CHAPTER 38

Slave Rebellions in the Caribbean Hasten the End of Slavery

In Christmas week in 1831, slaves in Jamaica organised a strike that swiftly developed into the largest rebellion the island had ever seen. The slaves were convinced that the British king had granted their freedom, and they were led to believe that a new era would start in the New Year. Their plan was to refuse to return to the sugar plantations after the Christmas holiday. 'We have worked enough already', a slave told a missionary who argued with him not to stay away from work. 'The life we lead is . . . the life of a dog. We won't be slaves no more; we won't lift hoe no more; we won't take flog no more. We free now; no more slaves again.'[1]

The strike was chiefly due to the work of Sam Sharpe, a black slave who worked as a domestic servant in Montego Bay. Sometimes called 'Daddy Sharpe', he was well-known as an impassioned Baptist deacon and preacher. The Reverend Henry Bleby, a Wesleyan missionary, described him as the most remarkable and intelligent slave he had ever come across.[2] Sharpe's involvement led the whites to remember the rebellion as the 'Baptist War'.

More than 20,000 slaves took part in this final revolt, the last of the almost continuous slave uprisings within the Empire since the successful revolution in Haiti in 1791. The cumulative effect of these rebellions, and the shock of the final explosion in Jamaica, obliged a reluctant British government to abolish slavery altogether. Its formal ending came two years later, in August 1833.[3]

Simmerings of slave unrest had erupted in Jamaica during the previous decade, and in the 1830s a new generation of impatient slave rebels sprang up elsewhere in the Caribbean.[4] In Jamaica the slaves secretly formed a 'Black Regiment', commanded by a 'Colonel Johnson', seemingly with the hope of defeating the island's meagre armed forces in a direct confrontation.

The rebellion that broke out over Christmas 1831 had started with the familiar incendiary pattern. The great house and sugar works at Kensington Estate, in the parish of St James, were set ablaze on the evening of 27 December, and other plantation houses in the neighbourhood were soon on fire. Looking out from his house in the parish the next day, the Reverend George Blyth counted sixteen incendiary fires.

The whites had had some inkling of what was coming, and might reasonably have been more prepared, but the rebellion lasted for an unprecedented

two weeks. Slaves on an estate near Montego Bay had been provoked into showing their hand early in the week before Christmas. An officer, Colonel James Grignon, had ordered a woman slave to be whipped, and several slaves protested vigorously. When police arrived to discipline the offenders, 'the whole body of slaves on the plantation resisted the constables, menacing them with their cutlasses'. The slaves seized the constables' pistols and disappeared into the woods.

The slaves now feared that the whites might take the law into their own hands if they did not act first. Some said that Colonel Grignon and his friends were planning to take out the slave men and 'shoot them like pigeons', while keeping slave women and children in slavery.

The various military encounters of the rebellion have been detailed by Mary Turner in her book, *Slaves and Missionaries*.[5] The military core of the rebellion, the Black Regiment, had some 150 slaves, with fifty guns among them. They were assisted by slaves recruited from the surrounding estates, commanded by 'Colonel Johnson' from the Retrieve estate. On 28 December, at the Old Montpelier estate, they confronted the island's white militia that advanced from their barracks at Shettlewood.

'Colonel Johnson' was killed in the first clash, but a new leader, Colonel Robert Gardner from the Greenwich estate, took over; he forced the militia to retreat to Montego Bay. 'Elated with success, the slaves carried rebellion into the hills, rousing support, burning properties, and setting off a train of fires through the Great River Valley in Westmoreland and St Elizabeth. The country between Montego Bay, Lucea, and Savanna-la-Mar was in rebel hands.'[6]

The Greenwich estate had long been a centre of Native Baptist preaching. It was now to be one of the headquarters of the rebellion:

> From Greenwich a sketchy organisation held sway over the surrounding country. On rebel estates slaves were organised into companies, each responsible for guarding its boundaries and holding allegiance to Gardner at Greenwich . . . Their work was supplemented by self-appointed leaders who organised their own estates, or roamed the country collecting recruits to resist the whites, destroying property, proclaiming freedom, and blocking roads against the military.[7]

The white plantation-owners were genuinely terrified. The moment they had been dreading for more than half a century had arrived. Some of their worst fears were being realised. Some called for bloodhounds to be brought over from Cuba, as had happened during the Maroon war of 1795. Others demanded the imposition of martial law, and this was proclaimed on 30 December. General Sir Willoughby Cotton,[8] the British commander-in-chief, established his headquarters at Montego Bay, and the slaves received a blunt message from him on 2

January 1832. They were told that the notion that the British king had ordered their freedom was wholly without foundation. Resistance was folly, the general said, but mercy would be shown to all except the ringleaders. They would be singled out for punishment, and a reward of $300 was offered for the capture of four of them: Colonel Johnson, Colonel Gardner, Captain Dove and Samuel Sharpe.

During January, scattered groups of slaves were slowly corralled in the hills by General Cotton's forces. They tried to persuade the Maroons to join them, but without success. Resistance was eventually crushed, and with their military defeat the slaves faced a brutal campaign of repression by the settler regime.

