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## War, Fire, and Rebellion in Jamaica

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Throughout the year of 1760, repeated uprisings by enslaved people in Jamaica threatened to overthrow the white power structure of the island, presenting one of the most serious threats to the British empire before the American Revolution and influencing transatlantic struggles over slavery. The uprisings began in the northern parish of St Mary, the location of many new plantations, growing the sugarcane that made Jamaica so prosperous for its white planters and so valuable to the empire. By 1761 rebels had killed sixty colonists and damaged properties across parts of northern and western Jamaica. More than 500 black men and women were killed during the fighting or in the bloody aftermath, as whites defeated the rebels and reasserted their own rule. The rebellions were led by Coromantee people, forced across the Atlantic via the Middle Passage from the Akan region of West Africa, and one of those leaders, an enslaved Coromantee man named Tacky, became synonymous with the entire struggle, now popularly known as Tacky's Revolt.

Seven decades later, a new Jamaican uprising took place within a much-changed Atlantic world. This mass protest began in north-west Jamaica at the end of 1831, led by recent converts to the Baptist mission church. The enslaved people who organized and led what later became known as the Baptist War appear to have had one overriding aim—to end slavery. Just like Tacky's Revolt, the Baptist War was a bold political manoeuvre, posing another major threat to the established order. It was probably the largest ever Jamaican slave revolt: the British military officer charged with suppressing it speculated that more than 20,000 enslaved people may have participated in one way or another.<sup>1</sup> Its earliest phase took the character of a mass-strike, although rebels also destroyed crops and buildings on more than 200 rural

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properties and killed fourteen colonists. Just as in the 1760s, the white regime moved quickly to suppress the rebels with brutal violence. An estimated 200 people were killed by the army or militia; a further 344 were later executed for their part in the rebellion. Nonetheless, the rebels of 1831 struck at a time when the future of Jamaica's labour system was already in doubt and metropolitan sympathy for the white slaveholders of the island at a low ebb. As a result, the Jamaican rebels of 1831 helped influence a debate that led to the gradual dismantling of slavery in the British-colonized Caribbean.

The studies under review are the first book-length accounts of these two events: Vincent Brown's *Tacky's Revolt*, focusing on the rebellions of 1760, and Tom Zoellner's *Island on Fire* on the Baptist War of 1831. It is remarkable that books about these important events have not appeared before. Both conflicts are important to the histories of Jamaica, of the British Empire, and of the transatlantic slave system. It is not particularly surprising that they have been ignored by military historians who are inclined, as Brown points out, to focus their attention on 'legitimate' battles between warring nations rather than the battles involving insurgent groups of colonized people that dot the history of British imperialism. But these are forms of conflict that have long been of interest to historians of colonialism and slavery. There are book-length studies of other American slave revolts, including several on the uprisings at Stono (1739) and by Nat Turner (1831) in North America.<sup>2</sup> Gad Heuman's book about the Jamaican Morant Bay rebellion of 1865 appeared in 1994, the same year as Emilia Viotti da Costa published her book about the Demerara slave uprising of 1823—each study covering uprisings that were important watersheds in Caribbean and British colonial history but, arguably, of no greater significance than what happened in Jamaica during 1760 or 1831.<sup>3</sup>

Books about Tacky's Revolt and the Baptist War are therefore long overdue, even though these events are already well-known to historians. Michael Mullen, Michael Craton and, more recently, Trevor Burnard have written good analyses of the revolts of the 1760s, albeit as parts of wider studies of slavery and resistance.<sup>4</sup> Brown, in his longer study, takes things further, and his particular achievements in *Tacky's Revolt* are a detailed analysis of the African background to the conflict, a nuanced treatment of the political cultures of enslaved people, and a far-reaching discussion of how their actions reverberated locally and around the Atlantic region. Scholars have had even more to say about the 1831 uprising, and detailed accounts of its events have been available since the 1960s in journal articles and as parts of books on larger topics. Craton discussed it in his work, and Mary Turner, B.W. Higman, and Richard Burton each sought to explain the rebellion and its causes.<sup>5</sup> The uprising has also loomed large in explanations of British slave emancipation, from William A. Green's account, published in 1976, to more recent work by Thomas Holt and Catherine Hall and in Michael Taylor's excellent new analysis.<sup>6</sup> Those scholarly treatments of the plans and motives that lay behind the Baptist War, and of its

transatlantic political impact, remain the most detailed explanations on offer, notwithstanding Zoellner's new narrative.

