilchards."⁴⁴

In the 1790s, commission houses would have had good reason to heed the wishes of major West Indian clients such as Simon Taylor. Sugar remained big business with potential for bonanza profits in years of favorable markets (see Table 3.3).⁴⁵ Published accounts from four sugar estates under Simon Taylor's management for seven crop years (1792-98) show full orders of Irish and Scottish herring for slaves along with foodstuffs for whites such as "mess" or "planter's" beef and pork, tongues, hog cheeks, pig heads,

⁴³ Robert Taylor to Simon Taylor, Billiter Square, London, 14 January 1813, STP, ICS 101 13/A/321.

⁴⁴ Simon Taylor to Robert Taylor, Kingston, Jamaica, 29 January 1812, STP, ICS 101/1/J/50. See also, Simon Taylor to Robert Taylor, Jamaica, 13 May 1813, STP, ICS 101, 13/A/326.

⁴⁵ From the 1770s through most of the 1790s, Taylor ordered supplies mainly through the London commission house headed by the merchant brothers Thomas and Robert Hibbert. In the 1790s, Taylor had grown dissatisfied with the Hibberts over the prices and qualities of supplies, including "very bad" slave clothing, so he transferred his consignments to his second cousin Robert Taylor's London house. Robert Taylor alleged about the Hibberts: "they have too much of other business to attend properly to the examination of the Supplies." Robert Taylor further claimed that it was well known that the Hibberts sought discounts from the tradesmen they dealt with, who in turn provided worse-quality goods. Robert Taylor to Simon Taylor, London, 6 September 1797, STP, ICS 101 13/A/83.

and butter.⁴⁶ Above all, planters' concerns over the quality of provisions and other plantation goods were inseparable from their desire to keep down costs for plantation necessities amidst what seemed to them inexorable price increases.⁴⁷

Table 3.3: Expenses, proceeds, and produce figures for four Jamaican sugar estates under the management of Simon Taylor, 1792-1798

	EXPENSES	PROCEEDS	SUGAR QUANTITIES (Hogsheads/Tierces)
1792	£4343	£34208	1034/10
1793	£4049	£23816	1133/10
1794	£6292	£16865	1136/10
1795	£6608	£36610	1107/10
1796	£7688	£9468	232/0*
1797	£6354	£26153	758/0
1798	£8444	£23816	707/45

* Includes only sugars from Llanrumney and Haughton Court

Source: *Journals of the Assembly of Jamaica*, vol. 10, JCB

By the 1820s, the declining business of sugar and other West Indian produce would force issues related to quality control to become even more closely entwined with

⁴⁶ The estates were Holland and Lysson's in St. Thomas-in-the-East; Llanrumney in St. Mary's; and Haughton Court in Hanover. The Assembly's tables concluded with the "Neat sum in the factor's hands at the disposal of the planter" by deducting from the "Gross Amount of Sales" the charges on duties, freight, weighing, insurance, and "Customary and other incidental charges." It is worth noting that these figures do not include revenues from cattle pens, commissions on attorney business, or money accrued from hiring out or selling slaves. *Journal of the Assembly of Jamaica*, vol. 10, 418-28. These figures are also cited in Selwyn H.H. Carrington, *The Sugar Industry and the Abolition of the Slave Trade, 1775-1810* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2002), 258.

⁴⁷ For Holland, Taylor ordered 120 barrels of herring from Ireland in each of the first two years (1792-9), but no Irish herring in subsequent years. From 1794-97, Taylor ordered herring from Glasgow for Holland, and from Glasgow and Newcastle in 1798; Holland received no Irish provisions at all in 1797. Taylor diversified herring shipments on other estates as well. For Lysson's in 1792 and 1793, Taylor ordered from Ireland 12 barrels of mess beef, 12 barrels of mess pork, 4 half barrels of tongues, and 6 firkins of butter. In 1794 and 1796, Taylor added 12 barrels of hog cheek or pig heads to the shipments. But in 1797, no Irish provisions were shipped to Lysson's. By 1798, even quantities of foodstuffs were reduced—10 barrels of beef, 8 barrels of pork, 8 barrels of pig heads, 6 firkins of butter. For these figures: *Journals of the Assembly of Jamaica*, vol. 10 (Spanish Town: Alexander Aikman, 1807), 418-435.

reducing expenses. British North American salt fish seemed to penetrate the West Indian market more deeply in this period. Commission houses on both sides of the Atlantic that dealt in Canadian fish seemed to take some measures to assure planters of quality control as they helped their beleaguered clients cope with declining markets. Greenock commission merchants Wallace, Hunter & Co. wrote to Jamaican proprietor Hugh R. Wallace in November 1820: “The Herrings now sent are cured & repacked with white Salt which we hope will be more approven of than Rock Salt, as to which & their quality we will be glad to hear your opinion.”⁴⁸ The following May, the merchants mentioned, “From the Falling off in the proceeds of the Sugar planters Crops we have been directing our attention to lessen the expences,” particularly by transshipping Newfoundland fish from Scotland to Jamaica. By doing so, they could unpack and inspect the fish before sending it out and reject any “that is not well cured.”⁴⁹ Even once the long war years had ended, British sources for provisions could be tenuous. In 1821, the Greenock merchants gloomily reported that the recent “unsuccessful fishery” on the West Coast of Scotland had made herring prices rise to the highest they had been “for some years & at present we see little prospect of their being lower.”⁵⁰

Slaves’ alleged consumer preferences occasionally cropped up in proslavery publications. In his travel account, *A Tour through the Several Islands of Barbadoes, St. Vincent, Antigua, Tobago, and Grenada* (1801), Sir William Young claimed to take a special interest in slaves’ preferences for certain foods when he was visiting several sugar estates that he owned as an absentee proprietor. “Of the salt provisions given out to the

⁴⁸ Wallace, Hunter & Co. to Hugh R. Wallace, Greenock, 14 November 1820, CS 96/4516, NAS.

⁴⁹ Wallace, Hunter & Co. to Hugh R. Wallace, Greenock, 11 May 1821, CS 96/4516, NAS.

⁵⁰ Wallace, Hunter & Co. to Hugh R. Wallace, Greenock, 17 October 1821, CS 96/4516, NAS.

negroes,” he wrote, “the finest sort are the mackarel [sic] from America, and the negroes are remarkably fond of them.” Young noted how his brother, a manager, “indulges them by studying to give them a variety in their provisions; pork, beef, and fish in different sorts.” Young’s brother tended to dole out pork rather than beef, because slaves believed, in Young’s words, that “one pound of pork will go as far as two pounds of beef” in a mess pot. Young concluded: “This little attention of Mr. H— to the negroes’ wishes, shews how much of their comfort must even depend on the master’s regard to them.” Young’s description of doling out rations of salt fish on a face-to-face basis was intended to depict rationing as an extension of the paternalistic relationship that masters allegedly forged with slaves. Young also noted that his brother was “a manager at once properly strict, and most kind, and who is both feared and beloved by all his negroes.” While acknowledging the specter of punishment that undergirded master-slave relations, Young reconciled the belief that attention paid to slaves’ food preferences could be evidence of planters’ “humanity” and “benevolence.”⁵¹

Obviously, Young’s claims about enslaved taste should be viewed skeptically. Further, his anecdote neatly elided the fact that slave provisions and other plantation necessities flowed through complex transatlantic supply chains. Slave provisions only constituted one set of commodities—albeit important ones—necessary for West Indian estates to function as productive units. Sugar estates were complex agro-industrial enterprises that required a wide array of raw materials and finished goods in order to process and package sugar and rum. Plantations also relied on the skilled work of local tradesmen who could build and repair structures and machinery used for production.

⁵¹ Young, *A Tour through the Windward Islands*, 273.

White employees, though small in number compared to vast slave workforces, also soaked up large sums in annual salaries. In order to produce sugar, relations between estates and such local creditors, tradesmen, and employees had to be maintained even in years when profit proved elusive. Planters, attorneys, and merchants hence understood that metropolitan credit alone could not sustain plantation enterprises; colonial sources of credit and supplies were also necessary. As such, ensuring that sugar estates could provision slaves and keep up production levels would become an object of regulation by colonial legislatures in the early nineteenth century—though not without controversy on both sides of the Atlantic.

Plantation Ledgers & Living Collateral

Rising levels of debt and resulting difficulties in procuring provisions and other supplies in transatlantic markets were inescapable topics in correspondence between planters, attorneys, and merchants. Foodstuffs purchased in the colonies were tallied alongside other so-called “contingent” expenses and primarily paid in bills of exchange drawn on commission merchants. While planters hoped to clear contingent expenses through local sales of rum and other secondary produce, they often complained that such proceeds rarely covered costs.⁵² Managers frequently cautioned absentee proprietors that

⁵² In 1787, Bryan Edwards’ Jamaican cattle pen, Bryan Castle, disposed of 123 bags of pimento worth £823.17 to pay off expenses for the pen and another estate, Brampton Bryan, including for fresh beef (£51.3.6); clearing pine walks; another purchase of beef (£20.3.6); and coffee (£12.3). “Acc[ounts] Curr[ent]: Brampton Bryan Estate and Bryan Castle Penn for Contingencies and Crop Acc[ounts] prefixed for the year 1787,” *Bayly v. Edwards*, C 107/68, TNA. Rum was occasionally shipped to British commission merchants for sale, but the practice was not widespread. Jamaican planter and attorney John Shand wrote about shipping rum “home” in 1803: “But in general it is much disapproved of by prudent managers here. And a mortgagee who insists on such an arrangement is regarded as a kind of harpy who would grasp at a commission for himself without regard to the interest of his unfortunate debtor.” John Shand to Abraham Chambers, 19 March 1803, *Chambers v. Goldwin*, C 112/163, TNA.

heavy provisioning expenses were impossible to avoid in this period.⁵³ In 1800, one planter wrote from the Ceded Islands: “The low price of sugar, short crops & the want of provisions for our Negroes, a West India Estate will at present barely maintain its Negroes & Stock, pay for its salary & stores.”⁵⁴ When provisioning expenses increased, attorneys might find themselves fending off accusations of embezzlement, fraud, or negligence. An exasperated Tobago attorney responded to an absentee proprietor in 1804: “Waste of all kinds on your Plantation is a regular complaint & the only answer I can give is that negroes must be fed & Lodged.”⁵⁵

Commission merchants kept a skeptical watch over resident planters and attorneys in order to see if their mismanagement of colonial accounts was a signal of their credit-untrustworthiness. Perceptions of attorneys as extravagant or wasteful consumers often surfaced in disputes over the management of estates. In the 1790s, London merchant-mortgagee William Lushington wished to appoint an attorney on the Grenada properties of indebted resident sugar planter James Campbell. Campbell refused to recognize the attorney, named MacDonald, citing his reputation of not being a “frugal man.” Likely invoking mixed-race progeny, Campbell observed that MacDonald maintained a large family on the island, “which does not altogether suit West India estates.” When the

⁵³ See for instance the letter of Tobago planting attorney George Morison: “the Cradley Negroes have not been healthy from the heavy rains last year the Negroe Grounds failed this has occasioned great expence in feeding far above what the Rum would furnish which I have been obliged to advance.” George Morison to Wilson, Tobago, 20 November 1803, f. 2-3, *Morison v. Morison*, C 104/178, TNA. See also Edwards, *History, Civil and Commercial* (1801), 157.

⁵⁴ James Campbell to William Lushington, 15 May 1799; 16 Nov. 1799; 20 March 1800; 2 June 1800, James Campbell Letterbook, *Campbell v. Rucker*, C 107/147, TNA. Cotton estates faced similar perils. “The Negroes must be fed, clothed, &c,” manager Peter Fairbairn lamented from Berbice in 1808, “& generally in Seasons when the Crop is most defective, the Expences are the greatest, for what affects the one is commonly injurious to the other.” Peter Fairbairn to Lady Seaforth, 1 Feb 1810, f. 249-50, GD 46/17/35, NAS.

⁵⁵ George Morison to Alexander Gordon, Tobago, 13 January 1804, *Morison v. Morison*, C 104/178, TNA.

merchant Lushington continued to insist on appointing MacDonald as attorney, Campbell protested, “few managers study anything but their own ease.”⁵⁶ Campbell further accused MacDonald of not giving adequate provisions to the slaves working on the estate, “but rather to support his own Table, as I am informed he lived in a style beyond what I could or would do.”⁵⁷

Even when dealing with heavily indebted correspondents, Lushington and other metropolitan merchants were financially incentivized to keep credit flowing to properties in order to ensure that slaves were at least marginally fed. Slaves underpinned not only labor regimes but also mercantile portfolios by serving as the collateral that helped secure mortgage debts.⁵⁸ In 1798, Lushington wrote to his agent in Grenada about the struggling James Campbell: “I shall accept none of Campbells bills unless they are certified by you, & I beg you will not Sanction any unless for Provisions for the Negroes.”⁵⁹ Another factor that granted a measure of leniency to indebted planters was that debt recovery (including the seizure of slaves) could prove difficult in the colonies, where planters hid behind

⁵⁶ James Campbell to William Lushington, 8 September 1796; 8 October 1796; 17 Jan 1797; James Campbell Letterbook, *Campbell v. Rucker*, C 107/147, TNA.

⁵⁷ James Campbell to William Lushington, 7 May 1797; 22 June 1800, James Campbell Letterbook, *Campbell v. Rucker*, C 107/147, TNA.

⁵⁸ Lands, buildings, and slaves in the colonies could be mortgaged and made liable for seizure under the terms of the Colonial Debts Act of 1732. For a recent analysis of the origins and effects of the law on slavery and British Atlantic legal culture, see Claire Priest, “Creating an American Property Law: Alienability and Its Limits in American History,” *Harvard Law Review*, vol. 120, no. 2 (Dec. 2006), 385-459. Historians disagree on the exact period in the eighteenth century when mortgages became the dominant form of debt among West Indian proprietors, but no one disagrees that it was widespread by the 1790s. On mortgages and plantation finance, see: Richard Pares, *Merchants and Planters* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1951) and *A West India Fortune* (New York: Longmans Green, 1950), esp. Chapters 10 and 11; K.G. Davies, “The Origins of the Commission System in the West India Trade,” 89-107; S.G. Checkland, “Finance for the West Indies, 1780-1815,” 461-469; Jacob Price, “Credit in the Slave Trade and Plantation Economies,” 293-339; S.D. Smith, “Merchants and Planters Revisited,” 434-465.

⁵⁹ William Lushington to Alexander MacSween, London, 25 August 1798, *Campbell v. Rucker*, C 107/147, TNA.

favorable laws and dilatory court proceedings.⁶⁰ “Chancery Business, & all disputed Cases, are so very expensive in this Country,” remarked a Jamaican debt collection firm in 1784, “that a man ought to know well the ground he goes upon, & have more than a common prospect of a favourable event before he plunges into the Law.”⁶¹ William Lushington wrote more simply of his desire to avoid seeking foreclosure on the Campbell properties: “I am unwilling I confess to myself in Law.”⁶²

James Campbell had disputes with other commission houses he dealt with as well. He also owned two interconnected sugar estates on the eastern side of Tobago, Argyle and Invera, which he had inherited from his brother Alexander, who had been killed during Fedon’s Rebellion in 1795.⁶³ Unusually detailed accounts for five “crop” years (1808, 1809, 1810, 1812, 1813) survive for the estates in the Masters’ Exhibits for the High Court of Chancery case *Campbell v. Rucker*. Itemized expenses in these accounts highlight the importance of local food supplies, but also show that costs for slave provisions, though vital, paled in comparison to expenses for items used for the production of sugar. More importantly, the surviving accounts illuminate the local webs of credit, goods, and services that supplied and sustained West Indian estates.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Burnard, “Et in Arcadia,” 31; Pares *West India Fortune*, 266. For a contemporary planters’ opinion that chancery courts actually favored mortgagees, see Mathison, *Notices Respecting Jamaica*, 14-15.

⁶¹ Cunningham & Cleland to the Assignees of Boyer & Kenyon, Montego Bay, Jamaica, 2 July 1784, *Bradbury v. Bradbury*, C 110/152, TNA.

⁶² “The Several Answers of William Lushington,” *Campbell v. Rucker*, C 13/2092/25, TNA.

⁶³ Argyle was listed as being under the ownership of the “Heirs of J. Campbell” and “Worked with Invera” on a map of Tobago from 1832. Henry Isles Woodcock, *A History of Tobago* (London: 1867), Appendices.

⁶⁴ Argyle and Invera’s surviving accounts are found in the Masters’ Exhibits for the High Court of Chancery in England, C 107/193, TNA. (All subsequent figures and names from the accounts will refer to this source.) Accounts include the following data: annual numbers of slaves on each estate, along with births and deaths; expenses with colonial and metropolitan merchants and traders; bills of exchange drawn on the Ruckers; debts owed to and by the estates with local merchants, tradesmen, attorneys, doctors, ship captains, and planters; and produce and consignments of sugar and rum. An estate inventory from 1808 lists the names, ages, occupations, values, and in some cases, physical condition of over ninety slaves on

Argyle and Invera had a combined population of nearly 400 slaves in the first decade of the nineteenth century. Provisioning them was carried out on an industrial scale and relied upon credit extended in the colonies as well as from London. The estates relied on a wide network of supply sources. In the five crop years under examination, accounts record 128 purchases of foodstuffs, totaling nearly £7,000 currency. There were eighteen individual merchants, merchant partnerships, ship captains, and other traders who supplied food to the estates. London commission merchants D.H. & J.A. Rucker were the only European firm represented in the accounts. Tobago-based suppliers of provisions and other plantation necessities accounted for more than half of the total expenses on the two estates from 1807-1814. Local merchants provided the estates with fish, beef, pork, flour, butter, corn, cornmeal, rice, potatoes, peas, barley, bread, salt, and turtle. While many of these foods overlapped with typical metropolitan supplies, others could only be procured from local storehouses or North American sources.⁶⁵

Not surprisingly, salt fish for slaves was by far the most important foodstuff purchased in these years, amounting to nearly £5,000, or about two-thirds of all listed food expenses (Tables 3.4 and 3.5). Quantities were immense—altogether, the estates consumed about 103 hogsheads and 229 barrels of fish. To give some idea of the physical scale of these provisions, 103 full hogsheads alone would have weighed over 100,000 pounds, or 50 tons. Argyle and Invera needed local trade contacts to purchase American

Argyle and Invera. (Accounts from 1808 also include a small cattle pen.) There are some limitations to the surviving accounts. Most problematically, annual supplies sent by the Ruckers from London were only listed as 'stores;' the London ships undoubtedly carried additional foodstuffs, such as salted beef and pork. (Although the Ruckers arranged for barrels of pilchards to be sent separately from the London supplies, so this item at least does appear in the accounts.) Some pages have been torn and stained, though not to any serious extent, and figures are missing entirely for the crop year of 1811. Additionally, there is no surviving attorneys' correspondence. Nevertheless, enough data remains in the accounts to illuminate the local webs of credit, goods, and services that sustained the estates.

