CHAPTER 3

Slave Rebellions in the Caribbean

The slave islands of the Caribbean were also affected by the course of the French and Indian War. Slave revolts in Jamaica in 1760 and 1765 posed fresh challenges to British rule. Slave workers from Africa had long contributed to the wealth of Empire, and the Empire itself seemed inconceivable at that time without the continued supply of the cheap labour they provided. Seized from the Spanish Empire a century earlier, Jamaica was England's largest, richest and most important possession in the Caribbean. Its riches came from sugar, grown on plantations worked by a huge slave population kept under fierce discipline.

During the Easter celebrations in 1760, slaves working on the Jamaica plantations exploded in a well-organised rebellion. Four hundred took part in the initial outbreak of slaves from a dozen plantations on the north coast. They were soon joined by thousands all over the island. According to the near-contemporary account of Edward Long, an established British planter, it was the most formidable uprising ever known in the West Indies to date.[1] Most of the slaves were 'Coromantins', imported from the Gold Coast (now known as Ghana), the area of Africa where the Ashanti would provide continued resistance against British rule throughout the nineteenth century.

The 'generalissimo' of the rebellion was Tacky – or 'chief' in the slave patois – 'a young man of good stature, and well made', according to Long's description. Other leaders were Fortune and Kingston, named after the plantations where they worked. Long had a poor opinion of Tacky, who 'did not appear to be a man of any extraordinary genius',[2] yet he led the rebellion for more than a year.

Much of the island was freed from imperial control. Large tracts were farmed by Maroons, the descendants of indigenous peoples and escaped slaves, whose free territory in the mountains had long provided a safe haven for fresh generations of runaways. Many slaves perceived it as an attractive model for an alternative society that might be created after they had secured their freedom. The rebel slaves of 1760, Long noted, were impressed by 'the happy circumstance of the Maroons'. They were perceived to have acquired 'very comfortable settlements, and a life of freedom and ease'.[3]

The Maroons had long sustained an independent existence and were quite capable, when provoked, of descending from the hills to cause havoc on the plantations. When the British had sought to eliminate them in the 1730s, the Maroons had fought the British forces to a standstill. A peace treaty signed in 1738 gave the Maroons rights to substantial territory, as well as guarantees of

freedom, independence and self-government. The Maroons agreed, in return, to surrender all runaway slaves in future, and to allow two white 'residents' to live among them, to regulate disputes that might arise between white and black. This typical colonial device – the positioning in conquered territory of a 'resident', an 'agent', or a 'district commissioner' – was much used throughout the Empire. The Maroons pledged themselves to assist the British monarch against his enemies, and they were called out to help crush the rebellion of 1760, although it proved necessary to summon troops from other islands.

The planning of Tacky's rebellion was meticulous, 'conducted with such profound secrecy that almost all the Coromantin slaves throughout the island were privy to it, arousing no suspicion among the Whites'. The rebel aim, wrote Long, was to divide 'the island into small principalities in the African mode, to be distributed among their leaders and head men'.

Sure of victory, slaves in Kingston had already chosen their future queen: 'The Coromantins of that town had raised one Cubah, a female slave belonging to a Jewess, to the rank of royalty, and dubbed her queen of Kingston; at their meetings she had sat in state under a canopy, with a sort of robe on her shoulders and a crown upon her head.' General Tacky, for his part, wrote Long, 'had flattered himself with the hope of obtaining (among other fruits of victory) the lieutenant-governor's lady for his concubine'.

Many slaves had dreams of independence along the lines pioneered by the Maroons. One slave, subsequently captured, outlined his ideas to his guard, a Jewish militiaman. Jews on the island were unpopular with the other white settlers, since most had refused to join the militia. Aware of this prejudice, the slave explained his plan to his guard:

> You Jews, said he, and our nation (meaning the Coromantins), ought to consider ourselves as one people. You differ from the rest of the Whites, and they hate you. Surely then it is better for us to join in one common interest, drive them out of the country, and hold possession of it to ourselves. We will have . . . a fair division of estates, and we will make sugar and rum, and bring them to market.
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> As for the sailors, you see they do not oppose us, they care not who is in possession of the country, Black or White, it makes no difference to them; so that after we are masters of it, you need not fear that they will come cap in hand to us (as they now do to the Whites) to trade with us. They'll bring us things from t'other side the sea, and be glad to take our goods in payment.

