CHAPTER 18

Rebellions, Revolts and Mutinies in the Caribbean

While military triumphs in India after the overthrow of Tipu Sultan created fresh opportunities for the promoters of the developing empire, British authorities in the Caribbean were faced by the difficult aftermath of military defeat. Shortage of troops through illness, and the perceived failure of the two great naval expeditions sent out in 1793 and 1795, had left the slave population alert and rebellious. The settlers and the landowners, for their part, were nervous and fearful. Britain and France had been at war for eight years; both sides were exhausted.

Fresh slave revolts and mutinies marked the start of a long period of unrest in Britain's slave colonies, partly provoked by the continuing upheavals in Haiti, and partly by the more immediate belief that the parliamentary moves to end the slave trade was but a prelude to an end to slavery. Slavery itself, of course, remained legal in the colonies, but an end to slavery itself was now the firm goal of its victims, to the alarm of their owners.

The British-held island of Tobago, off the coast of Venezuela, perceived as a likely candidate to be returned to French rule,[1] was the first to reach the edge of the precipice, in December 1801. The slaves planned to take their chance at Christmas, and prepared a rebellion on sixteen plantations. Each plantation had a leader with the rank of colonel. Roger, a driver on the Belvedere estate, was to be the island's new governor; Thomas, a cooper, was to be the commander-in-chief; and a slave called Sandy was to be a major. More than 1,000 slaves were involved in the plot, against a militia force of barely 200.

Roger is described in the records as 'a remarkable, active and intelligent Creole'. Well aware of the winds of change blowing through the Caribbean, he had a print on his wall of the execution of Louis XVI. Several organisers of the rebellion were drivers or tradesmen – men with a wider knowledge of the world than most plantation slaves. Many were relatively well off, 'not only in possession of the comforts, but even the luxuries of life'. Two of them were former members of the Black Rangers, the unit of slave soldiers recruited in 1795. Disbanded in 1800 under pressure from the plantation owners, these free soldiers had been sold back into slavery.

Setting the sugar cane alight outside each overseer's house was the signal for the start of the revolt. 'It was hoped that the appearance of the flames would

induce the whites to hasten to the spot', wrote the planter Bryan Edwards, a near-contemporary of these events, 'and that they might then be murdered with little difficulty'.[2] But the whites had heard rumours of the threatened rebellion, and Brigadier Hugh Carmichael, the garrison commander at Scarborough, ordered a special militia patrol to be mounted over the holiday. Martial law was declared and thirty plotters were arrested.

A macabre charade was enacted. Carmichael ordered that a single rebel should be hanged on the signal flagpole at dawn. After execution, his body was lowered and raised up again thirty times, with a gun fired on each occasion. 'The insurgents, who at a distance witnessed the execution, were thus led to believe that one of their chiefs perished at each fresh raising of the body; and the salutary effect of this belief was that, supposing themselves to be left without a leader, they surrendered or dispersed.'[3]

The rebellion was snuffed out; several hundred slaves and a number of free coloureds were arrested. Two were executed, including a coloured militiaman convicted of conspiring with the slaves. Martial law was lifted after reinforcements had arrived from Barbados in January – three infantry companies – and a further five men were hanged. Carmichael justified his action by claiming that the rebel leaders 'had sworn to the total extermination of the white and coloured people by a regular and systematic attack'.

This lurid picture, which most whites in the Caribbean had lodged in their imagination since the slave triumph in Haiti, was not to be realised in Tobago. The repression of Roger's rebellion knocked the spirit out of the slaves for a generation, and they did not finally secure their freedom until August 1834.

A fresh revolt broke out a few months later on the island of Dominica. On 9 April 1802, 500 black soldiers mutinied at Fort Shirley, near Cabrits, on the northern point of the island. 'Black Man' was their password, and among their number only the name of Private Hypolite has been recorded. The mutineers had justifiable grievances. Obliged to work without pay on the governor's private estate, they imagined that their military unit was about to be disbanded and that they would be returned to slavery, as had happened to the Black Rangers of Tobago.

The Black Regiment of Dominica had been formed in 1795, and in 1798, to swell their numbers, the governor had purchased 200 slaves from a market on a neighbouring island. Fighting for the British, they had been promised their eventual freedom. Fearing that this promise would not be kept, the black soldiers seized their barracks and killed three of the black non-commissioned officers and all the whites.

Colonel Andrew Cochrane, the island's governor, declared martial law and marched from Roseau to Fort Shirley with two regiments. The black soldiers held their ground, but the governor's force prevailed. Sixty of the mutineers

were killed and 370 taken prisoner.[4] A court martial sentenced thirty-four to be hanged. Some escaped over the ramparts of Fort Shirley and made for the hills. Private Hypolite was among their number, and joined a surviving group of black Maroons.