⁶⁵ Statements of expenses incurred for Argyle and Invera, *Campbell v. Rucker*, C 107/193, TNA.

fish from ships or storehouses, and the importance of salt fish in keeping slaves in some laboring form ensured that estates could not rely solely on European supplies.⁶⁶ Accounts indicate that attorneys might have made larger purchases of salt fish in order to work slaves harder and longer. In the crop year of 1808, Argyle and Invera purchased 32 hogsheads, two barrels and four kegs of fish for over £1500, compared to roughly £400 spent on beef and pork, £180 on corn, £100 on flour, and £30 on rice.⁶⁷

Table 3.4: Quantities of foodstuffs purchased for Argyle and Invera, 1808-1813

	FISH*	BEEF	PORK	FLOUR	CORN	RICE
1808	32 hhds, 2 blls, 4 kegs	13 blls, 4 half blls	11 blls	8 blls	4 puns, 58 blls, 58 bushels	1 trc
1809	18 hhds, 59 blls, 1 box	4 blls	4 blls	n/d	n/d	n/d
1810	30 hhd, 26 blls	30 lbs	12 blls	5 blls	7 puns (cornmeal)	2 trc
1812	16 hhd, 75 blls	4 half blls, 99 lbs	19 blls, 3 half blls	5 blls	n/d	1 trc
1813	7 hhds, 66 blls, 2 half blls	2 blls, 25 lbs	n/d	2 half blls	n/d	n/d
TOTAL	103 hhds, 229 blls, 4 kegs, 1 box	23 blls, 154 lbs	47.5 blls	19 blls	11 puns, 58 blls, 58 bushels	4 trc

*Includes barrels of pilchards shipped from Europe
 hhds=hogsheads; blls=kegs; puns=puncheons; trc=tierces; frk=firkins

⁶⁶ Argyle and Invera purchased fish from nine different suppliers. Cunningham & Brasnell were the most important ones, followed distantly by J.M. Collier & Co., John Firebrace, and John J. Darrell. From London, the Ruckers became larger suppliers as the years went on—their annual shipment of pilchards rose from twenty-two barrels in 1809 to seventy-five barrels in 1812, before dipping to sixty barrels in 1813. An increase from the London-side might have reflected difficulties the estates encountered in meeting obligations with colonial merchants; conditions of local scarcity; or simply better coordination between the Ruckers and managing attorneys. Tobago estates were allowed to barter rum in exchange for provisions from U.S. traders in order to alleviate scarcity at the start of the second war against France: Ragatz, *Fall of the Planter Class*, 322.

⁶⁷ Statements of expenses incurred for Argyle and Invera, *Campbell v. Rucker*, C 107/193, TNA.

Table 3.5: Expenses for foodstuffs for Argyle and Invera (currency), 1808-1813

	FISH	BEEF	PORK	FLOUR	CORN	RICE	BUTTER	POTATOES
1808	1525.67	197.99	191.65	102.12	183.1	30	21.76	
1809	911.16	65.53	79.4					3.6
1810	942.39	4.1	217.16	44.44	162.9	43.2	6.9	1.13
1812	786.66	69.21	327.02	46.52			10.8	3.12
1813	676.85	36.15					8.13	
TOTAL	4842.73	372.98	815.23	193.08	346	73.2	47.59	7.85

After fish, beef and pork were the most important provisions on the estates.

Argyle and Invera consumed 47½ barrels of pork along with 23 barrels and 154 pounds of beef, amounting to slightly less than £1200 currency. Slaves would have consumed some of this beef and pork—there were twelve barrels of “Pork for Xmas” (£217.16 currency) in one year, a customary holiday “gift” to slaves from white masters.⁶⁸

Secondary, grain-based foodstuffs such as Indian corn, cornmeal, rice, and flour further underscore the importance of colonial agents to provisioning regimes.⁶⁹ Potatoes, peas, and butter were purchased locally for the estates’ white employees; peas might have been given to slaves as supplemental fare. There were also three expenses of “fresh provisions for house use,” along with one purchase of “stock” (presumably pigs, poultry, goats, or

⁶⁸ Accounts list “mess beef,” “fresh beef,” “Irish pork,” and “prime pork,” in addition to simply “beef” and “pork.” In Ireland, grades of beef were determined by the size of cattle at slaughter. “Mess beef,” also known as “cargo beef,” came from larger cows and was of a higher quality than “small beef,” which would have included more undesirable parts, such as necks and shanks. Mandelblatt, “A Transatlantic Commodity: Irish Salt Beef in the French Atlantic World,” 27.

⁶⁹ Since Indian corn, cornmeal, rice, and flour were all North American commodities, it would have been unlikely for commission merchants to procure these goods for West Indian estates on long notice, and impossible on short notice.

cattle) for “house use.” On the more luxurious side, cheese and crackers show up in the accounts, along with one expense for turtle, a delicacy and status-marker peculiar to the West Indian planter class.⁷⁰

Beyond foodstuffs, there were items used to grow, procure, or prepare food on and around the estates. Attorneys purchased at least two fishing boats (£39 and £49), along with “300 fish hooks” (£9), “snapper lines” (£6), and a “second-handed seine” (£9), indicating that slaves were expected to provision themselves by sea as well as by land. Accounts list one expense for “yam seed for house use” (£13), likely intended for the garden plot outside the great house. Finally, a frying pan (£3) was purchased in 1808.⁷¹ These seemingly insignificant items illustrate more than the material texture of everyday life on nineteenth-century sugar plantations. Each one had potential multiplier effects: making the estates more self-sufficient; tying accounts closer to local producers and suppliers; and somewhat lessening dependence on British supplies.

While foodstuffs were essential to keeping slaves alive and laboring, they did not dominate plantation ledgers. Provisions represented only between eight to sixteen percent of Argyle and Invera’s total annual expenses from 1808 to 1815. Similar to other sugar estates, Argyle and Invera spent more on goods and services directly related to sugar production than on provisions that would improve slave life. Local expenses on building materials and repair work together outstripped foodstuffs in every year except 1813.⁷²

⁷⁰ Taste preferences of white workers for foodstuffs in “fresh” condition obviously rendered local sources the only option for procuring them. Statements of expenses incurred for Argyle and Invera, *Campbell v. Rucker*, C 107/193, TNA.

⁷¹ Statements of expenses incurred for Argyle and Invera, *Campbell v. Rucker*, C 107/193, TNA.

⁷² These costs ranged from about seven to twenty-six percent of total annual expenses. In 1808, £2800 was spent on raw and finished materials and tradesmen’s bills, accounting for 25.75% of the total. In this crop, the estates consumed white oak and red oak staves, heading, lumber, cypress shingles, casting, sheets of lead, empty puncheons, packs, shooks, and rum butts. Tradesmen’s bills from that year amounted to £578

Salaries for white employees were another major annual expense.⁷³ Expenses for livestock further tied accounts to local specialist merchants and other nearby estates and pens.⁷⁴ Hiring slaves connected Argyle and Invera to colonial labor markets and created debt relationships with neighboring slaveholders.⁷⁵ Finally, a host of smaller expenses rounded out colonial accounts: doctors' bills, taxes, freight and "draggerage," slaves' jail fees, payments to runaway catchers.⁷⁶

We know that James Campbell was running the estates at a loss in the years preceding his death in 1805. Subsequent accounts show that operating expenses might only have been covered in bumper crop years (Table 3.6). In 1808, Argyle and Invera

and included the following: James Lumsden made "sundry repairs to the water mill at Invera" (£313); Henry Baxter "ranged" a set of coppers and built a "double chimney" (£112); James Butter repaired items and built an ashpit, chimney, and abutment (£142); and Crooks and Gray repaired a mill bed (£11).

⁷³ Salaries amounted to more than what was spent locally on provisions in every year for which accounts survive. They were the least fluctuating type of expense and averaged around twenty percent of the annual total. In any given year, Argyle and Invera employed 10 to 17 free people—attorneys, managers, carpenters, overseers, pen-keepers, clerks, and bookkeepers. Attorneys received the highest salaries. For instance, Elphinstone Piggott was paid £700 currency for acting as receiver and attorney for both estates in 1807. In subsequent years, two separate attorneys were paid £250 sterling (about £500 currency) for ordering supplies, corresponding with merchants, and "inspecting" the estates.

⁷⁴ There were 93 to 130 "horned cattle" and 45 to 60 mules on the estates at any given time. Accounts show only two purchases of cattle, both in the crop of 1812: three oxen (£220) from attorney Charles Gray, and one "young ox" (£60) from Charlotteville ("Charlotte Ville") estate. Mules, on the other hand, were purchased in every crop year with the exception of 1808. John Francis Dubreuil supplied twenty "Spanish mules" in 1809 (£634), seven in 1810 (£440), ten in 1812 (£415), and five in 1813 (£215). Accounts for 1812 also list three (non-Spanish) mules purchased from John Campbell for £120. Draft animals were used to plough fields, power sugar mills, transport crops, and as sources of "manure, milk, meat, and leather." Account books usually recorded the numbers and conditions of "horned cattle" and mules (including births and deaths) with the same precision as they counted slaves. Philip D. Morgan, "Slaves and Livestock in 18th-Century Jamaica: Vineyard Pen, 1750-51," *WMQ*, vol. 52, no. 1 (January, 1995), 47-76 (quoted 48).

⁷⁵ On Argyle and Invera, expenses for hired labor rose during these years, no doubt caused in part by declining numbers of slave on the estates. In 1810, "jobbing" expenses amounted to £520, when the estates hired slaves from Charles Gray (attorney), Alexander Nesbitt, and Ebenezer Duncan (doctor) for holing and weeding canes.

⁷⁶ Doctor Ebenezer Duncan was paid £200-300 yearly for medical attendance on slaves and white workers. Argyle and Invera paid a few hundred pounds in taxes each year, including levies on the number of slaves on the estates and for "deficiencies" in the numbers of whites. Ship freight and "draggerage" (carrying goods loaded on small craft called droghers to and from ships at harbor) ranged from about four percent to seven percent of annual expenses.

produced the largest quantities of sugar and also generated the largest expenses out of any crop year—three hundred eighty-two hogsheads of sugar (which netted over £5,400 sterling in London, or roughly £10,800 currency) and 273 puncheons of rum (which generated local proceeds of about £7300 currency). These figures were against some £11,000 currency in island expenses and £1600 sterling for stores sent from Europe—putting the estates in the black by about £3900 currency. However, the balance would have been chipped away at by interest on mortgages, annuities, and other debts, so it is difficult to determine if the estates made a profit even in this year.⁷⁷

Table 3.6: Total and island expenses for Argyle and Invera (currency), 1808-1813

	TOTAL EXPENSES	ISLAND EXPENSES
1808	14,056.4	10,978.20
1809	10,181.11	6,139.94
1810	11,445.3	7,863.7
1812	12,102.1	8,797.95
1813	8,861.6	4,699.92

James Campbell died in 1805, but his disputes with commission merchants would have litigious and legislative afterlives. The plight of Argyle and Invera, and a consequent chancery case, *Campbell v. Rucker*, would attract the notice of colonial reformers and thus make the financial difficulties of provisioning slaves central to

⁷⁷ Statements of Sugar and Rum made upon Argyle and Invera and how disposed of, Statements of expenses incurred for Argyle and Invera, *Campbell v. Rucker*, C 107/193, TNA. Conforming to standard practice, Argyle and Invera paid local merchants primarily in rum while consigning almost all of the sugar to the London house. On 1 May 1808, the estates shipped 346 hogsheads and 20 tierces of sugar on board four different ships consigned to D.H. & J.A. Rucker. Meanwhile, attorneys recorded payments in rum to local creditors beginning in March. James Cunningham, who was the major provisioner for the estates in that crop year, was given eighty-three puncheons (9740 gallons) valued at about £2400 currency out of a total rum crop worth about £7300 currency. Rum production seems to have increased over the years in proportion to sugar. Some sugar was also sold locally. Douglas Hall notes that estates could meet the balance with “local earnings” from renting land, jobbing slaves, selling secondary produce such as grass, firewood, livestock, molasses, rum, and sugar. Hall, “Incalculability,” 343.

debates over slavery. The trouble began when James Campbell's widow, Lucy Campbell, inherited the estates in 1805, along with mortgages and other debts amounting to £19,875 sterling owed to D.H. & J.A. Rucker. Immediately following James Campbell's death, the Ruckers entered into possession of Argyle and Invera, appointed managing attorneys, and continued to reap produce consignments. In 1809, Lucy Campbell initiated a suit in Chancery against her late husband's creditors, alleging that they were hiding substantial revenues that should have been sufficient to clear the estates' debts.⁷⁸

Governor William Young of Tobago wrote about *Campbell v. Rucker* in an 1813 letter to Secretary of State of the Colonies Earl Bathurst. In the eyes of the proslavery governor, the case provided the perfect illustration of how planters' financial difficulties came at the expense of the material well-being of slaves. Young believed that three-fourths of the estates throughout the Windward Islands were "burdened" with onerous mortgage debts secured by land and slaves. Young explained, "no Contract or other debt for Stores, supplies, & Service of the Plantation could be demanded" following foreclosure or the death of proprietors until the mortgage was paid off. As a result, claimed the governor, many estates "could not get credit to procure Stores & Provisions for the Slaves: and at certain Seasons of the year, when Rum for barter was not forthcoming, the Managers could not obtain Salt Fish, Meats or other Necessaries for their People." Mortgage debts further prevented estates from satisfying bills to tradesmen and doctors. Young noted that James Campbell had died in 1805 with estates valued at more than £100,000, but with such large mortgage debts that estate income could only

⁷⁸ "Bill and Complaint of Lucy Campbell," *Campbell v. Rucker*, C 13/2108/27, TNA. The suit named ten defendants: Daniel Henry Rucker, Thomas Townshend, William Lushington, James McKinnon Campbell, John McKinnon Campbell, James Marryat, John Blackett, Christopher Idle, John Mann, and William Tenison.

pay off the yearly interest on mortgages. Local creditors were denied what Young termed their “just claims” from the Campbell properties—“Overseers losing their Salaries or Hire of Negroes: & Tradesmen vainly clamorous with their Bills.” Young contended that the situation of the Campbell estates was “no novelty.”⁷⁹

Governor Young subsequently took action. As Tobago’s chancellor, he “rescinded a decree passed by my predecessor in the Court” on the case and instead “adopted the Principle” of a decision from 1802 by Lord Chancellor Eldon in the High Court of Chancery. That case had been about the claims of creditors against the Drury Lane Theatre in London, who believed that they should receive priority in repayment over debts incurred for the operating costs of the theater. Playwright and manager Richard Sheridan, on the other hand, first paid salaries to the actors. Lord Eldon ruled in favor of Sheridan, arguing that since the only way for a theater to make revenue was by putting on plays, then money must first go to the performers. Otherwise, Eldon reasoned, the theater “was of no value as security to mortgagees.”⁸⁰ In his letter to Bathurst, Governor Young drew an analogy between a theater and a sugar plantation:

A West India Plantation ... must in the first Instance be sustained as a Plantation: Salaries to Hospital Surgeons, Managers, Overseers and others, must be paid: and as dresses & Sceptres for theatrical Kings, so cloaths & Hoes must be provided for Negroe Labourers, (& as the Properties of the Stage) so Staves, Hoops, Stills, Coppers, & other Articles for Maintenance of the Concern must be supplied, or the Land is of no value; it is no Estate!

⁷⁹ Sir William Young to the Earl of Bathurst, Tobago, 29 September 1813, f. 88-91, CO 285/18, TNA.

⁸⁰ R. Crompton Rhodes, *Harlequin Sheridan: the Man and the Legends* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1933), 187-88.

Here, Young attempted to situate the specific financing of sugar plantations within evolving understandings of labor and production in the greater British Empire.⁸¹

In November 1811, the Tobago legislature passed a law with the abbreviated title, “An Act, for the more effectually securing the Payment of certain Debts contracted for Use & Benefit of the Estates.” The Grenada legislature soon passed an identical act. The Grenada act first stipulated that “Attornies, Practitioners in Medicine, Managers, Overseers, Book-Keepers, or Tradesmen” must have their bills paid upon changes in ownership on estates. Second, supplies purchased by estates eighteen months previous to changes in ownership would be chargeable to new owners of estates, ensuring that old debts would not be refused. Third, debts incurred for stores, provisions, and other necessities would be paid off “in preference to any other Lien or Incumbrance of whatsoever Nature, or any Debt of Record, Specialty, or any other Debt whatsoever.”⁸² According to Governor Young, the effect of the law ensured, “whatever the distress of the Owner, the Distress reaches not to His Slaves.”⁸³

By the mid-1820s, laws that prioritized debts for slave provisions and other supplies existed in Tobago, Grenada, Jamaica, Antigua, St. Kitts, Nevis, Tortola, Trinidad, and Demerara. The widespread diffusion of colonial debt-priority laws reveals how an activist planter class defined “fair” and “moral” commercial practices as part of the political project of amelioration. Through these laws, planters mobilized the figure of

⁸¹ Sir William Young to the Earl of Bathurst, Tobago, 29 September 1813, f. 88-91, CO 285/18, TNA.

⁸² “An Act for more effectually securing the Payment of certain Debts contracted for the Use and Benefit of the Estates and Plantations in this Island and its Dependencies, against the Effect of Sales, or Disposal thereof, or change of Property therein, or the Death of Proprietors,” No. 149, 31 October 1812, *The Laws of Grenada and the Grenadines, from the Year 1766 to the year 1852, with a Table of Acts, and a Tabular and General Index* (Surrey: 1852), 163-65.

⁸³ Sir William Young to the Earl of Bathurst, Tobago, 29 September 1813, f. 88-91, CO 285/18, TNA.

the malnourished and suffering slave in order to shore up relations between sugar estates and local creditors against increasingly influential metropolitan mortgagees.⁸⁴

Interestingly, some antislavery commentators expressed the belief that debt-priority laws were salutary, so long as they did not challenge or undermine the roles of either Parliament or the Privy Council in regulating Atlantic commerce.⁸⁵

It would be difficult to measure the actual impact of debt-priority laws on either slave provisioning or plantation finance. More empirical scholarship on colonial debt litigation would be necessary in order to determine how effective debt-recovery laws were in securing the claims of local creditors versus metropolitan ones.⁸⁶ More

⁸⁴ For brief discussions of debt-priority laws, see Pares, *A West India Fortune* (1950), 363-4; Laurence *Tobago in Wartime*, 138-9; Russell Smandych, "'To Soften the Extreme Rigor of their Bondage': James Stephens' Attempt to Reform the Criminal Slave Laws of the West Indies, 1813-1833," *Law and History Review*, vol. 23, no. 3 (Fall 2005), 551-52.

⁸⁵ Sir James Stephen (1789-1859) reviewed the Grenada act in his capacity as Law Officer for the Colonial Office. Stephen initially praised what seemed to be the "humane & benevolent purpose" of the law: "of securing to the Negroes on the several estates of the Island sufficient food, clothing, & medical aid, by making the land, & not the Proprietor only, responsible for all advances made for their support." However, he harped on several variations in Grenada versions. The Leeward Islands law, he noted, extended the lien in question over the slaves only, while the Grenada version extended the lien over the entire estate; the Leeward Islands had exempted debts due to the Crown from its provision, while Grenada provided no such exemption; and, finally, the Grenada law contained no provisions to prevent fraudulent sales of encumbered estates. Stephen's analysis nonetheless suggested that colonial laws improving the ability of plantations to procure slave provisions were viewed as salutary so long as they did not infringe on the British Government's paramount authority in regulating trade and finance. James Stephen to the Earl of Bathurst, Lincoln's Inn, London, 13 November 1813, f. 176-178, CO 323/39, TNA. Stephen's commentary on the act is briefly discussed in Smandych, "'To Soften the Extreme Rigor of their Bondage,'" 551-52.

⁸⁶ James Stephen described debt-prioritization as "obsolete in practice" throughout the Leeward Islands: *Slavery in the British West India Colonies Delineated*, vol. 2, 249. In the 1820s, the Chief Justice of St. Kitts indicated that debt prioritization was practiced "only in cases where a creditor complies with the regulations." The Chief Justice of Tortola noted, "I know of no instance in which the right of recovery under that act has been resorted to in this island." *Third Report of the Commissioner of Inquiry into the Administration of Civil and Criminal Justice in the West Indies. Antigua, Montserrat, Nevis, St. Christopher, and the Virgin Islands. General Conclusions*. (London: House of Commons, 1826), 96. Nevertheless, Richard Pares' claim that debt-priority laws were "worse than useless" because they reduced credit in the islands is probably an overstatement: Pares, *West India Fortune*, 363-4. There seem to be no publications condemning the prioritization of debts for slave provisions and other necessities. Such laws became so widespread and were articulated over such a long period of time that if serious cases of fraud or financial malpractice had resulted in any of the colonies, similar laws likely would have been rescinded or rejected in the others. Furthermore, the fact that the Privy Council conditionally approved debt-priority laws indicates that commission merchants were not being unduly disadvantaged.

revealingly, debt-priority laws inscribed the nutritional needs of slaves within local ecologies of debtors, creditors, goods, and services. They were efforts on the part of planter-politicians to shape a managed decline for West Indian slavery. While such reforms were purportedly attempts to ameliorate the condition of slaves, they were also intended to maintain a viable position for planters within an evolving and increasingly disadvantageous imperial economy. Colonial debt-priority laws, albeit obscure pieces of legislation, were emblematic of how even the most seemingly obscure vicissitudes of economic practice might intersect with the politics of abolition. For both planters and their critics, the material logistics of provisioning slaves would assume a central position in debates over the morality of the institution of slavery itself.