The Jewish militiaman listened to this story with interest, according to Long's account, but declined to join the rebellion.[4]

Many slaves were recently arrived from Africa, and their familiar customs were much in evidence. Long recounts the capture and execution of a famous

'obeiah man', or priest, 'tricked up with all his feathers, teeth, and other implements of magic':

> He was an old Coromantin, who, with others of his profession, had been a chief in counselling and instigating the credulous herd, to whom these priests administered a powder, which, being rubbed on their bodies was to make them invulnerable; they persuaded them into a belief that Tacky, their generalissimo in the woods, could not possibly be hurt by the white men, for he caught all the bullets fired at him in his hand, and hurled them back with destruction to his foes.

The firm though mistaken belief that it was possible to resist and survive the modern weapons of the white man, a view often held by slaves and indigenous peoples, is a permanent thread that runs through the empire story.

Tacky's rebellion spread through the island and lasted for several months. It was crushed by superior force, but a guerrilla war continued for a year. Tacky was eventually captured by the Maroons and shot. His severed head was taken to Spanish Town and stuck on a pole. His fellow rebels, Fortune and Kingston, were 'hung up alive in irons on a gibbet' in the centre of Kingston. Fortune lived for seven days; Kingston for nine. Some 400 rebels were shot; others were burned to death over a slow fire; many committed suicide. Long concluded that 'such exercises in frightfulness proved of doubtful value'.

A further 500 had their death sentences commuted, and were shipped to Britain's prison island of Roatán, one of the Bay Islands off the northern coast of Honduras.[5] Among those sentenced to exile was Queen Cubah, but she persuaded the ship's captain to leave her behind in Jamaica. She was eventually recaptured and executed.

Tacky's rebellion lasted for so long that it received newspaper coverage in Boston. It was also talked about in London, and sparked off the publication there of a pamphlet called 'Two Dialogues on the Man-Trade'. Its author, J. Philmore, an otherwise unknown eighteenth-century pamphleteer, supported the slaves' rebellion – in order that they might 'deliver themselves out of the miserable slavery they are in'. In an outspoken statement, revolutionary for the times, Philmore declared, 'all the black men now in our plantations, who are by unjust force deprived of their liberty and held in slavery . . . may lawfully repel that force with force and . . . destroy their oppressors'.[6]

Philmore went further, claiming that it was 'the duty of others, white as well as black, to assist those miserable creatures . . . in their attempts to deliver themselves out of slavery, and to rescue them out of the hands of their cruel tyrants'. Tacky's rebellion, and this subsequent appeal to whites for revolutionary solidarity with the slaves, was to feed into the anti-slavery movement of the

eighteenth century that eventually secured an end to the slave trade within the British Empire in 1807.

A further rebellion of the Coromantin slaves took place in Jamaica in November 1765, organised by Blackwall, a survivor of the 1760 revolt. Put on trial at that time, he was acquitted for lack of evidence. On this later occasion, the slaves 'hoped to find the white people off their guard', wrote Edward Long in his history, 'and they had full confidence that, by their precautions and their secrecy, they should carry all before them and make amends for their former disappointment'.[7]

Following a plan similar to that of 1760, Blackwall organised a group of Coromantin slaves on the Whitehall estate, freshly arrived from the Gold Coast. That Christmas, they planned to stage revolts at seventeen estates. The aim, as Long described it, was 'to slaughter, or force the white inhabitants to take refuge on board the ships'. The slaves then planned 'to divide the conquered country with the Maroons, who, they alleged, had made choice of the woody uncultivated parts, as being most convenient for their hog-hunting'. The ambition of the slaves was to 'enjoy all the remainder, with the cattle and the sheep, and live like gentlemen'.

Unfortunately for the rebels, bonfires at the Whitehall estate were lit prematurely. Quamin, one of their number, was impetuous and 'would not wait the appointed time'. The plantation was seized for a while, but the slaves were checked at a neighbouring estate by the planters' militia. Some thirteen rebels were executed, and thirty-three were transported to Roatán island.