A decade later, in 1813, a war of extermination was launched in Dominica against the Maroons. Pharcelle, the Maroon leader in the 1780s and 1790s, was long gone, but Quashee, the most recent chief, had kept alive the flames of resistance through the first decade of the nineteenth century – a struggle characterised by sporadic guerrilla activity and a 'very considerable desertion of negroes from the estates'. Hypolite was still active, and so too was a Maroon called Jacko, who had been fighting in the hills for forty years or more.

The continued existence of a Maroon 'free territory' in the mountains was an attraction for the plantation slaves. In July 1812 a group of seventy-five at the Castle Bruce plantation had slipped away to join them. With more than a thousand Maroons providing a safe refuge for runaways, the authorities felt obliged to act. Colonel George Ainslie, a governor freshly arrived, made some effort to negotiate. Maroons who surrendered would be offered a free pardon; those who refused would be treated 'with the utmost rigour of military execution, their provision grounds laid waste, and the punishment of death inflicted on those who are found in arms'.[5] Chief Quashee had no plans to surrender, and rejected the governor's terms. The Maroon courier who had brought the governor's message was accused of treason and shot.

Unwilling to use the army to put down what was perceived as an internal disturbance, Colonel Ainslie turned to a familiar Caribbean practice – recruiting slaves and forming them into a Black Ranger battalion. Soon the Maroons were faced by black troops as knowledgeable about the forests as they were, and under orders to exterminate them. Colonel Ainslie proclaimed that 'the Rangers have orders to take no prisoners, but to put to death men, women, and children, without exception'. Rewards were offered for the heads of Quashee and other individual Maroons. Quashee, not to be outdone, offered $2,000 for the head of the governor.

The Maroons held out against the Rangers for a year, but their resistance eventually crumbled. Their farms were burned down, and Colonel Ainslie boasted that they faced the choice of 'starving in the woods or surrendering'. Jacko's small band of 500 was finally surrounded in July 1814, and Jacko was shot. Eleven leaders were hanged; their heads were cut off and displayed on poles at prominent places around the island. Some of those who surrendered were escaped slaves: one hundred men, forty-eight women and eight children. Found guilty of 'loitering off plantations to which they belong without passes', they were imprisoned.

The Maroons of Dominica had long maintained a close alliance with the plantation slaves – not always the case in other islands – and it was this relationship that allowed them to survive for so long.[6] Yet their alliance caused panic among the white slave-owners, who had demanded action from the colonial authorities with such success. After the war in Jamaica in 1795, the Jamaicans Maroons had been banished from the islands for ever. In St-Dominica, twenty years later, they were effectively eliminated. The slave-owners triumphed.[7]

In December 1805, in the Caribbean island of Trinidad, two French planters with sugar estates in Diego Martin valley sounded the alarm when they heard their African slaves singing a subversive song. Its words referred to the rebellion in Saint-Domingue (Haiti) in 1791:

> The bread is the flesh of the white man, San Domingo!
> The wine is the blood of the white man, San Domingo!
> We will drink the white man's blood, San Domingo!
> The bread we eat is the white man's flesh
> The wine we drink is the white man's blood.

Under cover of organising their Christmas celebrations, the slaves were preparing a rebellion and rehearsing these evocative songs.[8] 'King' Samson, the rebellion's leader, appeared in the day to be a harmless old Ibo slave from Nigeria, but at clandestine meetings at night, he emerged as a powerful *obeah-man* in charge of the rebellion's organising committee. This was what the whites were led to believe.

The British had acquired Trinidad from the Spanish in 1797, and were ever-fearful of the continuing influence of French Republicans.[9] A slave revolt had broken out on neighbouring Tobago in 1801, and the authorities had heard rumours of a black underground and a network of secret societies. The whites knew that they were outnumbered. Trinidad had 20,000 slaves in 1803, and barely 2,000 whites. There were also 5,000 Maroons, some of whom had come from the other islands.

Many of these French-speaking Maroons, republican in their political enthusiasms, had taken to the hills in 1797 after raiding the armoury left behind by the Spaniards. Their existence posed a permanent threat to the white plantation owners. The *cabildo*, or assembly, of the whites called them 'the scum of the Revolution', who had found in Trinidad a 'Refugium Peccatorum' – a refuge from their sins. It would be 'an act of moral madness', the *cabildo* recorded in 1803, 'to relax the police when we still have 5,000 of these people, and daily increasing'; 'every precaution' had to be taken.[10]

The Maroons were perceived by Colonel Thomas Picton, the first British governor, as 'irredeemably Republican', and soon he was challenging them with a small but well-armed militia. The Maroon-controlled hinterland was successfully invaded by this force, and the captured Maroons were executed. Picton also suppressed a mutiny of coloured troops on the way. His methods were criticised in London in 1802 and, accused of the excessive use of torture, he was forced to resign.