Life & Debt

Even before the rise of the abolition movement, planters had voiced complaints about the costs of slave provisions and other expenses in print and in parliamentary inquiries. Planter-writers and politicians often broke down annual expenses on “typical” or “model” sugar plantations in order to highlight their difficulties in maintaining slaves while also making profits. In his *History of Jamaica* (1774), Edward Long estimated that an estate producing £6,000 sterling of revenue each year would have contingent expenses of around £2,000, or about one third of income.⁸⁷ Bryan Edwards claimed in the 1790s that an estate producing 200 hogsheads of sugar and 30 puncheons of rum per year would have had half of its revenue eaten up by annual expenses, which Edwards calculated would amount to around £2150 sterling. Out of this expense, Edwards explained, “negro

⁸⁷ Michael Craton and James Walvin, *A Jamaican Plantation: the History of Worthy Park, 1670-1970* (New York: W.H. Allen, 1970), 118.

clothing,” tools, “miscellaneous articles,” and provisions—“such as salted herrings, beef, pork, butter, soap, candles, salt, flour, pease, groats”—together “cannot be less than 850*l*. Sterling.”⁸⁸ Beginning around 1807, plantation expenses entered the arena of public scrutiny as part of parliamentary investigations on the causes of “West Indian distress.” Jamaica proprietor Andrew Wedderburn provided the West India Committee with accounts from his Westmoreland estate of 344 slaves. Wedderburn separated accounts by “Stores for England” (£2,192) and “Jamaica Expences” (£3,749). He then broke down individual expenses, including herrings (£259) and Irish provisions (£92) from England and “fresh beef” (£130) purchased in Jamaica.⁸⁹

West Indian writers on political economy were interested in more than just tallying the costs of hypothetical supplies for a skeptical public. Rather, they wanted to foster the idea that they deserved special dispensation from government because of the fundamental uncertainties of the sugar economy. In *Letters on Slavery* (1789), William Dickson described the process of predicting crops, supplies, and labor costs on sugar estates as “a labrynth of co-operating contingencies, which baffles all calculation.”⁹⁰ In 1807, one pamphleteer wrote: “In Jamaica every expense is uncertain,” including “the price of provisions and of every sort of stock, the weather and the produce.”⁹¹ Planters’ complaints about the uncertainties of production and expenses were bundled into their larger sense of self-pity over debtor-creditor relations with metropolitan merchants.

⁸⁸ Bryan Edwards, *History, Civil and Commercial*, (1798), 224-225. Edwards excluded expenses incurred from the “tear and wear of buildings” and the six-percent commission paid to attorneys. Edwards also added salaries for the “overseer, clerks, and servants, bills to tradesmen, taxes, wharfage, staves, and other occasional supplies which by computation amount to 1300*l*. Sterling, or 1840*l*. Currency.”

⁸⁹ Macall Medford, *Oil without Vinegar, and Dignity without Pride: or, British, American, and West-India Interests Considered* (London: W.J. and J. Richardson, 1807), 110.

⁹⁰ Steele and Dickson, *The Mitigation of Slavery, in Two Parts*, 215.

⁹¹ Medford, *Oil without Vinegar* (1807), 34.

Bryan Edwards claimed that merchants advanced just enough credit for proprietors to “stock” estates (including with slaves), but then called in loans before crops could be expected. As a result, Edwards wrote, “the unfeeling creditor pretends the immediate necessity for his money; the law is rigorous; the lender ... gets the estate at his own price, and the unfortunate planter is ruined for life.”⁹² Edwards and other planter propagandists would remain adamant that the blame lay in London’s counting houses for the financial failure of estates and the resulting misfortunes experienced by slaves.

Of course, planters’ complaints that costs related to “maintaining” slaves were sinking plantation enterprises should be viewed skeptically. The fact that planters were willing to climb deeper and deeper into mortgage debt despite the ruin of so many of their associates was more symptomatic of their bullishness about colonial slavery than their personal penury.⁹³ As the examination of Argyle and Invera’s accounts has shown, foodstuffs probably constituted smaller outlays on most estates compared to production supplies and sometimes labor costs—not to mention commissions, annuities, interest, and other yearly debts.⁹⁴ Edwards also wrote and published his *History* during a great speculative boom in Jamaica and other West Indian colonies. Surging produce prices following the collapse of Saint Domingue in 1791 spurred expansion in the sugar and coffee industries until market gluts, speculative collapse in Hamburg in 1800, and other adverse economic factors produced conditions of West Indian “distress” in the first decade of the nineteenth century. (The Jamaican sugar economy was particularly hard-hit

⁹² Edwards, *History, Civil and Commercial* (1798), 220, 225-26.

⁹³ Higman, *Plantation Jamaica*, 100.

⁹⁴ For analyses of individual West Indian debts: Pares, *West-India Fortune*, 239, 280-292; Smith, *Slavery, Family, and Gentry Capitalism*, 177-225; Burnard, “‘Et in Arcadia Ego,’” 22.

by competition from high-grade foreign sugars.)⁹⁵ Striving to maintain the viability of estates and recover quickly from what they hoped was another short-term economic crisis, many British planters stocked up on “new” slaves at inflated prices in the years leading up to and following the abolition of the slave trade—despite declining values of slaves already on estates.⁹⁶ The necessity of feeding slaves on overstocked properties in the face of diminished economic prospects likely contributed to pushing the supposed difficulties of “maintaining” them toward the forefront of planter polemics.

Rising food expenses were not the only data that planters wielded in order to defend themselves against abolitionist allegations that they were malnourishing slaves. Planters also homed in on the practice of seizing slaves to satisfy a master’s debts as being detrimental to enslaved subsistence as well as unduly harmful to planters’ financial interests. Bryan Edwards wrote: “When the good negro has been comfortably settled upon the provision-ground, which affords him, besides subsistence, some luxuries of life, he may be separated from his wife and family, sold by auction, and dragged to the mines of Mexico, not for his own guilt, but for the misfortunes of his master.”⁹⁷ Undoubtedly recognizing their own self-interest at stake, Edwards and other reform-minded planters occasionally advocated that slaves should be categorized as real property and attached to estates. In the 1780s, Barbados planter Joshua Steele argued that entailing slaves to what he rather fancifully dubbed colonial “manors” would compel proprietors to better

⁹⁵ Ragatz, *Fall of the Planter Class*, 286-330; Ryden, *West Indian Slavery*, 215-70.

⁹⁶ David Eltis, Frank D. Lewis, and David Richardson, “Slave Prices, the African Slave Trade, and Productivity in the Caribbean, 1674-1807,” *Economic History Review*, vol. 18, no. 4 (2005), 679-80; Ahmed Reid and David B. Ryden, “Sugar, Land Markets, and the Williams Thesis: Evidence from Jamaica’s Property Sales, 1750-1810,” *Slavery & Abolition*, vol. 34, no. 3 (2013), 401-424; Burnard, “Et in Arcadia,” 22, 33-4.

⁹⁷ Edwards, *History, Civil and Commercial* (1798), 199-200.

maintain them and in the process enhance debt security by fostering “natural increase” on estates.⁹⁸ But slaves would never be legally entailed to estates in the British Caribbean colonies. They were too valuable as moveable property in the boom-and-bust businesses of sugar, coffee, cotton, and cattle.⁹⁹

Some West Indian writers masked their politics of financial self-pity in the guise of being more “humane” participants in transatlantic trade than their merchant counterparts. Absentee proprietor James Walker’s amelioration text, *Letters on the West Indies* (1818), included an imaginary dialogue between one planter who practiced the “old system” of cultivation—strictly to reap profit from the land—and another “improving” planter who argued that on his estates, “the great matter is always the state of the cultivators.” The planter who went by the “old” system asked: “What do you expect your creditors to say to such notions and proceedings?” According to the improving planter, mortgagees who held slaves as securities would be pleased by the appearance of “an increasing population of virtuous, healthy, and orderly families rising up to labour for me.” Laboring more happily and productively, slaves would produce more sugar: “In short, my maxim is, Take care of your negroes, and your fortune will take care of itself.” In the minds (if not always in the account books) of Walker and other improving planters, humanity and profit were not mutually exclusive. Later in *Letters on the West Indies*, Walker criticized “the strong and iron grasp of mortgage,” which allowed merchants who might not be slaveholders themselves to exert decisive influence

⁹⁸ Steele and Dickson, *The Mitigation of Slavery*, 95-96, 113-114. See also, Mathison, *Notices Respecting Jamaica*, 14-17. For a contemporary planter repudiation of entailing slaves to land, see Alexander Barclay, *A practical view of the Present State of Slavery in the West Indies; or, an Examination of Mr. Stephen's “Slavery of the British West India Colonies”* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1826), 73-4.

⁹⁹ Colonial legislatures made some efforts to track how many slaves were being seized for debt in the nineteenth century: on Jamaica alone, 22,600 slaves were seized between 1807-1822. Brown, *Reaper's Garden*, 105-7.

over the material “comforts” of slaves. He identified the problem as one of moral hazard—distant mortgagees would not feel the “parental duties which the real owner has crippled himself with from performing” by falling into debt or dying. Walker claimed that mortgagees would not promote “the feelings, comforts, or instruction of negroes,” as these things “would be deemed unbusiness-like language in the letter-book of a counting-house.” According to Walker, only resident planters committed to humane improvement would care enough to provide food that went beyond subsistence and toward “comfort.”¹⁰⁰

Among the critics of slavery, James Stephen probably commented at the greatest length on what he termed the “sad effects of the master’s debts and other necessities on the subsistence of the slaves.” Stephen had practiced as a lawyer in the West Indies, and his monumental, two-volume *The Slavery of the British West India Colonies Delineated* (1824, 1830) incorporated reams of data and testimony from parliamentary investigations and planter publications. Even though Stephen agreed that indebtedness prevented some planters from procuring provisions, he argued (correctly) that even slaves on highly profitable estates were ill-fed. Regarding plantation accounts as proof of planter benevolence, Stephen invoked the principle in the law of evidence of “estimating proofs,” whereby one can disregard sufficient proof “when the party offering it has better evidence in his power, which he does not produce.” Stephen wanted access to the “books and papers to be found in every West-India counting-house,” such as invoices of stores shipped to individual plantations. He reasoned that these accounts would have been placed before the public if they might have aided the cause of the West India Committee. Instead, Stephen noted, the public was left with “the loose parol [at their word] estimates

¹⁰⁰ James Walker, *Letters on the West Indies* (London: Rest Fenner, 1818), 146-9, 226-235.

given by individual planters, some of which carried the allowances materially above the accounts that I have cited.”¹⁰¹

Planter and abolitionist polemicists also compared the provisioning of slaves to the treatment of industrial and agricultural workers in Britain and the rest of Europe. Not surprisingly, the two sides reached conflicting conclusions about which groups had it better. Planter-writer John Foster compared the treatment of slaves favorably to European peasants and workers, who “drag out a miserable existence, almost naked and houseless, in an inclement climate, upon such remnant of a precarious crop of oats or potatoes.”¹⁰² Thomas Clarkson, on the other hand, argued that it was beside the point whether West Indian slaves were better fed, clothed, and lodged than British peasants, because slaves lacked “liberty,” more essential to human happiness than material comfort: “Happy, happy, *British peasants* ... may you be *for ever exempt from the comforts of colonial slavery!*”¹⁰³

Ultimately, what mattered more in debates about slave provisioning was not so much that slaves were unfree laborers, but that slave plantations were vulnerable to speculative failure. According to James Stephen, sugar production was not only an immoral form of commerce—it was an irrational one. Stephen frequently described West Indian speculation as a “lottery” or a “game,” and one that was extremely “hazardous.” According to Stephen, what induced planters and merchants to chase glittering and elusive profits from such a “ruinous system” was “the strong temptation of deep

¹⁰¹ Stephen, *Slavery in the British West India Colonies*, vol. 2 (1830), 285-7.

¹⁰² John Foster, *Two Letters on the State of the Negroes in the West Indies* (Bedford: J. Webb, 1824), 5-6.

¹⁰³ Thomas Clarkson, *The argument*,—“that the colonial slaves are better off than the British peasantry” answered, from the *Royal Jamaica Gazette of June 21, 1823* (London: Ellerton and Henderson, 1824), 99-100. See also Stephen, *Slavery in the West-India Colonies Delineated*, vol. 2, 243-341.

gaming”—he even referred to sugar estates as “colonial gaming tables.” Following their “losing speculations,” West Indian proprietors were always trying “to cast the burthen of their distress or ruin on the shoulders of their fellow-subjects in Europe” through relief from Parliament. Such “gaming,” contended Stephen and other abolitionists, prevented planters from maintaining slaves in times of financial distress.¹⁰⁴ In 1823, abolitionist parliamentarian Henry Brougham similarly remarked in the Commons: “The West-India purchaser of an estate may consider himself engaged in a gambling concern, and may hope in a few years to scrounge a handsome profit out of the unhappy beings committed to his charge.”¹⁰⁵

Commentators on all sides of the question tended to agree that West Indian plantations were different than other kinds of agricultural estates, manufactories, and trading firms existing in Britain and elsewhere. According to contemporaries, sugar estates were all three of these things at once. In 1807, West Indian merchant and pamphleteer Charles Bosanquet wrote: “the grower of sugar is both landlord and tenant, agriculturalist and manufacturer”—meaning he was a “tenant” to mortgagees. Furthermore, sugar planters were “engaged in a very precarious manufacture, under the most unfavourable circumstances.” The uncertainties of sugarcane cultivation ensured that the planter’s “property has none of the real or imaginary advantages of landed estates in Great Britain.” Furthermore, slave provisioning put unique pressures on profit margins. According to Bosanquet, “West India estates, unlike those in Europe, or in England at

¹⁰⁴ James Stephen, *England Enslaved by Her Own Colonies. An Address to the Electors and People of the United Kingdom* (London: Richard Taylor, 1826), 31-45.

¹⁰⁵ Society for the Mitigation and Gradual Abolition of Slavery throughout the British Dominions, *Substance of the Debate in the House of Commons, on the 15th May, 1823: On a Motion for the Mitigation and Gradual Abolition of Slavery throughout the British Dominions* (London: Ellerton and Henderson, 1823), 91-2.

least, are cultivated by persons attached to the soil, procured at a great charge, and who must be fed, lodged, and clothed at the expence of the property, whether employed, or not.” Bosanquet went on to note: “Much of this expence is incurred in Europe and America, for which there are no means of payment but the produce; to defray this, therefore, the estates must be worked, and the less the produce sells for in Europe, the greater the necessity of producing more, since the expences are not regulated by the same standard.” In other words, the more indebted the estate, the harder slaves “must be worked,” while provisioning expenses continued unabated.¹⁰⁶

Abolitionist politician Henry Brougham would echo the points made by the planter-sympathizer Bosanquet. Comparing West Indian estates to English estates, Brougham remarked that planters purchased plantations, “on speculation, or by debt, having advanced money on mortgage and with a view to consignments. In short, landed property in the West Indies partakes much more of the nature of a hazardous commercial speculation, than of that stable enjoyment of territorial property which characterizes the British landholder.”¹⁰⁷ These arguments about West Indian estates as peculiar sites of commerce and industry would manifest in several decisions in the High Court of Chancery, including *Leith v. Irvine* (1833), when Brougham himself was Lord Chancellor.¹⁰⁸ In the earlier Jamaican chancery case *Scott v. Nesbitt* that made it to the High Court in London, Lord Chancellor Eldon had reasoned, “that a West Indian estate

¹⁰⁶ Charles Bosanquet, *A Letter to W. Manning, Esq. M.P. on the Causes of the Rapid and Progressive Depreciation of West India Property*, (London: S. & C. McDowall, 1807 [second edition]), 12, 27-8.

¹⁰⁷ Society for the Mitigation and Gradual Abolition of Slavery, *Substance of the Debate* (London: Ellerton and Henderson, 1823), 91-2.

¹⁰⁸ *Reports of Cases Argued and Determined in the High Court of Chancery during the Time of Lord Chancellor Brougham and Sir John Leach, Master of the Rolls*, vol. 1 (London: Saunders and Benning, 1834), 277-97.

was not to be treated as an ordinary landed estate in England, but was rather to be regarded as a trading concern, like a mine or alum works,” which carried implications for the responsibilities of merchant-mortgagees for providing supplies even in years when the estates were not profitable.¹⁰⁹

In *Scott v. Nesbitt* and related cases, indebted planters occasionally found financial relief in receiving slave provisions and other supplies. But diving into legal minutiae in chancery decrees related to plantation finance is not necessary in order to stress the larger point that the relationship between slave provisioning and planter debt was deeply woven into the abolition debates. Contrary to standard assumptions about the politics of slavery in the British Empire, planters were not solely defensive actors on this issue. Rather, they had established the ground on which abolitionists would debate them through the publication of colonial accounts as well as polemical tracts that argued that *they* were in fact the ones involved in transatlantic commerce whose actions stemmed from humanitarian concerns. This rhetorical ploy was occasionally successful in forestalling legislation and receiving favorable legal decisions. But while the subject of debt might have been somewhat beneficial for planters in the short and medium terms, the steady accumulation of actual debt would ultimately spell their downfall as powerful political actors in the empire. No amount of “humane” self-posturing could rescue the planter class from the fact that slave plantations were simply losing economic propositions throughout most of Britain’s Caribbean colonies by the early 1830s.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ Reginald John Cust, *A Treatise on the West Indian Incumbered Estates Acts* (London: William Amer, 1865), 258.

¹¹⁰ It is worth noting that scholars have recently shown that Trinidad and Demerara remained viable sites of investment into the 1820s: Nicholas Draper, “The Rise of a New Planter Class?” 65-83.

Conclusion

In 1823, William Wilberforce offered his thoughts on how slave provisioning had featured in British political discourse over the previous four decades. He reflected that the earlier “Abolitionists of the Slave Trade” had had the propensity “to dwell much, and too exclusively, perhaps, on the slaves being under-fed and over-worked, and on the want of due medical care and medical comforts.” “These evils,” Wilberforce acknowledged, were “indeed very great,” especially “where the planters were in embarrassed circumstances.” But Wilberforce argued that figuring out the *exact* amounts that plantations expended on provisioning slaves was less politically useful than outlining how there existed in the system of colonial slavery a “natural tendency towards the maximum of labour, and the minimum of food and other comforts.”¹¹¹ For Wilberforce, the malnourished slave on a heavily encumbered sugar estate represented just one figure in the complete picture of colonial injustice presented by slavery for public view.

Pace Wilberforce, the financial and logistical aspects of slave provisioning were not minor considerations for contemporary actors. Rather, plantation debt formed a wedge on a set of political concerns linking together the material treatment of slaves and the functioning of metropolitan and colonial debtor-creditor relations. Contemporaries’ concerns over how well slaves were provisioned through trans-Atlantic supply networks echoed other discursive anxieties expressed in the abolition debates over the human consequences of far-flung economic relationships. From legislation that established monetary incentives to reduce mortality onboard slave ships to the compensation of former slave-owners as part of the “price” of emancipation, moral debates over what

¹¹¹ William Wilberforce, *An Appeal to the Religion, Justice, and Humanity of the Inhabitants of the British Empire, in behalf of the Negro Slaves in the West Indies* (London: J. Hatchard and Son, 1823), 7-8.

constituted “fair” commercial and financial practices in large part characterized policy negotiations over the dismantling of slavery in the British Empire.¹¹² These laws and discussions were not abstract responses to moral quandaries. They were efforts to define, regulate, reform, or discard what were perceived as the actual commercial and financial practices associated with coercive labor in the empire.

While slaves mostly figured silently in political debates, legal decrees, and legislation on debtor-creditor relations, they were central actors in other arenas of reform simultaneously being undertaken by both proslavery and antislavery politicians. As the next chapter will explore, political struggles over provisioning and malnutrition in the colonies were carried out in far more visceral form in contestations between masters and slaves over the control of plantation spaces, work routines, punishment regimes, and customary rights to hold provision grounds as property and to market the produce from them. These contestations were also attracting the notice of abolitionists and other metropolitan reformers.