The choice of *Tacky's Revolt* as the title for Brown's book is curious, because one of Brown's central and most convincing arguments is that what started in St Mary in 1760 is better referred to as the Jamaican 'Coromantee War'. Several uprisings, also led by Coromantee people, followed the initial uprising led by Tacky, who was killed in April, soon after the start of the revolt. Whites later learned of suspected plots in the town of Kingston and in various rural parishes. Major uprisings broke out in the western parish of Westmoreland between May and July, and from September a rebel named Simon led a group of insurgents on a drawn-out campaign through the countryside of south-western Jamaica. As Brown argues, Tacky's uprising of 1760 'was only one conflict within a larger war, an unfolding uprising itself encompassed by wars within wars' (163).

One of the strengths of Brown's work is to present these events as parts of a wider Atlantic scene, for instance by outlining how Jamaica's Coromantee War reshaped the transatlantic slave system. Immediate local reverberations saw the white colonial elite try to strengthen Jamaican slavery by funding a stronger garrison of white troops and by further bolstering white privileges, placing tighter legal restrictions on enslaved people and on free people of colour. The revolt also worried elites further afield, influencing British government efforts to exert more careful control over their transatlantic empire (which led, ultimately, to the American Revolution), encouraging settlers in some American colonies to question whether such a volatile system as slavery was congenial to peaceful social order and, in some instances, even to empathize with the brave, martyred leaders of the revolts. Brown makes a compelling case for seeing the Coromantee War as a pivotal moment in Atlantic history, although some of his conclusions elaborate other scholars' observations about the local and transatlantic impact of the Jamaican rebellions.

Brown's attention to the African contexts of the Coromantee War is more novel. Early chapters of *Tacky's Revolt* focus on political transformations and warfare in West Africa and on how enslaved Africans might have transposed their experiences and knowledge when forced across the Atlantic and into plantation Jamaica. For instance, Brown explores the various routes—the 'plausible pathways'—that might have carried a man like Apongo, also known as Wager, from West Africa to Jamaica, where he brought African experience of military leadership to bear in a conflict against white slaveholders (43). Brown's biographical tracing of Apongo—once treated as an honoured guest in Africa by a white man whom he was to re-encounter in Jamaica, and later publically tortured to death for his alleged leadership of the Westmoreland uprising in 1760—vividly illuminates his claim that slavery was a constant state of war in which conflict was often 'intensely personal' (46).

Brown ably illuminates the fear-ridden world of Jamaican whites, who crushed the rebellion with countless acts of brutality, intended as 'exemplary warnings' to

any would-be insurgent (156), and who, though 'willing to recognize the threat posed by black people', were nonetheless 'unwilling to concede that they were genuine political actors' (245). Those prejudices produced the archival record, but Brown's skilful reading of that archive—along and against its biased grain—allows him to present enslaved people as a genuine, sophisticated, but disunited political force. His analysis takes us beyond a simple account of slaves versus masters to focus also on the debates and struggles that divided enslaved people; as he argues, 'in Jamaica, the course of political struggle was determined more by political divisions among slaves, among Africans, and even among Coromantees than by their commonalities' (106). Some rebels appear to have wanted to retreat to the interior; others aimed for access to more fertile coastal land and to the sea. Some of those enslaved people who opposed the rebellion likely dreaded the chaos it might bring, or otherwise feared the prospect of a new Coromantee-dominated society.