With the power of the Maroons diminished, the chief threat to the white planters came from their African slaves. Brigadier Thomas Hislop, Picton's replacement as governor, heard rumours of an impending rebellion in December 1805; he imposed martial law and mobilised the militia. Informers had provided the names of slaves named as the future kings and queens, and the members of a future black government, and they were all arrested. Under torture, they confessed that a rising had indeed been planned for Christmas Day; two prominent planters, much hated by the slaves, were to have been the first to be killed.

Brought before a court martial, the three slaves held to be most responsible were found guilty and hanged. Six men were flogged, as were the women involved.[11] Among them was King Samson's queen, who was sentenced to wear chains for life, with a ten-pound iron ring fastened to her leg.

In the excitable imagination of Trinidad's tiny white population, the details of the Christmas plot of 1805 loomed ever larger as the years went by. The old French planters remained haunted by their fears of riot and massacre. They came to believe that the rebels had planned to kill every white man by grinding them up in Mr Shand's mill, and they recalled how 'lots were to be cast for the white ladies'. They were convinced that only the severest punishment would terrorise the Maroons and slaves into submission.[12]

Yet many free blacks believed that the Christmas plot was an invention of the terrified whites. They argued that the slaves had created an imaginary existence for themselves away from the world of the sugar plantation, and that when the slaves had talked of emperors and kings, they were simply planning their costumes for the Christmas carnival – and maybe they were.

Whether real or imaginary, the Christmas rebellion was brutally suppressed, and the white settlers remained on their guard. When a Methodist preacher arrived on the island in 1811 and preached sermons that favoured the slaves, he was drummed off the island. 'It is of no consequence of what colour ye are', the Reverend Thomas Talboys had preached to his slave flock, 'for the white man will be burning in hell, while all of you, who have faith in the gospel, will be enjoying bliss in heaven'.[13] This was not what the white *cabildo* liked to hear, and Talboys was charged with 'preaching doctrines tending to excite insubordination in the minds of the free people of colour, and slaves'.

Summoned before Brigadier Hislop, he was ordered into exile. 'Go instantly and shut up your Chapel', he was told, 'desist from preaching, and join a military

corps.' The subversive priest was sent to Guyana, while the brigadier left for India, to become a significant player in the extermination of the Pindaris in 1817.

Even when slavery was abolished throughout the British empire, in August 1834, and replaced with a system of apprenticeship, the slaves in Trinidad 'shewed much resistance, but this, in most cases, was of a passive nature. The use of the cat-o'-nine tails convinced some of the most refractory that they were in the wrong, and the rest returned to their duty.' With the extensive use of flogging, the former slaves found it difficult to tell the difference between the old system and the new, and remained in the mood of intransigence to which they had been reduced by years of repression.

In Jamaica in May 1808, fifty slaves at the military base at Fort Augusta organised a mutiny and killed their two white officers. Recently arrived from Africa, they had been purchased by the governor to serve in the 2nd West Indian Regiment. These were the last batch of a total of 13,000 slaves enrolled by the British army in the Caribbean since 1795. A graphic account of the mutiny at Fort Augusta by an historian later in the nineteenth century suggests that the slave soldiers were 'influenced by some wild idea that, if they killed the officers, they would then be able to return to their own country'.[14] The contemporary planter historian Bryan Edwards also thought that they 'were desirous of returning to their native country', but claimed too that they were 'too often drilled'.[15]

The mutiny was confined to the new recruits, and was swiftly crushed when older soldiers not only refused to take part but actively joined in suppressing it. 'Ammunition being supplied, nearly half the mutineers were shot, and the rest made prisoners.'[16] Sixteen prisoners were tried by court martial, and condemned to death; nine were shot.

The mutiny's brutal suppression helped fuel a subsequent slave revolt planned in 1809. Setting fire to a plantation outside Kingston was to be the signal for the start of the rebellion – a sign for others to join in. They had hoped to do so, according to Edwards, by 'the firing of the towns and the murdering of the white inhabitants'.[17] Their aim was to establish a republican government on the model of Haiti.

'Duke' Watkins was appointed the slaves' commander-in-chief, with a title designed to echo that of the Duke of Manchester, the island's military governor, while his second-in-command, 'Sambo' John, was addressed as 'Captain'. The whites were saved almost by chance, for in spite of the recent mutiny the colonial authorities were poorly prepared.[18]

The plans were discovered when one of the survivors of the mutiny of 1808 was captured in March 1809. Burgess, a slave in the 2nd West Indian Regiment, had escaped after the mutiny, and became one of the plotters of the planned

rebellion. Originally sentencing him to death for desertion, the authorities now prepared for his delayed execution. 'Just before the sentence was to be executed', according to Edwards's account, 'most probably with the hope of saving his life, he revealed the important secret which his friends had confided to him.'[19]

His allegations were investigated, and the authorities concluded that a slave rebellion was indeed imminent. Watkins and Sambo John and several others were arrested, while others escaped. Having provided such useful information, Burgess was pardoned, while Watkins and John were tried and executed. 'Thus ended the project of a negro republic in Jamaica', noted Edwards.