¹¹² On incentives to reduce mortality on board slave ships in the Slave Trade Act of 1788 (also known as Dolben’s Act), see Roger Anstey, *The Atlantic Slave Trade and British Abolition, 1760-1810* (Humanities Press, 1975), 269-70, 330. On the politics of slaveholder compensation, see Nicholas Draper, *The Price of Emancipation: Slave-ownership, Compensation, and British Society at the End of Slavery* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010).

CHAPTER FOUR

“Provisions is the Back-bone of a Negro property:”

Provisioning, Punishment, & Power in West Indian Slavery

One day on the Wotten Waven estate in Dominica in 1818, a manager named Mourillon ordered a slave driver named George along with the field gang “to pick plants of the Scratch Eddo from the Gutters.” According to legal documents, a slave woman named May protested—“those plants were hers, and [that she] took them from the people, who had them.” When Mourillon heard this from the driver, he decided to leave the eddo plants as they were. However, Mourillon would confront May in the field the next day and ask her from whom she had taken the eddo. Mourillon claimed that May then “asked him saucily, whether it was he who had planted them.” Subsequently, the manager ordered that she receive two lashes for her remarks. In Mourillon’s retelling, May resisted being held down for the whipping, and “she then call’d the whole Gang to her assistance and began to drag him.” At this point, Mourillon called for help from an overseer and some of the gang in holding down May. To Mourillon’s dismay, the field slaves did not rush to his aid, but instead started “shaking their Cutlasses over him and dragging the woman away from him.” Fearing for his life, Mourillon retreated from the estate and sent a dispatch to the proprietor Charles Court. According to Court, Mourillon told him, “that he had been Collared and dragged thro’ the mud by a body of the Negroes

and bitten in the Arm in several places.” Court would have his revenge one day later, when he had one of the alleged “ringleaders” beaten with the flat palm of a handsaw.¹

Dominica Governor William Maxwell, who had been feuding with members of the colonial legislature for refusing to pass an updated slave code, sent information about the incident to the Secretary of State the Earl of Bathurst in London. Anatomizing the case, Maxwell claimed that the former proprietor of Wotten Woven estate had been regarded as “a kind and benevolent master to his Slaves, which renders them most sensible of the very different treatment they have since experienced” under Court and Mourillon. Maxwell criticized the fact that when the gang had protested about Mourillon’s “encroaching” on their property, Court responded not by reprimanding the manager, but by punishing his slaves. In Maxwell’s eyes, Mourillon had abrogated the customary rights of Wotten Woven’s slaves: “it appears in the Manager’s evidence that he had ordered some ground provisions to be taken up which belonged to the Slaves, who, of course, expostulated; as property of this description had always been held sacred; and most justly, as it is all they have to depend upon.” Local juries, composed of fellow slaveholders and managers, would never convict Mourillon or Court of any wrongdoing. Maxwell concluded his letter to Bathurst by noting that in terms of the “feeding, clothing, moral Instruction, and Improvement in the condition of the Slaves,” Wotten Woven and other cases of cruelty had left him with “no hope that any radical reform or good can be expected to be brought about in the Colony.”²

¹ Depositions taken at Wotten Woven this 11th August 1818, before William Bremner and Robert Garraway Esquires, two of His Majesty’s Justices of the Peace, CO 71/55, TNA.

² Maxwell to Bathurst, Dominica, 27 September 1818, no. 99, CO 71/55, TNA.

Maxwell's letter to Bathurst was representative of the shift then occurring in British political circles toward promoting the "amelioration" of slavery as a part of increased metropolitan oversight of colonial administration in the Caribbean and other possessions worldwide.³ As the Introduction to this dissertation has noted, colonial legal codes regarding the treatment of slaves as well as enslaved claims-making through formal legal channels in the British West Indies have received much less attention than for those in the Latin American colonies. Instead, scholarship on the British Caribbean has tended to focus on private regimes of punishment and power relations on estates themselves.⁴ For the period from the abolition of the slave trade in 1807 to general emancipation in 1833-34, scholars concerned with the politics of slavery in the British Empire have mainly traced how politicians in the Colonial Office and other areas of metropolitan government attempted to centralize the administration of justice in the West Indian colonies and introduce reforms intended to promote the "civilization" of slaves such as increased access to Christian education.⁵ A much smaller body of scholarship has highlighted how individual cases of cruelty toward slaves received governmental scrutiny and occasionally entered into British public debate and consciousness.⁶

What the separation of these various lines of inquiry has obscured from view is that the discrete topics they cover—slave laws and claims-making; plantation punishment

³ Brown, "From Slaves to Subjects," 137-8.

⁴ See the Introduction to this dissertation.

⁵ For older, policy-based studies of amelioration: William Law Mathieson, *British Slavery and Its Abolition, 1823-1838* (London: Longman, Green and Co., 1926); D.J. Murray, *The West Indies and the Development of Colonial Government 1801-1834* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965).

⁶ Mary Reckford, "The Colonial Office and the Abolition of Slavery," *The Historical Journal*, vol. 14, no. 4 (December 1971), 723-734; James Epstein, *Scandal of Colonial Rule: Power and Subversion in the British Atlantic during the Age of Revolution* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2012); Lauren Benton, "This Melancholy Labyrinth: the Trial of Arthur Hodge and the Boundaries of Imperial Law," *Alabama Law Review*, vol. 64, no. 1 (Winter 2013), 91-122.

and slave health; metropolitan debates and legislation — were crucially linked together for slaves, masters, reformers, and other contemporary actors. British colonial and metropolitan authorities were paying increasing attention not only to how planters and managers conducted labor routines and meted out punishment on estates, but also to how slaves understood their own customary rights to work provision grounds and hold them as property. Elsa V. Goveia has rightly characterized British West Indian slave codes as focusing primarily on the rights of masters over enslaved property as opposed to the regimes established under the *Code Noir* and *Siete Partidas* that purportedly imbued slaves with a legal persona and certain “rights.”⁷ However, the incident at Wotten Waven estate suggests that we should reconsider the interconnected meanings of “property” and “rights” as they existed in master-slave relations within and governmental understandings of West Indian slave societies. How slaves and masters alike thought of and fought over provision grounds and other spaces in West Indian landscapes were subject to regulation through formal law as well as customary practices. These contestations over plantation spaces, in turn, ultimately influenced metropolitan reform projects regarding slave provisioning.⁸

In the mindset of planters and managers, West Indian properties were conceived of as more than abstract units of real estate with variable inputs of labor and outputs of produce. By “rooting” slaves to estates for sustenance as well as labor, planters

⁷ Goveia, “The West Indian Slave Laws of the 18th Century,” esp. 20-22.

⁸ On the relationship between space and power in plantation landscapes, see the following works by the historical archaeologist James A. Delle: “Power and Landscape: Spatial Dynamics in Early-Nineteenth-Century Jamaica,” in *The Dynamics of Power*, in Maria O’Donovan, ed. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 2002), 341-361; *The Colonial Caribbean: Landscapes of Power in the Plantation System* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2014). For a treatment of the forest in early modern England as a site of “intricate regulation” and competing claims both formal and customary, see E.P. Thompson, *Whigs and Hunters: the Origin of the Black Act* (New York: Pantheon, 1975), quoted 29.

consciously employed the provision-ground system and food cultivation on estates as mechanisms to enhance their control over individual slaves and entire slave gangs. Slaveholding, managerial, and medical communities were further consolidated in a shared disciplinary project of maintaining plantations as life-support systems in order to keep slaves spatially fixed on properties and alive enough to labor. Accordingly, amelioration laws and customary regulations about the treatment of slaves revolved around social and legal relations among masters as much as they did around the responsibilities of masters toward slaves. For slaves, provision grounds offered bases for nutritional support and some measure of economic opportunity. As such, provisioning threaded through every aspect of slave life—nutrition, labor, punishment, shelter, disease, family, and community. Further, slaves were conscious of operating within plantation landscapes that had been manipulated to keep them alive only in order so that they could work and reproduce. Slaves’ abilities to lodge complaints with colonial officials or to seek better treatment from masters were thus circumscribed by the fact that systems of provisioning were designed to sustain bare life and not to foster actual “improvements” in health and well-being—at least not in any modern sense of the term.

This chapter begins by examining how the provision-ground system shaped planters’ disciplinary and monetary creation of real estate markets as well as slaves’ understandings of their grounds as forms of property and sites of wealth creation. The next section considers the ways in which planters thought about and attempted to manage slave health and what happened when plantation healthcare systems broke down. The chapter concludes by examining slaves’ use of legal channels to lodge complaints about mistreatment against managers and other slaves. These complaints entered into official

memory through the collection of information on the part of the metropolitan government on conditions in the colonies. These and other cases, the conclusion suggests, served as important models for the imperial reform of slave provisioning in Crown colonies and entered into political debates during the move toward emancipation.

Moral & Immoral Economies

Provision grounds shaped West Indian real estate markets as properties were conceived of in terms of their capacities to produce for both sustenance and profit. Alongside other tracts of land, provision grounds were surveyed, categorized, and valued in appraisements and other legal documents in order to render them legible and saleable. Absentee planters in particular relied on the local knowledge of resident attorneys to ensure that estates had enough land for food crops to sustain slave labor forces—though caneland was always the foremost desired ground. For slaves, provision grounds provided not only nutritional benefits—albeit tenuous and mostly inadequate—but also some economic payoff for those who were able to hawk surplus produce for sale at Sunday markets. However, provision grounds were extremely vulnerable to weather catastrophes and other agricultural failures. As a result, severe inequalities sprang up on estates based on the abilities of some slaves and families to feed themselves better than others—causing food and violence to frequently converge in enslaved interactions.

Planters employed the provision-ground system as a means to produce a spatialized order of labor and nutrition on estates. Specifically, they believed that giving slaves a stake in provision grounds made them nutritionally dependent on estates—or, in common parlance, “attached” them to properties. Grenada planter Alexander Campbell

explained before the House of Commons in 1790: “[as] the more money the Negroes got for themselves, the more attached they were to the property, it has been the custom to give them as much [provision] land as they could work.”⁹ Planters’ conception of “attaching” slaves to estates via food production extended to the cultivation of supplementary provisions on estate lands. As attorney for two of the late Bryan Edwards’ Jamaica estates, R.W. Harris wrote about the need to replenish “household” provision crops that were grown near the great house and that had been neglected by previous managers. According to Harris, “Provisions is the Back-bone of a Negro property & he who neglects them or destroys them, lames the dearest Interests in the most essential part because plenty is the great support of the needy, the helpless, the indolent, but above all of the rising Generation.” Harris particularly worried that low supplies of food on the estate would lead to theft by those slaves whom he considered as “too lazy or too weakly to work provision grounds sufficient for their support.” He noted: “In their Masters grounds, they have a sure recourse for their idleness or their inability.”¹⁰

Planters’ belief in the relationship between nutritional spaces and social discipline took on monetary and legal dimensions in the creation of West Indian real estate markets. Whether on new ventures hacked out of the wilderness or “mature” estates that had been worked for years, the cultivation of provision crops fundamentally altered the value of estates and helped determine whether certain properties were worthwhile investments. West Indian writers published neat delineations of plantation land-use that balanced productivity with sustainability. Bryan Edwards wrote that the “typical” Jamaican sugar estate of 900 acres would have 300 acres in cane, and “the same number for esculent

⁹ *Minutes of the evidence*, 141-2, 145.

¹⁰ R.W. Harris to John Simpson, Dove Hall, Jamaica, 27 January 1801, *Bayly v. Edwards*, C 107/68, TNA.

vegetables, such as yams, plantains, potatoes, &c. and a third proportion of the same extent which remains under native wood for supplying the timber necessary for the estate.”¹¹ Provision grounds and other lands for cultivating food crops invariably held lower monetary value than tracts suitable for sugarcane or other more profitable uses. On sugar estates, the comparative values of provision grounds and other types of soil were always pegged to caneland. In 1790, Jamaican planter William Beckford put the average price of “prime” caneland at £22 sterling per acre; cane land “in ratoons and young plants” at £15; provision grounds at £14; pasture land at £8; and woodland at £4.¹²

Actual landscapes seldom matched simple formulae. Provision grounds were often described as being on “broken” ground, located in the backlands of estates or in scrubby uplands called “mountains,” anywhere from under a mile to ten miles or more from slave dwellings.¹³ Estate valuations, appraisements, and other legal documents were therefore created in order to render the diverse patchwork of colonial topographies into a common system of property exchange. Valuations were typically made by two or more planters or attorneys who acted as third parties in transactions. From Jamaica, William Robertson advised that “four creditable Gentlemen”—excepting owners of adjoining properties who might wish to purchase the estate—should perform the task, their first job being, “To have all the grass pieces, provision, Coffee & ruinate grounds & wood lands separately surveyd with the number of Acres in each mark’d down & in what condition.”

¹¹ Bryan Edwards, *The history civil and commercial* (London: B. Crosby, 1798), 221.

¹² William Beckford, *A Descriptive Account of the Island of Jamaica* (London: T. and J. Egerton, 1790), xxxi.

¹³ B.W. Higman finds that the average distance from the works to the furthest provision grounds was 1,727 yards on Jamaican estates; “mountains” were usually within ten miles of plantations, but could be located much farther away. B.W. Higman, *Jamaica Surveyed: Plantation Maps and Plans of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (Jamaica: Institute of Jamaica, 1998), 82, 265. See also McDonald, *Economy and Material Culture of Slaves* (1993), 24.

Afterward, pieces of land were to be valued separately and then lumped together with the buildings, “Negro houses,” and “Slaves, Horses Asses mules & Cattle” to form the complete value of the property.¹⁴

Not surprisingly, surveying work was weighted toward measuring caneland as opposed to provision grounds and other types of acreage. Surveyor William Frazer recorded his daily activities in Clarendon Parish, Jamaica, in a diary from 1797-1805. The surveying of “cane pieces” dominated Frazer’s work and took up most of the entries devoted to his occupation. But Frazer also surveyed plantain and cocoa walks, “negroe grounds,” “corn pieces,” “grass pieces,” and woodland. One four-day stretch on one estate illustrates the varied nature of his work. On Tuesday, the diary recorded: “Run out 4 p^{cs}. [pieces] D^o. [cane] for Dan^l. Tabois Esq.” On Wednesday, he then surveyed a plantain walk on Tabois’ estate. On Thursday, Frazer “Made out the Diagram” of the pieces, and on Friday he finished the diagram and sent it to Brandon Hill.¹⁵

Surveyors’ earthy and inky labors were translated into valuations and other formal documents that enabled buyers, sellers, creditors, debtors, and inheritors to comprehend the productive and non-productive elements of estates. As opposed to the neat delineations of land-use put forward by Edwards and other writers, such documents adhered to no strict methodology of land classification or nomenclature. Rather, the idiosyncratic specificity in how they described tracts of land demonstrated how West Indian real estate markets eschewed scientific precision in favor of reflecting evolving

¹⁴ William Robertson to James Johnston, London, 5 December 1804, Series XII, Box 56, Folder 2, Powel Family Papers, HSP.

¹⁵ See entries for 14-17 February 1797 and 24 June 1797, in William Frazer’s Jamaica Diary (1797-1805), JCBL. Provision grounds and other types of non-caneland were also mentioned on the following dates: 29 April, 23 June, 18 November 1797; 9 March, 24 April, 25 April, 18 July, 14 August, 1798; 12 March 1799; 18 April, 17 October 1800; 28 May, 12 August 1801; 17 March, 19 March 1804.

land-use patterns and the rough-and-ready nature of plantation environments. One valuation from 1805 of Henry Jackson's Mount Pleasant Estate in Hanover, Jamaica, showed how slaves might take over marginal estate ground for subsistence cultivation. Mt. Pleasant comprised 294 acres of caneland (£28 currency per acre for a total of £8232), along with "102 Acres of Negro Grounds, partly cultivated" (£20 per acre for £2040). The valuation listed a further 184 acres described as "very indiff. Land now occupied by Mount pleasant Negroes" (£8 per acre for £1472); slaves likely cultivated food crops on this less-valued ground in order to supplement what came out of their more highly valued "Negroe Grounds." After "Guinea grass" and common pasture, the remainder of Mt. Pleasant consisted of "Rockyhills Intervals Swamps Ponds & Roads" — neither ruiante nor woodland but the varied topography of Hanover itself.¹⁶

Three appraisements from 1801 of different estates owned by Aretas Akers showed a more sophisticated methodology in delineating lands used for either profit or sustenance. These documents divided land into "classes" according to soil quality. Coubaimarou estate in St. Vincent had four classes of land—first (£90 per acre), second (£65), third (£35), and fourth (£25), with the first two comprising "Land in Canes," and the latter two lands in "provision, pasture & occupied by buildings &c."¹⁷ Akers' Layou estate in St. Kitts, on the other hand, had 56 acres of first- and second-class caneland, and 40 acres (£15 per acre) of non-classed "Negroe grounds," which were described as "mostly wore out Some worth little or nothing."¹⁸ Finally, Akers' Olivees estate had three

¹⁶ Valuation of Mount Pleasant Estate, 14 February 1805, *Douglas v. Harrison*, C 110/141, TNA.

¹⁷ Appraisalment of Coubaimarou Estate, 8 January 1801, Akers Family Business Papers, MS 999/2A/1, Senate House Library, University of London.

¹⁸ Other tracts described on Layou's appraisalment ("Rocky & impracticable;" in "Brush wood & much exhausted") indicate the overall degraded condition of the estate's soils. Appraisalment of Akers' Layou

classes of caneland—£100, £70, £30 per acre, respectively—along with an unspecified run of “Mountain Land” (provision ground) valued at £500.¹⁹

Shrewd proprietors recognized that provision grounds were inextricable from the fundamental sustainability of estates. In the minds of planters, then, actual monetary values did not always equate to the perceived worth of different tracts of land to properties as a whole. In 1787, Simon Taylor expressed relief that an appeal in a court case “for the Negro Grounds has been determined in our Favour at home.” Describing the case as a “Matter of the Highest Concern,” Taylor wrote, “had we lost them I really do not know what would have been the Consequence to those Properties and it would have been impossible for us to have carried them on if we had been obliged to hand feed the Negroes.”²⁰ Planters often sought to purchase more acres for provision cultivation in order to accommodate larger numbers of slaves or to supplement worn-out ground. Planter James Campbell expressed dismay over an associate’s plan to sell off part of a Grenada estate, noting, “they should not on any account part with this piece of land as it is everything to that estate, the land they had for Negroes provisions being wore out.”²¹

Absentee proprietors often granted attorneys wide authority in purchasing new grounds. From England, absentee Jamaica proprietor George Watson Taylor wrote to his attorney: “Respecting the acquisition of the run of ground for the benefit of the Lyssons population, I am perfectly ready to adapt your suggestion, & I hereby authorize you to

Estate (St. Kitts), 1 January 1801, Akers Family Business Papers, MS 999/2A/2, Senate House Library, University of London.

¹⁹ Appraisement of Olivees Estate, 27 January 1801, Akers Family Business Papers, MS 999/2A/3, Senate House Library, University of London.

²⁰ Simon Taylor to Lady Taylor, Kingston, Jamaica, 31 July 1787, STP, ICS 101 3/B/12.