A further rebellion broke out the following year. Thirty-three Coromantins 'suddenly rose and, in the space of an hour, murdered and wounded no less than 19 white persons'. The slaves were soon defeated; some were killed on the spot, and others executed later or sent to Roatán. Yet they kept up the pressure, both in Jamaica and elsewhere in the Caribbean, as a new phase of slave resistance began.[8]

A rebellion on the British island of St Vincent some years later, in March 1772, was so serious that two British battalions had to be sent there from the North American colonies. A long-smouldering resistance movement by Black Caribs, who had organised themselves to oppose white settlement on the island, was led by Joseph Chatoyer.

The Black Caribs, like the Maroons elsewhere, were descendants of the indigenous inhabitants of the island who had intermarried with runaway and shipwrecked slaves. Their situation paralleled that of other British islands in the Caribbean, notably Jamaica and Dominica, which had significant Maroon populations who were neither white settlers from Europe nor black slaves from

Africa. The Caribs of St Vincent saw themselves as the indigenous owners of the island: they had never accepted the sovereignty of the French, nor, later, of the British.[9]

The British had acquired St Vincent from the French at the Paris peace conference of 1763. The acquisition had proved a mixed blessing: the Atlantic side of the island was occupied by 10,000 Black Caribs, while the Caribbean side was in the hands of 5,000 French settlers, originally from Martinique, who ran sugar plantations with slave labour. The British brought in fresh settlers from Britain, and planned to extend new plantations into Black Carib territory, the most fertile part of the island.

The large tracts occupied by the Black Caribs, effectively a free territory in the hills, were an irritant to the plantation owners and a significant attraction for the slaves, providing a safe haven for runaways and an attractive model for an alternative society. The British had begun building a road into the Carib half of the island in 1771, and surveyors, guarded by forty soldiers, were sent up into the hills. The plan was to survey and sell the Carib land and to place the Caribs in 'reserves'.

Armed Carib bands organised by Joseph Chatoyer were initially successful in halting the surveyors' work, and early in 1772 Chatoyer came with forty Carib chiefs to a meeting called by Sir William Young, the British Commissioner. Negotiations took place, but Young found the Caribs to be 'in a fixed resolution not to consent to our settling any part of the country claimed by them'.[10] Faced with a negotiating deadlock, the plantation owners demanded that more extreme measures should be taken against the Caribs. They should be expelled by force and sent to 'any unoccupied tract of 10,000 acres' in Africa, 'or to some desert island adjacent thereto'.[11]

Young and the plantation owners needed reinforcements to crush the Black Caribs, and two battalions arrived from North America in March. Chatoyer's followers held out for some months, but, facing defeat and a choice between extermination or exile, they abandoned their resistance war a year later, in February 1773.

Concern in Britain over events in the Caribbean had grown since the days of Tacky's Jamaican slave rebellion, and Chatoyer's Caribs now secured vocal support in the parliament in London. They were 'fighting for liberty', declared Colonel Isaac Barre MP in December 1772, 'and every English heart must applaud them'. Granville Sharpe, the philanthropic radical, wrote to the Earl of Dartmouth, the colonial secretary, pointing out that 'even a victory in so bad a cause will load the British government with indelible shame and dishonour'.

Fresh negotiations took place, and Chatoyer signed a treaty that allowed the Caribs to remain in occupation of the northern third of the island. Yet he remained distrustful, well aware that the plantation owners would never settle

for less than the eventual destruction of the Caribs. After a brief period between 1779 and 1784, when the island again fell under French control, Chatoyer reignited his resistance against the returning British in 1785, and again in 1791; but the settlers eventually achieved their aim. The Black Caribs were defeated after Chatoyer's death, and the survivors were expelled to Roatán island, where a handful of their descendants remain to this day.

Two decades passed before the future of slavery began to interest political opinion in Britain, where most people shared the opinion of Adam Smith, delivered in a lecture in 1763, that 'slavery . . . has hardly any possibility of being abolished'. Smith explained that slavery 'has been universall in the beginnings of society, and the love of dominion and authority over others will probably make it perpetuall'.[12] Famed for his economic perspicacity, Smith was less far-sighted on this occasion.