The Jamaican political world of the 1760s had become something very different by 1831. By that time, a transatlantic debate about emancipation had transformed the politics of slavery and of rebellion. Zoellner's book about the Baptist War takes us into that political landscape, offering a story about war and revolt that is frequently quite distinct from the one told by Brown. In Zoellner's description, rebellions by enslaved people were the results of 'the pent-up rage' of people whose numerical advantage over the white minority, access to fire and sharp tools, and secretive plotting created a 'combustible atmosphere'; they were 'a pending eruption everyone could sense was in the offing' and that periodically 'passed through Jamaica like tropical storms' (71-2). Zoellner often resorts to such tropes. The leaders of the 1831 uprising, he asserts, had hoped for a peaceful protest but watched it 'gyrate out of control and erupt into an inferno' (4). He writes that, as enslaved rebels in north-west Jamaica lit fires from one sugar plantation to the next (acting as beacons to co-conspirators), it was 'as if the universe itself was answering the first call of flames and setting free some beautiful and terrifying spirit that could not be called back' (113). At best, this sensationalism is distracting. At worst it presents the rebellion as an exotic and mysterious force of nature, rather than a political event that took place as it did because of the ideas, planning, organization, and disagreements of enslaved people.

*Island on Fire* is a very different sort of book to *Tacky's Revolt*. Zoellner is a popular author, who has written previously about diamonds, uranium, rail travel, modern American culture, and the Rwandan genocide. His book is not aimed at a specialist readership. Instead, it presents a narrative of the events of the Jamaican rebellion of 1831 within a much larger story of British slavery and abolition from the sixteenth century to the nineteenth. This scene-setting helps to keep things accessible for a popular audience, and narration of well-trodden background takes up much of the book. At times it is flippantly impressionistic. Zoellner only briefly describes the Coromantee

rebellions of 1760, calling them ‘scattered uprisings’, inspired by ‘Tacky’s bravado’ (73). The anachronistic caricature of Jamaican slavery that emerges pays little detailed attention to the extensive literature, old and new, that has helped us understand either the complexities of colonial society or the transformations to slavery in Jamaica that helped ensure that the uprising of 1831 was very different to Tacky’s rebellion of 1760.

Zoellner’s primary sources are drawn from some familiar archival collections, including correspondence between Jamaican Governors and the Colonial Office, but they come principally from published accounts by white witnesses of the rebellion, including militiamen, slaveholders, and missionaries. Some of those narratives were published at the time, but several were later reminiscences, and many were written with a clear political purpose in mind: for instance, to exaggerate the violence of the rebellion to garner sympathy for its white ‘victims’ (a proslavery manoeuvre) or to expose the violent reactions of local white slaveholders while presenting enslaved people as misguided martyrs or innocent victims (narratives favoured by abolitionists). The book begins with the reactions of fearful whites in Montego Bay, as they observed fires lit by the rebels spreading through the surrounding countryside. Zoellner later comments that those beacons signalled something ‘orgiastic and ungovernable’ (112), the beginning of a series of ‘kinetic events’ that added up to ‘five weeks of chaos’ (168), during which colonists struggled to come to terms with ‘the trauma convulsing the island’ (144). To understand the events of those five weeks, when self-emancipated rebels challenged the existing colonial order of things in Jamaica, it is, of course, necessary to describe such fears. However, rather than analysing the biased perspectives and emotional styles of his sources, Zoellner tends, instead, to allow them to take control.

Eyewitness accounts colour parts of Zoellner’s prose, and those passages sit in awkward contrast with his clear sympathy for enslaved rebels and recognition of their achievements. He describes the oppression of enslaved people at the hands of their brutal masters and the indiscriminate violence meted out against defeated rebels by white militiamen. Much of the discussion of the 1831 uprising in *Island on Fire* focuses on the contested image of the rebel leader, Samuel Sharpe, including discussion of how we might try to learn about such historical figures despite archival bias. The epilogue shows how the rebellion is remembered in modern Jamaica, ending with a description of a ceremony that Zoellner attended in 2017 celebrating Sharpe, who is now commemorated as a Jamaican National Hero. The ceremony concluded with a bonfire at Kensington Pen, site of one of the beacons that signalled the 1831 uprising, and the words ‘burn it down!’ called as a chorus by the crowd. As Zoellner’s narration illustrates, for that particular modern Jamaican group, the fires that spread through their district nearly 200 years earlier were beacons not of traumatic chaos but of hope.