²¹ James Campbell Letterbook, p. 75, *Campbell v. Rucker*, C 107/147, TNA.

engage for the purchase in question.”²² For their part, attorneys and other colonial agents often touted their ability to scout new provision grounds to replace or supplement older ones. James Campbell advised one proprietor to purchase 80 acres of land that would make “most excellent provision grounds for your Negroes,” noting, “I have examind it well & it will save you the price in 2 years, in particular as no doubt you must put a few more New Negroes on that estate.” But ever with an eye toward profit, attorneys might also advertise provisions lands as good for growing cash crops as well. Campbell noted that this particular tract of land would be suitable, “indeed for any kind of culture.”²³

Since provision grounds were tied into colonial land markets, upticks in cash-crop speculation had knock-on effects on their cost and availability. In 1801, Simon Taylor wrote about a planter newly setting out in Jamaica during a boom in coffee production: “As to buying land to feed his Negroes it is a very difficult thing indeed there is not an Acre to be purchased within ten Miles where he lives.” According to Taylor, “the immense Cultivation” of coffee in recent years had tripled the price of “all lands in this Country” ten times over, so that “no tolerable piece of land could be got” for less than £25 or £30 per acre. Sugar planters, Taylor went on, had engrossed all their lands in cane and had none to part with. Taylor advised that the young planter’s best option might be to wait for a proprietor of a smaller estate of 100 or 200 acres to die and then to buy the land at auction.²⁴ Similarly, Jamaica attorney William Shand lamented in 1819 about his inability to secure new provision grounds: “The run desired for Lyssons is not I fear

²² George Watson Taylor to William Shand, London, 6 August 1817, STP, ICS 101 8/D/11.

²³ James Campbell Letterbook, p. 65, *Campbell v. Rucker*, C 107/147, TNA.

²⁴ Simon Taylor to David Reid, Kingston, Jamaica, 10 March 1801, STP, ICS 101 1/D/53. Taylor might have had self-interested motives in advising the young planter to avoid purchasing more provision land: this planter had been relying on Taylor’s estates for provisions.

likely to be got soon, there are some Coffee trees on it and this article has become so valuable that Mr Walker demands twice the value of the land.”²⁵

Planters might mitigate the distance slaves had to travel to work their grounds by purchasing tracts that were contiguous to estates or nearby. Ultimately, planters let the burden of distance fall on slaves, procuring nearby grounds only as cost and convenience allowed. Jamaica attorney John Shand remarked in 1818 about one particular run of provision ground: “The place which has now come into the market is more distant than could be wished but there is little prospect of getting any thing more convenient.”²⁶

Smaller properties were sometimes advertised specifically as “provision estates,” which probably became more attractive to buyers in the face of rising costs for imported foodstuffs and falling profits from sugar and other produce over the course of the nineteenth century. In 1810, one planter advertised in *The St. George’s Chronicle, and Grenada Gazette* for the sale of Good Hope estate (“commonly called PERDMONTEMS”), comprising 227 acres: “The property is at present rented out in small patches, and in the cultivation of ground provisions, for which it is well adapted in many respects, possessing also the advantage of being closely in the vicinity of Richmond Hill and the Town of St. George, where vegetables, &c. are in constant demand.”²⁷

The possession of good-quality provision grounds could influence perceptions of the credit-worthiness of the potential inheritors or purchasers of estates. As such, provision grounds occasionally factored into estate settlements. In 1808, absentee

²⁵ William Shand to George Watson Taylor, Spanish Town, Jamaica, 17 January 1819, STP, ICS 101 8/E/2.

²⁶ John Shand to George Watson Taylor, Spanish Town, Jamaica, 21 February 1818, STP, ICS 101 8/B/30.

²⁷ *The St. George’s Chronicle, and Grenada Gazette*, no. 371, 22 December 1810, from *Caribbean Newspapers, 1718-1876* (American Antiquarian Society), accessed 25 March 2016.

proprietor Joseph Hayne's will devised to his widow Catherine a cattle pen called Chatsworth in St. Ann's, Jamaica. Creditors would judge her suitability to take over the estate based on "her own Security" in slaves and land. Two men familiar with the matter noted approvingly, "she is possessor of about 50 fine Negroes, with a Provision Mountain."²⁸ Another Hayne relative instead encouraged a London merchant and absentee proprietor to purchase the pen, yet relied on the same reasoning: "Your mountain is no distance and would as a provision place be a very valuable appendage."²⁹ On the other hand, provision grounds might be deemed too marginal or unproductive for proprietors to keep possession of. In 1813, Henry Desborough was offered £300 Sterling for a tract of land on his sugar estate in Trinidad, which his agent described as, "all in Brush wood ... and in my opinion at present good for nothing." The man who had made the offer wished "to provide in some way for a coloured woman by whom he has a number of Children, and this ground shou'd he get it, is intended to afford them an opportunity of planting provisions." Since the land was unsuited for sugar or coffee, and recent depreciation in land values would make it difficult to dispose of otherwise, Desborough's agent advised: "I would not hesitate to accept the offer."³⁰ For free black or mulatto women, men, and children, these lands were anything but marginal, but rather oases of subsistence dotting landscapes carved up for production.

Even within the bounds of coercion, the provision ground system held some economics benefits for slaves. Slaves could produce surplus provision crops for exchange at bustling Sunday markets, which were attended by all strata of West Indian society.

²⁸ John Hiatt and James Laing to Joseph Higgin, Jamaica, 7 September 1808, *Hayne v. Higgin*, C 112/171, TNA.

²⁹ C. Hayne to John Higgin, Cheltenham, England, 2 July 1808, *Hayne v. Higgin*, C 112/171, TNA.

³⁰ Newman to Henry Desborough, Trinidad, 20 April 1813, *Thompson v. Desborough*, C 109/380, TNA.

Cash pocketed from these exchanges could be used to purchase anything from extra food, clothing, tobacco, liquor, and other articles, or (more rarely) manumission for themselves or relatives.³¹ Jamaican planter Gilbert Mathison described a typical Sunday market at Kingston with slaves hawking “poultry, pigs, wood, fruit, vegetables, pork, corn, &c.” Mathison noted that Kingston was “almost exclusively supplied with the above-mentioned articles by the industry of slaves, who bring their surplus productions to market from the country within a circuit of twelve or fourteen miles.” According to Mathison, slaves returned home with “salt pork and beef, codfish, butcher’s meat, rice, flour, bread, rum, clothes, &c.”³² Traveling to market also afforded slaves opportunities for creating and reaffirming social and affective ties that were continually being undermined by socio-economic forces of dislocation and death. Even white observers like Mathison perceived this fact: “Some [slaves] are seen anxiously engaged in managing their little traffic, which they do with great good order and decorum; others, less industrious, but no less active, are seeking in the crowd for brothers, sisters, wives, husbands, friends, lovers, whom once a week they have an opportunity of seeing.”³³

Slaves understood that their nutritional and economic lives were rooted literally and figuratively in the security of their grounds as a kind of property and their ability to go to market as a customary right. Tobago planter Gilbert Franklyn explained that even though slaves were “only [to] be considered as tenants at will; but even that species of property is seldom violated, or that ground exchanged for other ground, without making

³¹ According to Roderick McDonald, slaves purchased a wide variety of goods with cash from Sunday markets, “of which clothing and personal accessories, housewares, food, and drink were the most important.” *Economy and Material Culture*, 92-128 (quoted 111).

³² Mathison, *Notices Respecting Jamaica*, 1-2.

³³ Mathison, *Notices Respecting Jamaica*, 1-2. On slave marketing and mobility, see Dirks, *Black Saturnalia*, 73-75; Byrd, *Captives and Voyagers*, 105-6; Brown, *Reaper’s Garden*, 114.

some satisfaction for the crop on the ground.”³⁴ Given the sharp imbalances in power that characterized social relations in West Indian colonies, slaves were remarkably effective at getting planters to recognize their internal economy as rights both *de facto* and, eventually, *de jure*. Slaves gained customary rights of occupancy to specific plots of ground and often passed them on to kin. As a result, they might fiercely resist planters and managers who encroached on provision grounds to plant cash crops or put them to other uses. Slaves also resisted efforts on the part of colonial and metropolitan governments to curb Sunday markets. Such concessions won by slaves would persist into the years of apprenticeship and beyond, as freedmen struggled to establish a peasant class within the bounds—and often within the physical boundaries—of the old plantation system.³⁵

Customary rights were hard-won, though. As the altercation on Wotten Waven estate has shown, planters’ concessions to slaves’ expansion or protection of internal economies were points of everyday contestation.³⁶ Further, it would also be easy to overstate the economic benefits of the provision ground system for slaves. Indeed, contemporary slaveholders did it all the time in order to justify the fact that they made slaves largely subsist themselves. In 1774, Jamaican planter and historian Edward Long asserted that twenty percent of the cash in the island circulated in the slave community,

³⁴ *Minutes of the Evidence* (1790), 93.

³⁵ McDonald, *Economy and Material Culture*, 18-19; Marshall, “Provision Ground and Plantation Labor in Four Windward Islands,” 60; Brown, *Reaper’s Garden*, 113-27. On the elimination of Sunday markets in Jamaica and Barbados in the mid-1820s, see Caroline Spence, “Ameliorating Empire: Slavery and Protection in the British Colonies, 1783-1865,” (PhD Dissertation: Harvard University, 2014), 234-6.

³⁶ For instance, slaves had rebelled in the southeastern parts of Dominica in January 1791 for more time to work provision grounds (three days per week), an action that was brutally repressed by colonial authorities. Stephan Lenik, “Plantation Labourer Rebellions, Material Culture, and Events: Historical Archaeology at Geneva Estate, Grand Bay, Commonwealth of Dominica,” *Slavery & Abolition*, vol. 35, no. 3 (2014), 508-526.

claiming that especially “industrious” slaves could save hundreds of pounds by their death. But accumulated personal wealth among most slaves was probably much more limited.³⁷ For instance, food theft was common among slaves throughout the West Indian colonies.³⁸ In Dominica, slave thefts of foodstuffs, clothing, and other goods were tried in the court of petty sessions. In 1819, one jury convicted three slaves named London, Antoine, and Alexander of stealing twenty-five pounds of salt fish valued at £1 and 10 shillings onboard a sloop called the *Retrieve*; it is unclear whether the three thieves intended to split the beef among themselves or sell it to others.³⁹ Sentencing in another case showed how being caught for stealing food was a serious matter. In 1820, the slave William was charged with stealing the following property from one Thomas Crawford: twenty pieces of silver coin in English, Spanish, and Dutch currencies; two gold rings (£20 currency); “one Suit of Clothes” (£6 currency); and “two pieces of Beef” (£1). William pleaded not guilty; six white jurors—who heard testimony from Thomas Crawford, another white man, and a slave named Norfolk—concluded otherwise. William was sentenced to receive thirty-nine lashes in the public market in Roseau, then “delivered to his Owner on entering into security to banish him from the Island for Life, and payment of Fees.”⁴⁰

One also needs to be cautious of overstating any nutritional benefits that slaves derived from the provision-ground system, especially given the “precarious” material bases upon which provision crop cultivation rested. As Chapter One has shown, provision

³⁷ Vincent Brown cites Long’s figures but argues that Jamaican slaves most often used cash to purchase nothing more than bare necessities: *Reaper’s Garden*, 114.

³⁸ On the close association in planters’ minds of slave theft and food, see Dirks, *Black Saturnalia*, 99-102.

³⁹ In the Court of Petty Sessions (*enclosures*), Charles Maxwell to Bathurst, Dominica, 12 June 1819, No. 125, CO 71/56, TNA.

⁴⁰ In the Court of Petty Sessions (*enclosure*), Dominica, 1820, CO 71/57, TNA.

crops could be wiped out entirely by storms and stymied in growth by drought. Further, while provision grounds could be spaces in which enslaved family bonds were strengthened and communities consolidated, such bonds were tenuous and subject to severance altogether through the physical removals and dislocations that characterized the business of slavery. Differences in the amount of land given to certain slaves combined with differences in time to cultivate their grounds also produced “power hierarchies and wealth inequalities” on estates. High-ranking slaves such as drivers and mechanics and other specialized workers—sometimes called “officers” or “head men”—were often granted greater resources in land and time in order to produce surpluses in their grounds and accumulate relative wealth and property. Conversely, enslaved women, the majority of whom were field hands, along with newly transported African slaves “unseasoned” to the rigors of plantation labor, were especially disadvantaged by the energy demands of marginal food production.⁴¹

Slaves therefore had good reason to jealously guard the produce of their grounds, and violent encounters were not uncommon in these spaces.⁴² In November 1819, a group of runaways in Dominica had not eaten for three days when they arrived at the provision grounds of Bell Hill estate around midnight. The band consisted of a mother, Cecile, her two sons, John Pierre and Tyson, and a fourth man, Kingsale. They had entered the Bell Hill slaves’ grounds and “had dug a Basket of yams” before a watchman named Etienne fired a musket ball over their heads. Initially, the group ran away, but John Pierre

⁴¹ As Justin Roberts notes, any wealth or property accrued by slaves was “precarious” by nature and “could be lost the moment a slave died or was sold or moved.” Roberts, “The ‘Better Sort’ and the ‘Poorer Sort,’” 458-473 (quoted 466). See also Brown, *Reaper’s Garden*, 114.

⁴² On violence within and stealing from provision grounds: Roberts, “The ‘Better Sort’ and the ‘Poorer Sort,’” 459-60; Byrd, *Captives and Voyagers*, 101-4.

reported that he and Kingsale went back and approached the watchman in order to ask for food. Kingsale was shot in the stomach after throwing a small stone at the watchman. John Pierre called out to Etienne to help carry the wounded Kingsale out of the cold; the watchman refused, not trusting the group. The next day, around “first Cock Crow,” the watchman returned with some other slaves and carried Kingsale to the dwelling house on Bell Hill. Kingsale was later taken to a slave hospital on a neighboring estate, where he died from the musket ball having punctured his small intestines and femoral artery. By clearing Etienne from any wrongdoing, Dominica’s justices of the peace officially reaffirmed the watchman’s right to use deadly force to protect the nutritional property of Bell Hill’s slaves.⁴³

Seen from a modern perspective of cost-benefit analysis, the provision-ground system held a certain amount of logical sense for proprietors and even for slaves. Planters could gobble up the cheaper tracts of land not suitable for sugarcane cultivation that were prevalent in West Indian landscapes. They could then exploit those tracts to their fullest by having slaves cultivate them and thus largely feed themselves without incurring much extra cost. Slaves, though burdened by the time and energy demands of food cultivation, made the most of what the system offered by improving their levels of sustenance and marketing surplus produce. But the provision-ground system was also riven with contradictions for both groups. Proprietors and attorneys wrote frequently about the need to secure new and fresh tracts for provision grounds, yet they remained steadfastly geared toward engrossing lands that could produce cash crops. While slaves fought hard to protect their internal economy from being curtailed or overly regulated by masters and

⁴³ Inquisition and information from witnesses regarding the slave Kingsale (*enclosures*), Henry Few to Bathurst, Dominica, 15 November 1819, CO 71/56, TNA.

colonial legislatures, differential access to property and wealth accumulation generated rivalries and violence within slave communities. These contradictions stemmed from the fact that provision grounds as components of properties and sites of cultivation—though absolutely vital to property values and slave subsistence—were much more marginal concerns in plantation management compared to the cultivation of cash crops.⁴⁴

Provision & Punish

Plantation healthcare infrastructure and medical practices were subservient to the larger disciplinary purposes of slave provisioning. Most sugar estates constructed hospitals or other sites of recovery that incorporated special dishes of food for sick slaves, but managers' and doctors' medical "treatments" and "cures" of slave maladies often involved physical punishment in addition to novel meals and doses of medicine. Deliberate deprivation of food was even resorted to in the punishment of healthy and sick slaves alike. Laws and statutes sometimes came into play in the adjudication of legal disputes between proprietors and managers when slave sickness and mortality threatened the value of properties or the viability of production cycles. Colonial subsistence laws and litigation defined human necessity for different kinds of slaves at different moments—unhealthy slaves receiving medical care; old and infirm "wanderers;" sick runaway slaves caught and placed in holding pens—in order to define the responsibilities of planters, managers, and doctors to one another.

By the late-eighteenth century, most sugar estates had developed hospital infrastructure as a means to ensure that slave sickness did not overly hinder production

⁴⁴ The idea of the provision-ground system having inherent social, legal, and economic "contradictions" is borrowed from James A. Delle, *The Colonial Caribbean*, esp. 145.

schedules. Utilizing contemporary medical wisdom on the healthfulness of “fresh” provisions and moderate amounts of “animal food” to aid in recovery, plantation managers and doctors combined local produce with imported meats and grains in rations for sick slaves.⁴⁵ While special dietary regimens might have gone some way toward nourishing slaves back to health, plantation hospitals and other sites intended for recovery existed solely for the purpose of rendering temporarily unproductive laborers fit for work. The managerial imperative was to get sick slaves out of hospitals as quickly as possible.⁴⁶ One Barbadian manager stated that he regarded well-functioning alimentary systems of slaves as bellwethers for their laboring ability. “I suffer no Idlers to remain [in the hospital],” proclaimed Sampson Wood in 1797, “when the Doctor declares that they need no Physic, that their pulse is regular, & I find their digestion good, & their appetite keen, I send them to work, & never yet have I had one return with a relapse.”⁴⁷

Hospitals essentially served as one variety of private sites of incarceration that planters utilized to discipline slaves; others included plantation “dungeons” or the areas underneath the decks and porticos of buildings.⁴⁸ Confinement very often had the effect of turning a healthy slave into an ailing one. When managers wanted to prolong a slaves’ time in confinement, the provision of food constituted a form of torture. In 1818, an overseer on Castle Bruce estate caught a slave named Smart allegedly stealing a bundle

⁴⁵ In 1807, Jamaican planter Simon Taylor extolled the virtues of barley, noting that it was “almost daily used in some sort of Broth or Soup both in the Town and Country,” and if a more steady supply could reach Jamaica then it could be used “in our Hospitals for sick and weakly Negroes in the Nature of Soup and being boiled with Cocos Yams and Plantains.” Simon Taylor to George Hibbert, Kingston, Jamaica, 31 October 1807, Simon Taylor Papers, STP, ICS 101 1/I/43. On special dietary regimens for slaves in poor health, see Mathison, *Notices Respecting Jamaica*, 92-3; Philip Gibbes, *Instructions*, 90. On slave hospitals: Sheridan, *Doctors and Slaves*, 333; Roberts, *Slavery and the Enlightenment*, 164-167.

⁴⁶ Roberts, *Slavery and the Enlightenment*, 166.

⁴⁷ Sampson Wood to [John Lane], Barbados, 8 September 1797, Newton Family Papers, MS 523/321, Senate House Library, University of London.