Martial law was extended for a further month, and captured prisoners were executed without trial. In the weeks before 4 February, ninety-four rebel slaves were hanged in Montego Bay, and twenty-five were shot or hanged in Falmouth. Each day some fifteen to twenty slave prisoners were flogged.[9] Some of those present noted the courageous bearing of those destined for execution. They walked to the scaffold 'calm and undismayed . . . as if they had been proceeding to their daily toil . . . With the dignified bearing of men untroubled as to the justice of their cause, they yielded themselves to their doom.'[10] Samuel Sharpe, the Baptist preacher, was among those captured and hanged.

More than 300 slaves were killed during the fighting, and the final toll was much higher. A further 300 were executed in the immediate aftermath of the rebellion's collapse, and trials continued over the next two years. More than 140 of those indicted for 'murder, rebellion, arson, etc.' were shipped off to the Empire's convict settlements in New South Wales.[11] It was a long journey – first to Britain, and then on to Australia. British colonialism had an unusual capacity to disrupt people's lives by shipping them around the globe. Slaves seized in Africa and taken to the West Indies might subsequently find themselves taken, via Britain, to Australia.

The panicking white settlers suffered rather less than they had feared. Only fourteen of them were killed during the rebellion. Yet the whites still wanted revenge. In February, as the gibbets worked overtime in Falmouth and Montego Bay, white mobs took out their anger on the Christian chapels which they believed had nurtured the rebellion. The mob at Montego Bay was a cross-section of white society: book-keepers and overseers joined hands with lawyers and landowners; some of them were magistrates. Chapels were destroyed all over the island.

The planters were seriously affected in their pockets, and the government in London lent them £200,000 to re-establish their businesses. The economic cost of the uprising was estimated at over £1 million, and things would soon get worse. The effect of the rebellion was to speed up the end of slavery, decreed in 1833. Many of the settlers could not accept this diktat from London. When

a new governor, Constantine Henry Philips, the Earl of Mulgrave, arrived that year, his first task was to crush a mutiny by the officers of the white militia. His second was to order that the heads of executed slaves should be removed from poles at the entrance to sugar estates; he complained about 'the revolting nature of such a spectacle'.

Although slavery had been declared illegal in the British Empire, and although the slave trade had long been formally abolished, the seizure of Africans for the armed forces from slave ships captured in the Atlantic still continued. Desperate for recruits to serve in their armies in the West Indies, the British would enrol them into their West Indian regiments. In September 1836, 112 potential soldiers were recruited in this way; in January 1837, 109; and in May, from two ships, 205. Over a period of eight months, the First West India Regiment, based at Trinidad, received more than 400 not-very-willing African recruits.

'The formality of asking these men whether they were willing to serve was never gone through', wrote A. B. Ellis, an historian of the regiment, in 1885.[12] 'Many of them did so unwillingly.' Ellis justified the practice on the grounds that 'they were all savages in the strictest sense of the word, entirely unacquainted with civilisation, and with no knowledge of the English language.'

Many slave soldiers recruited in this way were not loth to mutiny, and on 18 June 1837, at Trinidad's San Josef barracks, outside Port of Spain, 300 black soldiers took this course, mostly fresh recruits to the First West India Regiment. Their mutiny was organised by an African chief called Daaga, also known as Donald Stewart. The mutineers, according to the regimental account of the mutiny, were mostly Popos, Longos and Ibos, with a few of the Yoruba that Daaga had himself recruited. The citizens around the barracks were kept awake that night by the sound of the mutineers singing the war chant of the Popos:

> Dangkarree,
> Au fey
> Oluu werrei
> Au lay.
> Come to plunder, come to slay,
> We are ready to obey.

Daaga was not himself a slave, but a slaver. His story was unusual. At home on the Nigerian coast, he had collected a number of Yoruba to sell, and had delivered them to a Portuguese slaving ship. Once on board, the Portuguese crew had seized him to add to their cargo. Subsequently, during the Atlantic crossing, the Portuguese ship was captured by a British cruiser. Daaga and the

slaves were taken back to the African coast, landed at Sierra Leone, and recruited into the First West India Regiment. They were then sent over to Trinidad.

No favours were done to a captured slave by turning him into a soldier, argued Edward Joseph, a Trinidad historian of the time. 'Formerly it was most true that a soldier in a black regiment was better off than a slave; but certainly a free African in the West Indies now is infinitely in a better situation than a soldier, not only in a pecuniary point of view, but in almost every respect.'[13]

Daaga's mutiny began with the torching of their barrack block and the seizure of the armoury. The mutineers set off into the countryside in the belief that they would be able to walk back to Guinea.[14] They did not get far. Forty were killed by the militia and the rest were rounded up. The three organisers were sentenced to death, and Edward Joseph gave an account of their execution:

> Donald Stewart [Daaga], Maurice Ogston and Edward Coffin were executed on August 16, 1837 at the San Josef barracks. Nothing seemed to have been neglected which could render the execution solemn and impressive . . . The condemned men displayed no unmanly fear. On the contrary, they steadily kept step to the Dead March which the band played . . .

When the provost-marshal cried out 'Ready, Present', Daaga removed the bandage from his eyes, and his deep, metallic voice sounded out in anger: 'The curse of the Holloloo on white men. Do they think that Daaga fears to fix his eyeballs on death?'[15] Contemptuous of his executioners, the Nigerian chief turned his back on them.