⁴⁸ Paton, *No Bond but the Law*, 49-50.

of canes around midnight. The overseer brought Smart to the manager, Charles Sydenham, who had the slave placed in bilboes (iron restraints across the ankles) and kept in confinement for four days. On the fourth day, Smart asked for and was granted his release and ordered back to work. Sydenham remarked that at this time the slave “appeared in perfect health, complained of no Ailment and was in the Act of eating his Dinner.” But twenty minutes later, two slaves came running to Sydenham and cried out that an overseer was “killing Smart” by striking him. Sydenham ventured into the slave village and found Smart “lying on his Belly on the ground and foaming at the mouth.” Diagnosing Smart’s condition as an “Apoplectic fit,” Sydenham administered hartshorn (horn of red deer). But Smart died shortly after, “falling forward suddenly, and pressing the lower part of the belly with his hands.” Brought before colonial authorities, Sydenham would marshal evidence that Smart was well fed while in shackles in an effort to portray his system of discipline as humane. He particularly noted that the slave received three meals per day while confined. Another overseer, George Moore, also testified that while Smart was in bilboes, “he always ate heartily, and never complained of an Indisposition.” Finally, Rosalie, a slave nurse, was called upon to testify in the case, and she said that she had prepared the meals for Smart.⁴⁹

Sick slaves could be punished grotesquely when managers deemed that their maladies were feigned, or that their illnesses were manifestations of deliberate efforts to

⁴⁹ Depositions concerning the death of the slave Smart at Castle Bruce Estate, Dominica, 14 January 1819, before Justices of the Peace William Bremner and John Laidlaw, CO 71/56. Justices of the peace took depositions from five slaves belonging to Castle Bruce in addition to the testimony from Sydenham and the overseers Moore and Cotton. At issue in the investigation were discerning between three possible causes of Smart’s death: complications from his confinement in the bilboes; being fatally beaten by Cotton; or, natural and unrelated causes. Slave testimony probably proved of little importance in the outcome of the investigation. Justices of the peace could not find a doctor or coroner to perform an autopsy on Smart’s body and determine the nature and extent of his injuries. Sydenham was pardoned.

sabotage production. For instance, dirt-eating, commonly referred to by contemporary whites as *mal d'estomac*, was the slave disorder that we would most directly correlate with malnutrition and other forms of inadequate provisioning. Deliberate human consumption of earth and soil (*geophagia*) has existed across human societies for millennia, but it was especially prevalent in the hunger- and famine-prone slave societies of the Caribbean and U.S. South. However, West Indian planters, managers, and overseers would often not attribute the cause of dirt-eating to malnutrition. Rather, they sometimes regarded outbreaks of the disease as refusals to perform labor on the part of what they considered mentally deranged slaves.⁵⁰

In documentation from two criminal cases forwarded to London by Dominica's Governor Maxwell, managers on separate sugar estates had punished dirt-eating slaves by forcing them to consume mixtures containing human excrement as a means of "curing" them. In one of the cases, manager Maurice Ogsden of Union Estate was brought before a grand jury of the court of petty sessions in 1816. Ogsden testified that several Union slaves had been in the habit of consuming "ashes, clay and soft Stones." Ogsden claimed that the punishment he used to discipline several dirt-eating slaves had stemmed from the slave community itself: "finding other modes of punishment to put a stop to this practice to be of no avail, he had recourse, by the recommendation of some of the Gang themselves, to be smearing the faces of those addicted to it before the Gang, with a Composition of Excrement mixed with the Ashes they were in the habit of eating." Ogsden's claim that slaves had recommended the punishment is difficult to verify from

⁵⁰ Dirks, *Black Saturnalia*, 86-89. For an analysis of the evolution of contemporary medical views of dirt-eating as a "slave disease," see Rana Hogarth, "Comparing Anatomies, Constructing Races: Medicine and Slavery in the Atlantic World, 1787-1838" (PhD Dissertation: Yale University, 2012), 70-108.

information in the six slave depositions that justices of the peace recorded. Regardless, the manager believed that the mode of “curing” the dirt-eaters served as evidence of his own humanity. He testified that he had enforced it only with the aim of “saving the Lives of the People by deterring them from a practice so pernicious to their Health, as Eating Earth.” Further, he was careful to distinguish that he had ordered the driver merely to “besmear” their faces, but “not to force it down their Throats.” Finally, Ogsden noted that the foul mixture was only administered for a limited time, and that he employed other cures for dirt-eating as well, including “Exercise,” which had been advised by the “Medical Attendants of the Estate.”⁵¹

For sick slaves who had run away, masters turned to public forums as a means of surveillance. In 1810, a Grenadian slave woman named Marie who suffered from dirt-eating had run away from her free black owner, John Cox. Cox placed an advertisement in the *St. George's Chronicle, and Grenada Gazette*, describing her as “5 feet 6 inches high, stout make, large nose and eyes, her face apparently bloated from a recent mal-de-stomach.” Cox’s advertisement stated that he would reward anyone who apprehended Marie and put her in the “Cage”—the central holding cell for runaway and recalcitrant slaves that existed in most West Indian towns. Cox’s advertisement further “cautioned” against anyone “employing or harbouring her” and thus depriving him of her productive potential after she had recovered from illness.⁵² Here, Cox utilized an array of public and private penal mechanisms—the newspaper; the public holding pen; the slaveholding community at large—in order to reclaim his physical right to living property. Crucially,

⁵¹ Depositions taken at Union Estate, Dominica, 14 September 1818, CO 71/55, TNA.

⁵² *The St. George's Chronicle, and Grenada Gazette*, no. 371, 22 December 1810, from *Caribbean Newspapers, 1718-1876* (AAS), accessed 25 March 2016.

he could rely on an institutionalized colonial disciplinary structure that would keep the dirt-eating Marie sheltered and marginally fed as she was shuttled back to him. And the fact that Cox's advertisement mentioned Marie's "recent mal-de-stomach" underscored how disease and discipline were closely interlinked in the ways in which planters sought to assert control over slaves' mobility.

As a means of putting their "best intentions" on the books, planter-legislators in most colonies crafted colonial amelioration statutes that purportedly regulated the feeding, clothing, sheltering, and medical care of slaves. Varying slightly in specifics, stipulations on provisioning in colonial laws were generally two-fold in purpose: establishing "baseline" standards of food rations; and ensuring that sufficient lands and number of days were granted to slaves for working provision grounds.⁵³ Statutory promises were often vague, though. The first clause of Dominica's *An Act for the Encouragement, Protection, and Better Government of Slaves* (1788, renewed and "made perpetual" in 1793), stipulated that "every Owner, Renter, Manager, or Overseer of any Slave or Slaves, shall feed or cause to be fed, all such Slave or Slaves ... with a sufficient quantity of good and wholesome Food, and shall give them good and sufficient Cloathing, and shall provide dry and comfortable Lodging for them." This clause also required medical provision for sick slaves. While threatening fines of £100 for masters who did not adhere to the law, the clause did not determine what exactly constituted "good and sufficient" food, clothing, shelter, or medical care.⁵⁴

⁵³ For a brief discussion of colonial amelioration laws, see Spence, "Ameliorating Empire," 54-62.

⁵⁴ *An Act of the Legislature of the Island of Dominica, Anno Domini, 1788, Revived and Made Perpetual by Act Passed in 1793, Entitled, An Act for the Encouragement, Protection, and Better Government of Slaves* (Roseau: William F. Stewart, 1813), CO 71/50, TNA. The second clause was more specific, stipulating that owners, managers, and overseers, "shall have the Option of feeding his, her, or their Slaves, by allowing them a sufficient quantity of good and wholesome Food, or by allotting to each and every one of them a

Many of the clauses in amelioration laws were more revealing for showing the ways in which planters wielded norms about enslaved bodily necessity as a means of defining social and legal relations among slaveholding and managerial classes. Wealthier planters, who were more likely to craft colonial legislation, particularly worried about heavily indebted and “lesser” slaveowners manumitting or simply abandoning slaves, who would then lack any “assistance.” After all, hungry slaves were regarded as problems for public order as well as stresses on colonial coffers. For instance, the twenty-eighth section of Jamaica’s Slave Act of 1816 explicitly forbade owners to “discard” old or sick slaves. The act obliged slaveholders to “keep all such slave or slaves upon his, her or their properties,” to clothe, feed, and house them adequately, and “not suffer such slave or slaves” to “wander about and become burthensome to others for sustenance.” The penalty for negligence was £20; slaveholders who refused the fine were to be locked up in the common jail until they paid up.⁵⁵

One legal case about the financial consequences of an outbreak of dirt-eating among slaves on a Grenada estate illustrated how feeding, clothing, and caring for slaves could factor into the adjudication of disputes between slaveholders and managers. From early 1810 to August 1812, the Plaisance coffee estate was under the possession of resident planter George Whitfield, after which it was taken over by the Crown and placed under the management of a court-appointed manager named McEwen. Whitfield later

sufficient Portion of Land for that purpose, and certain Times for cultivating it, over and above the Sundays and Holidays hereinafter prescribed.” Again, masters would be charged £100 for not ensuring that slaves received “proper and sufficient Food and Nourishment” under either system, but these conditions were not defined specifically. Beyond statutory niceties, colonial provisioning regulations were inherently flawed due to the social, economic, and legal milieu in which they were to be implemented. Elsa Goveia, *Slave Society in the British Leeward Islands at the End of the Eighteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), 144.

⁵⁵ Alexander Barclay, *A Practical View*, 6.

testified that when he had purchased the forfeited estate in 1810, there were 152 slaves on the property, which went down to 147 by the time the Crown seized it. Slave numbers would subsequently shrink to 129 during McEwen's tenure as manager. After regaining possession of the estate, Whitfield sought compensation from the colonial government for the value of the slaves who had died during his absence. He also argued that he had the right not to pay McEwen his salary due to the loss in slaves. As Whitfield alleged, McEwen had provided the slaves with "insufficient Quantity of food, & no Clothes." Whitfield particularly cited McEwen's failure to issue clothing to slaves at the start of the coffee crop in August, which coincided with the wettest and hence coldest months in Grenada. Whitfield believed that this had led to cases of dirt-eating and other diseases among the slaves.⁵⁶

In order to bolster his case, Whitfield secured testimony from three sets of plantation doctors. The first, McEwen & Dickenson, said that they usually recommended that clothing be given to slaves "in the beginning of the year, or as soon as the first Convoy arrives as it is generally sent from England with the other Stores." They noted that sickness usually prevailed in the wet months of October and November—"as inflammatory complaints are more prevalent in these months, warm clothing is certainly useful."⁵⁷ Another doctor, Alexander Cockburn, said: "I think, Negroes on Coffee Estates, should have their Clothing at the beginning of Crops, say 1st Augst, on Sugar Estates about the beginning of the Year." According to Cockburn, this rationing schedule would help avoid slave diseases associated with the rainy season such as flux—"especially on Estates, where they are short of provisions"—catarrhal fever, and

⁵⁶ George Whitfield to Governor Shipley, 14 July 1813, f. 125-6, CO 101/53, TNA.

⁵⁷ Letter of Macewan & Dickinson, Grenada, 10 December 1813, f. 111, CO 101/53, TNA.

pleurisy.⁵⁸ Doctors Thomas and Alexander Duncan noted that while clothing allowances were usually given out every twelve months according to “the custom of Estates; some giving it earlier, some later,” they nonetheless believed that in the “moist quarter” of the island, it was most proper to dole out clothing earlier as protection against “Autumnal Rains and bleak winds.” But the Duncans were cautious about stating the beneficial effects of clothing for slave health: “We have no doubt as to the propriety of warm Cloathing for Mal D’Estomac Negroes, but although it must contribute to their Comfort and ease their sufferings, our experience does not enable us to say that we have found it absolutely essential either towards the prevention or cure of this disorder.”⁵⁹

Whitfield also had three storekeepers from the port of St. George’s provide information to the court on local sales of slave clothing in an effort to further his claim that McEwen had been negligent in rationing Plaisance’s slaves. One mercantile firm noted: “We had Osnaburghs and other Articles fit for negro Cloathing, also negro Blanketts, Hats &c for Sale in our Store between the 17 Augt. 1812 and the 26 of June 1813.”⁶⁰ A second merchant claimed that he had “negro cloathing and Blankets” in his store during the same period.⁶¹ A third storekeeper testified that his store had osnaburghs, blankets, and “Blue Pennistones” during those months, but he could not recall if McEwen had stopped by: “I am however inclined to think he did not, as there is no article of Negro Cloathing at his debit in our Books from 17 Augt 1812 to 26 June 1813.”⁶² For his part,

⁵⁸ Alexander Cockburn to George Whitfield, Grenada, 10 December 1813, f. 113, CO 101/53, TNA.

⁵⁹ Thomas and Alexander Duncan to George Whitfield, Grenada, 10 December 1813, f. 114, CO 101/53, TNA.

⁶⁰ Messrs. Garraway to George Whitfield, St. George’s, Grenada, 10 December 1813, f. 118, CO 101/53, TNA.

⁶¹ George Brown to George Whitfield, St. George’s, Grenada, 13 December 1813, f. 119, CO 101/53, TNA.

⁶² John Lindsay to George Whitfield, St. George’s, Grenada, 9 December 1813, f. 120, CO 101/53, TNA.

the manager McEwen countered that dirt-eating was not caused by inadequate clothing, but rather, “is obviously a Disease of the Mind, produced by Discontent, & fostered by unkind Usage.” He contended that the cases of dirt-eating on Plaisance had actually occurred due to hard-driving management during Whitfield’s earlier tenure as well as the “Discontent” that inevitably arose among slaves who experienced frequent changes in management.⁶³

Slaves on Plaisance had lodged protests for better treatment from McEwen and a previous owner, Francis La Barrie. La Barrie would testify before the court that slaves had complained about insufficient clothing on the estate.⁶⁴ He blamed the manager McEwen for ill treatment that caused several slaves to run away: “Nor do I think they would have felt so severely in their Minds from the changes of Possession; nor have suffered so severely in their health from the Colds and Coughs if their Cloathing had been given to them when I requested it.”⁶⁵ Court documents showed that two slaves had run away from the estate while McEwen was attorney, apparently due to hunger. While these slaves were in the woods, “They had poisoned a Calf, & buried it, & afterwards taken it up to eat.”⁶⁶ La Barrie testified that the runaways returned after 18 months away from the estate: “I believe their Return at last was owing to their promised Pardon, & the Desire of receiving their Christmas Allowance of Provisions.”⁶⁷

⁶³ George Whitfield to Charles Shipley, Grenada, 11 December 1813, f. 101-104, CO 101/53; George Whitfield to Governor Shipley, 14 July 1813, f. 125-6, CO 101/53, TNA.

⁶⁴ George Whitfield to Charles Shipley, Grenada, 11 December 1813, f. 101-104, CO 101/53, TNA.

⁶⁵ Francis La Barrie to George Whitfield, Grenada, 23 November 1813, f. 107-8, CO 101/53, TNA.

⁶⁶ George Whitfield to Charles Shipley, Grenada, 11 December 1813, f. 101-104, CO 101/53, TNA.

⁶⁷ Francis La Barrie to George Whitfield, Grenada, 11 December 1813, f. 109, CO 101/53, TNA.

The runaways had probably been seeking more than just an escape from overtaxing work routines: Plaisance was a property where managers experimented with torture devices to discipline sick slaves. An overseer on the property, John George Haberstroh, testified before the court about the relationship between Whitfield and the manager La Barrie as well as the treatment of dirt-eating slaves. Haberstroh claimed to have seen La Barrie “make out a List of Negro Cloathing” and send it to Whitfield, who told him, “you have made out the List a little too high, I will get it out cheaper and better from England, and will send it out.” Haberstroh did not believe that the provision of slave clothing on Plaisance under Whitfield’s management was either inadequate or that it had led to any slave deaths. Haberstroh noted that he had seen slaves “go to the Plaintiff [Whitfield] and ask for their Cloathing,” and that Whitfield had promised to “send it to them soon, and every thing necessary, and that the cloathing he would send out, would be better than the last year’s, which he added was not good.” But Haberstroh’s deposition also shed light on the torture of dirt-eating slaves on Plaisance. Haberstroh said that Whitfield had put “Boards” around the necks of two dirt-eaters, explaining, “such contrivance prevented their eating Dirt a little, and it was circular and about twenty six inches diameter with a hole in the centre.” Haberstroh further deposed, “there was a larger Machine afterwards made, about four feet in diameter, which like the smaller ones was called a Neck Table, but the larger one was never put on, and only intended to frighten.”⁶⁸

⁶⁸ *The St. George's Chronicle, and Grenada Gazette*, 9 December 1815, page 2, *Caribbean Newspapers, 1718-1876* (AAS), accessed 25 March 2016.

Whitfield ultimately lost his case; the Board ordered that he pay McEwen £83.5 in salary.⁶⁹ More importantly, the dispute underscored how colonial litigation was shaped by the ways in which the health of slaves underpinned the value of properties. Amelioration laws such as the Guardian Act and litigation about the treatment of slaves embedded everyday business transactions—managerial services, appraisals, sales, purchases—within a financial logic structured by the securitization of many debts via living capital. In this case, colonial medical, mercantile, and managerial communities were mobilized in order to mediate relations between slaveholders and managers and overseers. Rather than protecting poorly provisioned slaves from the ill effects of climate, colonial laws and courts here protected proprietor (Whitfield) and manager (McEwen) alike from the ill financial consequences of slave mortality. Moreover, the causes and consequences of *Whitfield v. McEwen* represented in microcosm how plantation healthcare regimes encompassed far more than doctors, medicines, and hospitals. Medical treatment of sick slaves and methods of disease prevention were disciplinary and utilized with the intention of ensuring that slaves could perform work. Managers sometimes determined that some seriously ill slaves, such as the dirt-eaters in Dominica forced to consume excrement and ashes, should be punished to death in order to make the point to other slaves that “proper” provisioning practices must be adhered to. Slaves, debilitated by plantation healthcare in addition to the rigors of cultivating cash crops, had some ability to formally protest their general provisioning—albeit within legal regimes not generally favorable to their interests.

⁶⁹ Regarding Whitfield’s claim for compensation for the lost value of the property, the Board reckoned the value of the loss of three slave children who died during McEwen’s tenure against three other children born on the estate during the same period—a difference of about £220, which reduced Whitfield’s total compensation to £137.4.2. Minutes of the Council of Grenada, 15 December 1813, f. 123-4, CO 101/53, TNA.

Amelioration & Its Discontents

Matters related to the treatment of slaves throughout the West Indian colonies increasingly came under the purview of London in the 1820s. Coordinating with the recently formed Society for the Mitigation and Gradual Abolition of Slavery as well as reformist members of the West Indian lobby, Secretary of State the Earl of Bathurst issued a circular letter in 1823 to the governors of the ten colonies under representative rule—Jamaica, Barbados, the Bahamas, St Kitts, Nevis, Antigua, Montserrat, Dominica, St. Vincent, Grenada—with recommendations for the amelioration of slaves' conditions. These recommendations included recognizing slaves' property rights; the abolition of the use of the cart whip on estates and a general prohibition on the flogging of female slaves; the encouragement of Christian practices among slaves; the admission of slave evidence against whites in colonial courts; and the establishment of savings banks for slaves to encourage values of thrift and wage-earning. Unsurprisingly, these proposals were vehemently opposed by colonial legislatures despite their relatively "conservative" nature. However, what the switch to a formal amelioration program also did was establish a commitment on the part of the British government to the more extensive collection of information on all matters related to slavery in the different colonies.⁷⁰

Some of the most detailed documentation on slavery was collected by a small legal commission dispatched to the islands in order to investigate matters related to civil

⁷⁰ Mathieson, *British Slavery and Its Abolition, 1823-1838*, 134-141; Mary Turner, "Planter Profits and Slave Rewards: Amelioration Reconsidered," in *West Indies Accounts: Essays on the History of the British Caribbean and the Atlantic Economy in Honour of Richard Sheridan*, Roderick A. McDonald, ed. (University of the West Indies Press, 1996), 5-12; Mary Turner, "Modernizing Slavery: Investigating the Legal Dimension," *Nieuwe West-Indische Gids*, vol. 73, issue 3/4 (1999), 5-26; Petley, *Slaveholders in Jamaica*, 89-92. On amelioration and the collection of information in Berbice under the Fiscal, see Browne, "The 'Bad Business' of Obeah," esp. 454.

and criminal law. The commission was headed by a lawyer named Fortunatus Dwarris, the son of Jamaica attorney and proprietor William Dwarris, who owned the Golden Grove sugar estate in St. Thomas-in-the-East. Born in Kingston in 1786, Fortunatus was sent back to England in his infancy, later attended Oxford, and entered the legal profession in 1811. Rising in the ranks and entering rarefied circles of patronage, Dwarris was tapped in 1822 by absentee proprietor and politician Henry Goulburn to chair the West Indian legal commission. To the chagrin of abolitionist activists and politicians, the West Indian lobby discovered a friend in Dwarris. He later published an anti-abolitionist tract, *The West India Question Plainly Stated* (1828), in which he called for “only a very gradual process of emancipation, over a quarter of a century and with full compensation for the owners,” but nonetheless maintained that the treatment of slaves had greatly improved over time. Dwarris’ biases aside, the commission’s three reports captured an incredible wealth of testimony and documentation from colonial officials about the functioning of formal laws and customary practices related to the treatment of slaves.⁷¹

Much of the documentation collected by the Dwarris commission shed light on how slaves operated as legal actors by lodging complaints about mistreatment to various colonial officials. Slaves in most of the British Caribbean colonies could appeal to certain designated magistrates to intervene on their behalf in disputes with masters and other slaves. The names and functions of these officials evolved over time in colonial and metropolitan legislation and appeared under various names (e.g., Guardians of Slaves in Grenada; magistrates and later Councils of Protection in Jamaica). Slaves had to be

⁷¹ Dwarris and another commissioner, Henry Maddock, would travel to Barbados, Tobago, Grenada, St Vincent, Dominica, Antigua, Montserrat, Nevis, St Christopher, the Virgin Islands, and Trinidad. On Dwarris’ life and career, see W. P. Courtney, “Dwarris, Sir Fortunatus William Lilley (1786–1860),” rev. Jonathan Harris, *ODNB* (Oxford University Press, 2004; online ed., January 2016), www.oxforddnb.com, accessed 23 March 2016.

careful in how they lodged protests, because complaints that were found groundless were often met with bodily punishment from officials in many of the colonies. Still, the published reports from the Dwaris commission showed that British West Indian slaves had far greater access to courts and magistrates—and utilized this access to a much greater extent—than historians of the subject have generally acknowledged.⁷²

In Grenada, slaves could lodge protests with officials known as Guardians of Slaves. Guardians were usually managers and attorneys and thus unlikely to strictly enforce statutes of the colonial amelioration law known as the Guardian Act. Responding to queries from Dwaris' commission, Grenada's attorney general observed: "I think that [the Guardian Act], a very excellent law, if it were carried into effect." While the attorney general thought that the mere existence of the act at least might have caused slaveholders to be "more careful, than they otherwise might be [in their treatment of slaves]," he described the law as mostly defective due to flawed enforcement mechanisms: "The misfortune is, that proper persons cannot be found to carry it into effect. They are those, who may be liable to it themselves, who are the guardians. Perhaps a man may be guardian one year, and his neighbour the next, which would prevent his acting strictly, according to the act." Interestingly, the attorney general stated that he thought that the parts of the law that regulated the infliction of punishment on slaves were adhered to, but that stipulations regarding proper provisioning were not: "The parts that are not carried into effect, are, those, which require the guardians to visit the negro-grounds, and see that proper food and clothing is administered. The act does not specify what particular

⁷² For a brief consideration of slaves going before courts of law and magistrates throughout the West Indies: Mindie Lazarus-Black, "Slaves, Masters, and Magistrates," 252-281. On slaves' access to courts of law in Jamaica, see Robert E. Luster, *The Amelioration of the Slaves in the British Empire, 1790-1833* (New York: Peter Lang, 1995), 37-43.

quantity of food and clothing, but it is left to the guardians to say what is necessary food and clothing.” Nevertheless, slaves in Grenada resorted to the guardians with some frequency: there were 51 complaints from 1821-23.⁷³ Several of these cases disclosed how enslaved claims-making about poor provisioning threaded together concerns over rationing, work regimes, punishment, shelter, sickness, and a range of other matters.

In 1822, two guardians traveled to the Duguisne estate in the Parish of St. Patrick to investigate complaints made by a large group of slaves. The first complaint was described as, “a pretty general one of their having received a short allowance of clothing.” The guardians determined that this complaint was groundless after interviewing three groups on the plantation: one, “the negroes who cut it [the cloth] up and served it out;” second, white employees (probably overseers) who interacted with slaves on a daily basis; and, third, the complainants themselves, who eventually admitted that they received “eight yards osnaburghs, five yards penneston, one hat, one cap to each man, and one handkerchief to each woman, twelve hanks thread, linen and calico divided amongst the women, of four, five, six and seven yards, as far as it went, and three yards of check amongst the head negroes.” Another complaint of Duguisne’s slaves was about “hard usage, short time to make meals, frequent punishments, and hard work in the field.” While the guardians concurred that some of the punishments meted out on the estate were too severe, they remarked, “the time for meals was proved to be half an hour for breakfast, and two hours for dinner; their treatment in the field appears to us to be the same as on the other estates.” Finally, a third complaint was that managers had broken the locks on several slave houses while searching for stolen sugarcane pieces, which

⁷³ *First Report of the Commissioner of Inquiry into the Administration of Civil and Criminal Justice in the West Indies. Barbados, Tobago, Grenada* (London: House of Commons: 1825), 98-9, 111.

resulted in some slaves having their clothing purloined. The guardians ordered “that the consequent losses be made up to those that have suffered and that the broken doors be immediately repaired.”⁷⁴

Grenadian slaves also lodged complaints individually with guardians. In these cases, slaves might find themselves at odds with not just masters and drivers, but also other members of the slave community. John Francois, who labored on Paradise estate in the Parish of St. Andrew, had complained to Lieutenant-Governor Phineas Riall that the driver on the estate “beats him with a cart-whip on the shoulders, for not keeping up at his work in the field, and that the marks or sores on his shoulders are the effects of such treatment.” The guardians found that John Francois had never before complained directly to the proprietor or overseer on Paradise and further remarked: “[he] has a sufficient quantity of provisions to eat, as much as any other slave on the planation; does not like to work in the field; is generally worked in the small gang; has often heard his master scold the driver when he observed any of the slaves marked by an accidental blow with a switch; the driver beats him with a switch as well as a cart-whip.” (His weekly allowances were reported to be six quarts of flour and three pounds of fish.) Further, the proprietor of Paradise produced the estate’s journal in order to show how often John Francois had “absconded” in order to portray him as a habitual runaway. An overseer described him as an “idle negro, coming to work after sunrise, considerably after the rest of the gang,” and that he was not worked as hard as other slaves on the estate. The driver reported: “John Francois is a very bad boy; although he [the driver] strives to encourage him by frequently feeding him from his mess.” The driver further testified that the

⁷⁴ *Third Report of the Commissioner of Inquiry into the Administration of Civil and Criminal Justice in the West Indies*, 271-2.

proprietor had given John Francois “a garden ready planted” and as much time to work it as the other slaves on the estate. When the guardians asked John Francois “to call on his friends to come forward to speak as to his character,” John Francois claimed that he had no such friends; other slaves on the estate might have resented what they perceived as special treatment that he received from the driver.⁷⁵

Disease and health also surfaced in negotiations between masters and slaves in the guardians’ reports. In 1821, an old slave woman named Diana belonging to Hope Vale estate complained to the guardians about a change in treatment from a new manager. The report noted that Diana was “subject” to dirt-eating—“the paroxysms of which complaint are at some periods very severe, and at other times nearly disappear.” In order to recover from the disease, Diana had “been in the habit of absenting herself” from Hope Vale for months at a time and living with another woman “near Perd Montems, who she calls sister.” (It is unclear if this woman was enslaved or free.) Diana’s former manager had “frequently overlooked this conduct,” but her new manager resented what he viewed as special treatment for a recalcitrant slave. After Diana had moved back to Hope Vale and started “chiefly” residing in the slave village, she “constantly employed herself in carrying fruit, wood, charcoal, &c. to St. George’s.” Seeing that she was able to carry such “burthens,” Hope Vale’s new manager ordered her to join the other older women on the “grass gang” collecting fodder for cattle. Diana refused to do so, citing the fact that she did not receive allowances of dry provisions like the other women in the gang. According to the guardian’s report, the overseer told her that she had to be “treated as the others”—meaning, put to work—if she were to reside on the estate, to which Diana

⁷⁵ Ibid., 275-6.

allegedly responded with “very violent language, which induced the overseer himself to order her a few lashes.” Both the guardians and the manager of Hope Vale would censure the overseer for whipping Diana, reasoning that confinement “is the only justifiable mode of reducing people of her advanced age to reason and obedience.” For her part, Diana “acknowledged” to the guardians that she had been receiving regular allowances of salt fish, whether she was “absent or present” on the estate. The guardians therefore “directed that she should be kept upon the property, and receive a regular supply of provisions in future.”⁷⁶ In this case, guardians mediated in disputes between members of the master class on Hope Vale, while simultaneously fixing Marie’s body and labor to the estate.

In St. Kitts, slaves could go to magistrates in town to levy complaints against owners, managers, and drivers. Returns of slave complaints collected by the Dwarris commission to magistrates at Basseterre from August 1822 to December 1823 recorded nineteen total cases, out of which eight were directly related to the poor provision of food and clothing. These eight cases altogether involved 113 enslaved complainants, including identifiable numbers of 63 females and 48 males. Five of these eight complaints were lodged against managers; one against an attorney; two against lessees of slaves; and one against a slave driver. These rare surviving records illustrated how legal authorities provided some measure of protection for slaves from masters, but also how magistrates wielded physical punishment as a means to back up planters’ private authority as well.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Ibid., 273-4. The report noted: “By reference to the estate’s journals, we find this gang indulged with a day every week out of crop to work their gardens, and a supply of ten puncheons of dry provisions received this year is now nearly expended.”

⁷⁷ “Return of Slave Complaints in Basseterre, against Owners, Attornies or Managers; from 26th August 1822, to 26th December 1823,” *Third Report of the Commissioner of Inquiry into the Administration of Civil and Criminal Justice in the West Indies*, 236-241. (The printing of the records makes it so that each individual case is spread out over six pages.) Mindie Lazarus-Black has briefly analyzed these cases: Lazarus-Black, “Slaves, Masters, and Magistrates,” 266.

It is worth noting here that St. Kitts and other colonies in the Leeward Islands did not generally feature provision grounds and were therefore much more dependent on imported rations than Grenada, the other Windward Islands, and Jamaica. St. Kitts and the other Leewards had also been more intensively cultivated in sugarcane for a longer period of time and thus featured more worn-out soils. As a result of these two factors, dearth and outright famine were more frequent and severe than in other British West Indian colonies, especially during decades of uncertain supply lines, declining sugar prices, and catastrophic weather.⁷⁸

Interestingly, the Basseterre returns show that even more so than in Grenada, slaves in St. Kitts frequently lodged complaints to magistrates in very large groups. This might have stemmed from the fact that rations were doled out to gangs, while provision grounds were generally cultivated by individuals or in family groups. Further, slaves in St. Kitts might have believed that going together to magistrates would offer some protection from corporal punishment. Basseterre's returns recorded four cases that were not decided in the favor of the complainants (though in one of these rulings, a driver was found to be at fault in being too "severe"). In two of the failed cases, slaves were administered lashes, while in the other two cases, they were ordered to return home. Gender appeared to have played no clear role in determining how slaves were punished: in one case, 14 slaves had complained, but only the "ringleaders," 6 males, were sentenced to receive 25 lashes with a cat-o-nine-tails; in another instance, all the complainants (8 males and 11 females) were sentenced to receive 30 lashes of the cat.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Higman, *Slave Populations of the British Caribbean*, 52, 207-8, 317-19.

⁷⁹ *Third Report of the Commissioner of Inquiry into the Administration of Civil and Criminal Justice in the West Indies*, 236-241. (The names of two slaves, Lukey and Violanto, are of indeterminate gender and were not enumerated in the gender breakdown.)

Seasonality mattered when St. Kitts' slaves sought improvements in food rations. In the midst of the summertime "hungry season" in August 1823, eight male and seven female slaves belonging to the estate of one W. Crooke went to the magistrates with a simple complaint against the attorney and manager: "Want of food." After hearing from the manager, the magistrates determined, "that no allowance had been issued to the slaves for six weeks, owing to the want of provision." The magistrates ordered that the slaves return to their estate and that they "shall in future be regularly furnished with the proper allowance of food." In another case, magistrates found that a lessee of slaves had not "been able to procure provisions" for at least eleven slaves he had hired from another owner, ruling "that the arrears of food be immediately made good to the slaves."⁸⁰

The Basseterre returns also revealed how slaves' expectations for rationing were inseparable from their customary expectations about the amount of labor they would be tasked with performing on certain days of the week and in different seasons of the year. While slaves on sugar estates were generally given Sundays out-of-crop free from plantation labor, they might be tasked with what managers considered "light" chores, such as "throwing grass" for livestock or "picking hogmeat."⁸¹ In December 1823, twenty-seven slaves—men, women, and children—belonging to the estate of William Ottley lodged the following complaint against a manager: "Short allowances, and that Mr. Miles requires them to bring more grass than they have been accustomed to do before he became the manager; and that having refused to do so, Mr. Miles did not give them their usual allowance of salt provisions for two weeks, and that the corn is not sufficient." The magistrates examined the overseer, who gave evidence that Miles:

⁸⁰ Ibid., 236-241.

⁸¹ On work routines in- and out-of-crop, see Chapter One of this dissertation.

... had ordered a bundle of stock-meat to be thrown on Saturday evening or Sunday morning, (at the option of the negroes,) in addition to the eight bundles which they have hitherto been accustomed to bring, and that having refused to do so, Mr. Miles had not given them any salt provisions for two weeks, in consequence of which some of them had refused to take the corn meal, which is six pints per week.

The magistrates backed the slaves' claim that the additional labor was onerous and that the food was insufficient. They ordered the allowances of salt provisions to be made good and that rations of corn meal be increased to meet the standards established by law.⁸²

Despite the success of this claim, Basseterre's magistrates generally placed the burden of proof on the complainants. Magistrates' subjective perceptions of the physical appearance of the slaves in front of them could be turned into evidence against the plaintiffs. In one case, twenty slaves lodged the following complaint against their manager: "Hard labour, and not receiving the allowance of melasses and water, to which they had been accustomed while at work." The magistrates investigated and issued the following report: "This complaint was decided to be groundless; the complainants admitting that they regularly receive their weekly allowance, and their appearance, generally, exhibiting no marks of ill usage. They were sentenced to receive thirty lashes each of the cat, and to return to the estate." Other slave complaints were dismissed upon the production of plantation documents or simply by virtue of a master giving his word that he did not treat slaves poorly. For example, one manager was exonerated from a complaint about "Insufficiency of food, and severe treatment," when his employer, the proprietor, "produced an account of the quantity of provisions expended." In another

⁸² *Third Report of the Commissioner of Inquiry into the Administration of Civil and Criminal Justice in the West Indies*, 236-41.

case, complaints about a manager inflicting “Ill treatment, by hard work and want of food,” were found “groundless” by the magistrates when the manager “explained his mode of treatment with regard to labour, food, and time of rest.”⁸³

Similar to most other aspects of slave life, how slaves variously operated as legal actors in different colonies was crucially shaped by the specific labor regimes in which they worked. In provision-ground colonies such as Grenada, slaves seemed to have voiced complaints individually or in families and small groups—mirroring the organization of how they worked their grounds and marketed produce. By contrast, slaves in St. Kitts seemed to have gone to magistrates in large plantation gangs, indicating that under a system of ration allowances, what slaves deemed beneficial for one person, would have been deemed beneficial for all. Many complaints in both colonies, not surprisingly, were unsuccessful; other complaints met with favorable outcomes. Successful or not, each of the cases revealed the legal and extralegal processes and mechanisms through which magistrates as well as masters maintained and reasserted control over slaves. Whether by physically punishing slaves or by ordering that they be returned to estates, colonial authorities used their powers in part to uphold the geographical entwinement of labor and nutrition determined by provisioning and production regimes.

Conclusion

Toward the end of June in 1823, members of Dwarris’ commission arrived at Roseau, Dominica, and met with the chief justice and attorney general of the island. The

⁸³ Ibid., 236-41.

commissioners came with a series of questions, one of which being whether slaves could give evidence against whites in criminal courts. In his answer, the attorney general cited an instance of the punishment of a dirt-eating slave, probably from the case that had occurred on Union estate mentioned earlier in this chapter: “In 1818 or 1819, I indicted a manager for ill-treatment of a slave, by putting mixed dirt and ordure into his mouth; and examined half a dozen witnesses, at least, who were slaves.” The attorney general noted that slave testimony in this case was admitted under law because it was against a manager, and not an owner. However, the grand jury, composed of the manager’s peers, acquitted the man. According to the attorney general: “It [the punishment] was intended to cure him of dirt-eating, a remedy against mal d’estomac, and on that ground the defendant was acquitted; I thought improperly.”⁸⁴ The acquittal essentially upheld the notion that the punishment fell within the boundaries of the acceptable treatment of sick slaves understood implicitly or explicitly among Dominica’s slaveholding community.

The attorney general’s dismay at the outcome of the case indicated that he would have considered himself committed to the principles of amelioration as they operated both in plantation management and in colonial justice. What “amelioration” entailed in both the minds of planters and in the everyday realities of master-slave relations is much more difficult to determine. Plantation healthcare and provisioning regimes were intended solely to maintain slaves as living, laboring capital, and managers’ creative remedies for the “treatment” and “cure” of unhealthy slaves could be among the most grotesque punishments carried out on plantations. Further, planters and managers who

⁸⁴ *Second Report of the Commissioner of Inquiry into the Administration of Civil and Criminal Justice in the West Indies, St. Vincent, Dominica. Appendix.* (London House of Commons, 1826), 27 (arrival at Roseau), 212-213 (testimony).

advocated for “improved” systems of food production on estates or who granted slaves more time to work their grounds often did so with the aid of the lash or with the intention of increasing surveillance and control over work gangs. Likewise, public officials charged with “protecting” the interests and material treatment of slaves resorted to the capital punishment of hungry, diseased, and ill-clothed persons when they saw fit. As the conclusion to this dissertation suggests, the disciplinary motivations and coercive mechanisms that characterized colonial programs of amelioration would be replicated in imperial reforms to slave provisioning. They would also shape political debates over the dismantling of the institution itself.

CONCLUSION

Freedom's Want

One Saturday in September 1816 on the River estate in Dominica, a slave named Jemmy was walking back to the village along with the rest of the gang after being dismissed from the field at sundown. Jemmy was approached by an overseer named Jean Dominique Long, who in Jemmy's words, ordered him "to break a Cocoa Nut for his [Long's] eating." Jemmy accordingly split open the coconut, "believing it his duty always to obey a white man." However, the manager of the estate, John McCorry, then approached the overseer Long and "a conversation ensued" between the two white men. An apparently displeased McCorry subsequently ordered the driver of the estate to give Jemmy twelve lashes with a cart whip, despite the overseer Long's "remonstrances." Jemmy deposed that in the evening of the following day he again ran into the manager McCorry while carrying a bundle of grass for the estate's livestock. McCorry taunted Jemmy, asking him "why he walked lame." Jemmy allegedly answered that his limp was due to yesterday's flogging. McCorry once more called over the driver and ordered him to give Jemmy fourteen more lashes with the cart whip.¹

Jemmy recalled the two beatings in a deposition for a case in the Court of Petty Sessions in Dominica in 1818. In the first whipping, Jemmy seemed to have served as a surrogate victim in some dispute between the overseer Long and the manager McCorry. In the second beating, Jemmy unfortunately served as a mechanism for McCorry to reaffirm his absolute power over slaves who "talked back." The fact that Jemmy's body

¹ Deposition of Jemmy, Dominica, 3 August 1818, CO 71/55, TNA.

endured two beatings stemming originally from the splitting open of a coconut demonstrated how closely intertwined provisioning and punishment could be in even the most casual encounters between masters and slaves. Further, Jemmy's relative powerlessness at avoiding the beatings hinted at the difficulties that slaves encountered in negotiating their own position vis-à-vis whites, who wielded physical domination over slaves as well as ownership of the very landscapes in which slaves lived and labored. Power imbalances that shaped the social terrain of master-slave relations in the islands would also shape the legal terrain of metropolitan reform projects in Crown colonies as well as the discursive terrain of the emancipation debates. This dissertation concludes by examining Colonial Office efforts to rationalize and improve slave provisioning in Trinidad and then briefly discusses how slaves' customary rights to own provision grounds and market produce figured into the political transition from slavery to freedom.

The Experimental Colony

In 1824, the British government issued an order-in-council that created a new consolidated slave code for the colony of Trinidad. It would turn the island, in the words of two historians, into a "legal laboratory of the empire." (Contemporary abolitionists often referred to it as the "colony of experiment.") Since Trinidad had been conquered and seized from Spain in 1797 and was now held by the British Crown, the local legislature held much less say in local policy-making than in representative colonies such as Jamaica. Accordingly, abolitionist reformers working inside the Colonial Office had long taken an interest in using Trinidad as a kind of proving ground for the idea that slaves would perform wage work or that sugar could be cultivated by free labor. Legal

reforms in the island were based on testing these premises and also adapting what British officials understood as the benign effects of “Spanish Regulations” (parts of the *Siete Partidas*) to colonial amelioration laws. For instance, the 1824 order established the office of the Protector of Slaves, which like magistrates in St. Kitts and Guardians of Slaves in Grenada was supposed to serve as an important mediator in protecting slaves from the absolute authority of masters. Further metropolitan reform projects in Trinidad involved the establishment of savings’ banks for slaves to encourage values of thrift and the purchase of manumissions, which officials considered important mile-markers on the road to freedom and wage-earning for colonial slave populations.²

In practice, many of the reforms implemented in Trinidad made the colony look less like an exemplar of new forms of social organization and more like a heavily rationalized version of the other British West Indian colonies. Returns of slave complaints made to the Protector of Slaves recorded forty-eight complaints made by sixty-one individual slaves from mid-July to mid-October 1823. Eight of these cases were directly related to provisioning and involved twelve slaves ranging in “probable age” from 18 to 45 years old. Provisioning-related complainants were about equally divided in terms of occupation: seven slaves were listed as “plantation field” workers; three were “plantation laborers,” probably of a higher rank than field hands; one was a “personal slave;” another was a “domestic.” In contrast to the complaints made to Basseterre magistrates in St. Kitts, where women featured prominently as legal actors, registered

² On Trinidad as a “legal laboratory,” see Lauren Benton and Lisa Ford, “Magistrates in Empire: Convicts, Slaves, and the Remaking of the Plural Legal Order in the British Empire,” in *Legal Pluralism in Empires, 1500-1850*, Richard J. Ross and Lauren Benton, eds. (New York: NYU Press, 2013), 179-80. See also: Brown, “From Slaves to Subjects,” 136-7; Noel Titus, *The Amelioration and Abolition of Slavery in Trinidad, 1812-1834: Experiments and Protest in a New Slave Colony* (Bloomington, Ind: AuthorHouse, 2009); Spence, “Ameliorating Empire,” 138-192.

slave complainants in Trinidadian cases were overwhelmingly made by males—by a margin of ten to two. Further, only one of these cases involved slaves going before officials in a group: in this case, five “plantation field” slaves who complained of “bad treatment, have no provisions, and are overworked.” Their master, a sugar planter named Mr. Mornier, denied the charge, stating that they were runaways; authorities agreed, finding them “bad characters, and two of them very insolent.” Monier, though, would intervene on behalf of the five slaves and secure their release. Another plantation field slave, Robert Davies, age 30, similarly complained of being “worked on Sunday, and inadequately fed and clothed,” by his master W. Harris, a free black wheelright. The authorities weighed that Davies’ complaint was “not proved, and [he was] found guilty of stealing and running away.” Like Monier, Harris requested that Davies be spared punishment; the potential lost labor value of this relatively young male slave no doubt factored into Harris’ decision to ask for leniency.”³

Two other cases of the adjudication of slave complaints in Trinidad showed how imperial authorities adapted new-fangled modes of punishment to conform to managers’ traditional desire to discipline hungry slaves. Adolph, listed as a forty-year old “plantation laborer,” alleged that he had been flogged by his owner, the planter Samuel Jones, “for stealing and selling plantains.” Jones had Adolph’s feet shackled in irons, which was against the island’s new slave code. Jones protested in his defense that Adolph “was flogged, but not put in irons; is a bad negro.” Utilizing the latest method of state-based discipline, the Protector of Slaves ordered instead ordered that the “negro punished by one week's work in the tread mill.” Another slave listed as a plantation laborer, Ned,

³ *Report of His Majesty's Commissioners of Legal Inquiry on the Colony of Trinidad* (London: House of Commons, 1827), 254-59.

age 45, complained of, “Want of food and clothes, and sickness from fever.” His owner, the cocoa planter Joseph Faillie, flatly denied the claim. Upon investigation, the Protector determined about Ned: “That he eats dirt, and is a runaway.” Rather than utilizing the treadmill, the Protector ordered that the slave “remain in the hospital until recovery. [F]rom the distance of his master's estate, and to break him of the habit of eating dirt; returned to his master.”⁴

Provisioning and social discipline were also explicitly linked together in the rationalization of slave crime in Trinidad. Protectors of Slaves drew up official lists of possible offenses that slaves could commit. The categories of offense were weighted toward crime that might undermine production on estates as well as the absolute social authority of white masters. One such report counted 11,131 individual offenses (6,223 by men, 4,908 by women) across the island from June 1824 to June 1826. There were 76 different types of offenses, including murder, practicing obeah, stealing canes, and “abusive language” toward managers, overseers, and drivers. The offenses that slaves allegedly committed most often in this period were “neglecting duty” (2,085), “insolence” (1,284), “disobedience” (1,247), and “absconding, running away, etc.” (1,181). There were also offenses directly related to the provisioning, including “eating dirt, charcoal, etc.” (14 cases total—8 men, 6 women); “neglecting gardens” (122 cases—22 men, 100 women); “selling and destroying clothes furnished by owner” (8 total—5 men, 3 women); and “cutting and eating dead cattle” (3 total—1 man, 2 women).⁵

⁴ Ibid., 254.

⁵ List of Offenses Committed by Male and Female Plantation Slaves in the Island of Trinidad, 24 June 1824–24 June 1826 (*enclosure*), Ralph Woodford to Bathurst, Trinidad, 26 February 1827, No. 13, f. 80, CO 295/74.

Another aim of imperial reform in the island was to strengthen values of “thrift” and earning among the enslaved population through the establishment of savings banks and the encouragement of the purchase of manumission. Trinidad manumission records indicate that high-status slaves who might have had greater opportunities to work provision grounds or had more time to market produce had much better chances to buy their own freedom. Forty-two slaves were manumitted in Trinidad in the second half of 1827. There was, for instance, Alphonsa Castano, a 30 year-old plantation slave who purchased her freedom for £78: “She resides in the Quarter of Santa Cruz, and sells Plantains.” Castano was also able to purchase the freedom of her 16-year old daughter, Catalina, for about £60. Two other manumitted slaves from the return might have had businesses selling foodstuffs. Marie Thereza, thirty-nine, was a “personal slave” (likely a domestic) who bought freedom for £97.10: “She cultivates land in the Valley of Maraval.” Another freedwoman, Gature Helene, forty, was a personal slave who paid £86.13 for her freedom: “She lives in the Market-street and is a huckster.”⁶

Just as in other West Indian colonies, though, cases of cruelty and poor provisioning of slaves in Trinidad filtered back to observers in Britain. One case picked up by *The Anti-Slavery Reporter* in 1831 had appeared in the Protector of Slaves’ reports published by Parliament. It documented a slaveholder named Eliza O’Brien who had allegedly tortured a slave named Noel by chaining him at night until he died from complications from a leg ulcer. According to the report, O’Brien chained Noel at night because “Noel used to break open his mistress’s store, and steal therefrom rum, salt pork,

⁶ These figures were from a larger report that listed 588 freed slaves—170 described as “plantation slaves” and 418 as “personal slaves”—from June 1824 to December 1827. Out of this total, 409 former slaves paid in aggregate £25,627.2.6 ½ for freedom—an average of £62.13.1 ¾ per person. Return of slaves manumitted by private contract, 25 June to 24 December 1827, Trinidad, f. 10-11 (p. 114), CO 295/77.

butter, flour, plaintains [sic], &c.” Abolitionists were keen to highlight for the British reading public why Noel probably stole from his master: “He did not get his allowances regularly. Sometimes he got half a pint of farine (cassada flour) and a piece of salt fish, and when he let a mule get away, he had none at all, and he then used to run away and steal. His mistress did not feed him as she ought. He used to steal because he was hungry.”⁷

As the end of slavery drew closer, even dispatches from Trinidad’s officials to authorities in Whitehall betrayed the sense that perhaps the island was not so different from others in the British Caribbean. In 1832, Governor Lewis Grant wrote to Secretary of State Viscount Goderich about a gang of slaves who had been “in a state of insubordination” on Plein Palaise estate, which was located about 20 miles away from the seat of government in Port-of-Spain. Grant traveled to the estate with the brother of the proprietors and two colonial officials. Upon arriving at Plein Palais, Grant discovered that about two-thirds of the slaves were now absent. He ordered a party of militia to scour the woods nearby. According to Grant, he and the officials soon discovered “that the insubordination which had been shewn had arisen in the Drivers having impressed the rest of the Gang with the belief that they were imposed upon by the Manager in respect to the portion of time which they ought to have for their own use” (meaning, to work their grounds). Grant reported that upon hearing this news, “Some of them [the slaves], and particularly some of the women I understood had conducted themselves with much violence, even to the extent of threatening the Commandant [a local official] when they were called in from the Field to be remonstrated with.” Unable to reassert order with the

⁷ *The Anti-Slavery Reporter*, vol. 4, no. 14 (London: August 1831), 369-70.

gang, the commandant retreated to a local military post and called in soldiers for reinforcements. Upon seeing the forces brought in to quell the disturbance—“and along with them” Grant noted, “a man who is frequently employed, I understand, in the inflicting of punishment”—the majority of Plein Palais’ slaves fled into the woods.⁸

The Plein Palais runaways were not simply escaping in a chaotic frenzy to avoid punishment. Rather, they were employing large-scale *marronage* as a means to seek legal protection from colonial authorities. While Governor Grant was at the estate, only a few of the slaves returned. Many others, he reported, had gone to Port-of-Spain, “to make their Statement to the Protector.” Grant ordered that the Protector have the slaves returned to Plein Palais immediately. He also ordered that a thorough investigation take place under three magistrates who would examine the slaves in the presence of the Protector. This impromptu tribunal determined that the driver and two other “ringleaders” in the affair should be the only ones to receive corporal punishment, but they also sent “two of the most unruly of the women to the Tread Mill.” In the course of the investigation, Grant discovered information about the origins of the commotion: “One of the causes of their murmuring was that they had been compelled to work in Gang on their Provision Grounds, instead of each Individual being allowed his portion: it had been divided after being a little advanced in cultivation, but this was not satisfactory, as they like to have their grounds distinctly separated and each to be left to his own way of acting in this respect.” Grant concluded his dispatch to Goderich by remarking: “I have no

⁸ Lewis Grant to Goderich, Trinidad, 8 June 1832, no. 27, f. 301-305, CO 295/92, TNA.

Complaints of Insubordination from any other part of the Island except the vague and general one of the Male Slaves being sullen, and the women insolent.”⁹

Grant’s cryptic conclusion to his report on local scenes of disorder, confusion, and contestation summed up the ambivalent and contradictory nature of imperial oversight of provisioning in Trinidad. Colonial Office reforms intended to promote the more “humane” treatment of the island’s slaves merely inscribed in law forms of discipline and punishment for slaves who complained of abuse that were customary in practice in the other islands. Further, Whitehall’s rationalization of slave crime in Trinidad upheld the notion that slaves’ basic needs for food, clothing, shelter, and medical care were embedded within the paramount rights of masters to have slaves remain orderly, subordinate, and fixed on properties for labor. Programs to encourage manumission such as the establishment of a savings’ bank probably served to deepen the wealth inequalities among slaves and free blacks. Finally, Grant’s letter laid bare how British reformers’ desire to have slaves respect property rights and perform wage work in the post-slavery period butted into slaves’ own desire to hold onto provision grounds as property and work them how they saw fit. Rather than shining as a beacon of successful reform back to the imperial center, the “experimental colony” represented a harbinger of continuing social conflict into the post-slavery period.

Emancipation

Provisioning was more explicitly addressed in the Colonial Office’s order-in-council of 2 November 1831. First, the order established a six-day workweek for slaves

⁹ Ibid.

with labor carried out during the daylight hours with defined meal breaks. According to Mary Turner:

Provision grounds, on suitable land situated no more than two miles from the slave village, had to comprise half an acre for each person over fifteen years old and a quarter acre for each child. Seeds and tools for cultivation were to be supplied and time for cultivation (forty days in forty successive weeks) allowed in the workweek. The slaves had sole ownership of the crops and use of the land until the crops were harvested.

Standard rations were also laid out, and slaves were allowed to “seek legal redress” from protectors of slaves in all colonies. But there were drawbacks for slaves in the new order. First, the time allotted for the cultivation of provision grounds was more extensive than under customary practice, but slaves would have to work them under supervision. Second, slaves lost customary property rights to their grounds. Third, the order abolished Sunday markets, which according to Turner, had “already [been] much curtailed” throughout the islands.¹⁰

The Colonial Office dictated that the order be implemented in the Crown Colonies—Trinidad, Demerara-Essequibo, Berbice, and St. Lucia—within one month. Colonies with representative assemblies were ordered to pass the reforms into law or face financial penalties in the form of having funds withheld from the West India Relief Bill. Planter-politicians in these colonies predictably resisted putting the reforms on the books—let alone into practice. Regardless, the reforms were crafted on the eve of the ultimate dismantling of slavery in the empire. Led by the Baptist preacher Samuel Sharpe, tens of thousands of slaves in Jamaica rebelled from December 1831 into January 1832, spurred in part by rumors that whites were withholding emancipation decrees along

¹⁰ Mary Turner claims that the “distinguishing feature” of the order “was that it set out the mutual obligations of slaves and owners: how much work for how much food, clothing, and medical care supplied.” Turner, “Modernizing Slavery,” 12-16.

with calls for the implementation of wage work from the King. The so-called Baptist War marked the beginning of the end of slavery in the British Empire.¹¹

In May 1832, the House of Commons appointed a select committee to investigate the question of general emancipation. Jamaica loomed outsized in British political consciousness during the lead-up to emancipation, and the select committee met during a climate of fear and worry following the rebellion. While emancipation had only been intermittently advocated for in the 1820s, popular sentiment among British officials and the public alike now deemed that it was much safer and more expedient to grant slaves freedom than to risk social disorder in the colonies. Indeed, 1,500,000 Britons would eventually sign a petition following the publication of the committee's minutes calling for general emancipation. Still, the question of what freedom would look like was very much up in the air throughout 1832-33. Thirty-three witnesses were called before the committee to answer dozens of questions about the conditions of slaves. The aim of the committee was to figure out whether, if freed, blacks would continue to labor in a state of subservience to white property owners in return for wages rather than provisions. Indeed, the committee's two "main points" that guided them throughout the hearings illustrated the significance in the official mind of plantation provisioning regimes to issues of social discipline and order:

1st. That the Slaves, if emancipated, would maintain themselves, would be industrious and disposed to acquire property by labour."

2^d. That the dangers of convulsion are greater from Freedom withheld than from Freedom granted to the Slaves.

¹¹ Turner "Modernizing Slavery," 16. For a brief account of Sharpe, the Baptist War, and the lead-up to emancipation, see Thomas Holt, *The Problem of Freedom: Race, Labor, and Politics in Jamaica and Britain, 1832-1938* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1992), 13-21.

The abolition of slavery was passed into law in August 1833 and put into effect one year later. Slaveholders, meanwhile, received compensation for lost property, which was essentially the largest central government bailout of a dying industry up to that point in British history.¹²

For former slaves, life during the immediate period of freedom greatly resembled what they had experienced under formal bondage. In most colonies, former slaves were placed in a state of “apprenticeship” until 1838 and compelled to labor very much like they had before. Natasha Lightfoot writes:

The apprenticeship system suspended hundreds of thousands of the empire’s African-descended subjects in a liminal space between enslavement and freedom from 1834 to 1838. In theory, it apprenticed former slaves to their former owners to prepare them for free labor; in practice, it extended their bondage, requiring them to work for a stipulated number of hours without pay in exchange for rations and housing.

In colonies with extensive patches of uncultivated land, such as Jamaica, former slaves were able to develop “proto-peasantries” and eke out subsistence for families, giving the new civil status of freedom at least some measure of material legitimacy. In smaller islands where land was scarcer, such as Antigua, peasant classes did not develop as extensively—if at all. Everywhere, black men’s and women’s provisioning needs remained especially vulnerable during economic downturns such as the crisis that crippled the British West Indies as a result of London’s greater turn toward principles of liberalism and free trade in the mid- to late-1840s.¹³

¹² For the two “main points,” see *Report from Select Committee on the Extinction of Slavery throughout the British Dominions: with the Minutes of Evidence, Appendix and Index* (London: House of Commons, 1832), 3. On the select committee, see Olwyn M. Blouet, “Earning and Learning in the British West Indies: An Image of Freedom in the Pre-Emancipation Decade, 1823-1833,” *The Historical Journal*, vol. 34, no. 2 (June 1991), 391-409. On compensation: Draper, *The Price of Emancipation*.

¹³ Natasha Lightfoot, *Troubling Freedom* (quoted 8). Lightfoot notes that Antigua, the Bahamas, and the Cayman Islands rejected apprenticeship programs and provided full emancipation on 1 August 1834. See

Global Geographies of Want

This dissertation has explored the terrestrial and maritime geography of scarcity and famine in the British Caribbean colonies at a particular moment in time in order to provide a lens on how policies emerged—unexpectedly, haphazardly, ambivalently, often unsuccessfully—at colonial and metropolitan levels that intended to meet the bare needs of subjects in the region. I hope that the preceding pages have suggested that the significance of this story is hardly limited to one region of the world. Generally considered as a precocious zone of modernity because of the importance of sugar to the development of early industrial capitalism, Britain’s West Indian colonies might have served as developmental models for other areas in even darker ways. Indeed, cavalier metropolitan responses to the harsh human consequences that attended disruptions to slave provisioning systems would be echoed in other imperial locales as well.

In one of the most infamous and nearly contemporaneous episodes of deep imperial hunger, London’s officials would place most of the blame for the social catastrophe and ghastly mortality of the Great Famine in Ireland (c. 1845-52) on Irish tenant farmers’ overreliance on the potato for subsistence. Instead of redirecting flows of grain and meat from leaving the island for Manchester and other industrializing centers, British officials instead stuck to the ascendant principles of *laissez-faire* and allowed dearth to prevail. And rather than providing extensive aid to starving Irish in the form of food relief and other direct measures, British commissioners instead generally preferred

also: O. Nigel Bolland, “Systems of Domination after Slavery: the Control of Land and Labor in the British West Indies after 1838,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 23, no. 4 (October 1981), 591-619; Holt, *Problem of Freedom*.

that hungry peasants labor for wages in workhouses and other controlled environments—a means of essentially disciplining them and discerning the so-called “worthy poor” from those “lazy” and undeserving of “handouts.”¹⁴

British India became an even more persistent exemplar of how imperial policies could combine with the instabilities of global cash and commodity markets and the ravages of ENSO cycles to generate massive death tolls through starvation. As subsistence economies shrank due to the commodification of property and the erosion of rural peasant regimes of tenure, inhabitants of the subcontinent became more and more vulnerable to credit crises reverberating out from London and other banking centers as well as high prices for grain stemming from corners in “futures” markets in Chicago, Liverpool, and other far-distant cities. Famine was especially fierce and fatal in Bengal in the 1870s and again during World War II. In the decades since Independence and the tragedies of Partition, regions of South Asia have often struggled to maintain food security, seen in its worst incarnation during the famine in Bangladesh in 1974.¹⁵

Sadly, conditions of widespread nutritional despair and corresponding social and political strife have surfaced once more in the Caribbean region almost exactly at the moment that the writing of this dissertation has reached its conclusion. Venezuela is in the grips of its worst economic crisis in decades owing in large part to low oil prices on international markets. Reportedly, eighty-seven percent of Venezuelans have claimed that they do not have enough money to purchase adequate food for themselves or their

¹⁴ For a contemporary British official’s perspective about the Irish Famine and a description of the implementation of workhouses and limited relief measures on the local level, see Charles E. Trevelyan, *The Irish Crisis* (London: Longman, Brown, Green & Longmans, 1848).

¹⁵ For food crises and famine in nineteenth-century India: Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts*. On the Bengal famine during World War II and food policy in general: Amartya Sen, “The Food Problem: Theory and Policy,” *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 4, no. 3 (July 1982), 47-459.

families. Violent protests against government policies and inaction and the looting of stores and food trucks have rocked the country's cities.¹⁶ The severity of Venezuela's current predicament should not be viewed as an exceptional snapshot of life inside a global economic order that sometimes generates unevenness in the distribution of food supply. Instead, it should be seen as a startling manifestation of how deeply divisions between spaces of comparative food security and spaces of persistent food vulnerability have become entrenched across the world. The author hopes that this dissertation has in some small way helped unsettle notions that such divisions are either new phenomena or natural products of environmental factors and the workings of markets. Rather, the history of provisioning in the final decades of slavery in the British Caribbean colonies reminds us that public policy, private interests, and general societal indifference toward the human consequences of catastrophe have often conspired together as hunger's invisible hands.

¹⁶ Nicholas Casey, "Venezuelans Ransack Stores as Hunger Grips the Nation," *The New York Times*, 19 June 2016.

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