The fires of 1831 were lit by men and women who hoped for a radical transformation of the world in which they were forced to live. This was excruciating

for Jamaican slaveholders to witness, impossible for abolitionists to understand, and we are still trying to comprehend it. The political aspirations of enslaved people were articulated through an underground political culture that, by 1831, was part of a wider transatlantic struggle over slavery. And yet the suppression of the Jamaican uprising shows that the British empire was still unwilling to see black people as having a legitimate political voice. If their revolt ended slavery in the empire, therefore, it did so only indirectly, not because decision-makers in London shared the rebels' hopes but because they were confused and frightened by their actions. The events caused by Sharpe and other rebels provoked an anxiety that unpredictable violent uprisings by enslaved people would proliferate in the Caribbean so long as slavery continued, and so render British colonies unstable. As Eric Williams put it in 1944, 'the alternatives were clear: emancipation from above, or emancipation from below', and that choice commingled with others to produce British slave emancipation.<sup>7</sup> What followed was legislation that ended slavery but that otherwise took the political aims of enslaved people into account only to thwart them. Enslaved people, who had hoped to gain land of their own and the autonomy to farm it for themselves, received nothing of the sort. Instead, a period of 'apprenticeship' forced them to continue working for their oppressors for another four years, while slaveholders received cash compensation from the government in exchange for forfeiting their human 'property'.

As Brown writes, the 'small dirty wars' fought by the British empire against enslaved rebels 'epitomized the relationship between trade, labor, and imperial power' (11). During the 1830s, ordinary black Jamaicans challenged the existing order of things in British-colonized Jamaica. Their challenge was different from that of the Coromantee War, seven decades earlier, in part because their political frame of reference had shifted, building now not on recent experiences of fighting and negotiating in Africa but, instead, on the political knowledge of those rooted in the Caribbean. But the story of the Baptist War bears out Brown's assertion: in the new age of abolitionism, the imperial state was still not prepared to deal directly with black labourers, favouring a resolution to the problem of slavery that preserved the prevailing social, economic, and racial order of things in the colonies. These two books help us understand those continuities and changes. For scholars of slavery and abolition, Brown's book is the more significant: a finely crafted account of the micro and macro politics of slave resistance that will inform work in this field for some time to come. But in distinct ways, both these studies—of war and of fire—will help their readers make new sense of the politics of resisting slavery from below.

## Notes

1. 'Report from House of Assembly, Jamaica, on Injury sustained during recent Rebellion' (evidence of Sir Willoughby Cotton), Parliamentary Papers, House of Commons, 1831–32, XLVII (561), p. 28.



2. Examples include Kenneth S. Greenberg (ed.) *Nat Turner: A Slave Rebellion in History and Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Patrick H. Breen, *The Land Shall be Deluged in Blood: A New History of the Nat Turner Revolt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Mark M. Smith (ed.), *Stono: Documenting and Interpreting a Southern Slave Revolt* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2005); Peter Charles Hoffer, *Cry Liberty: The Great Stono River Slave Rebellion of 1739* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).
3. Gad J. Heuman, 'The Killing Time': *The Morant Bay Rebellion in Jamaica* (London: Macmillan, 1994); Emilia Viotti da Costa, *Crowns of Glory, Tears of Blood: The Demerara Slave Rebellion of 1823* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
4. Michael Mullin, *Africa in America: Slave Acculturation and Resistance in the American South and the British Caribbean, 1736–1831* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992); Michael Craton, *Testing the Chains: Resistance to Slavery in the British West Indies* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982); Trevor Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire: Thomas Thistlewood and his Slaves in the Anglo-Jamaican World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Idem, *Jamaica and the Age of Revolution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020).
5. Craton, *Testing*; Idem, 'Proto-Peasant Revolts? The Late Slave Rebellions in the British West Indies, 1816–1832', *Past & Present* 85, no. 1 (1979): 99–125; Mary Reckord (née Turner), 'The Jamaica Slave Rebellion of 1831', *Past & Present* 40, no. 1 (1968): 108–25; Mary Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries: The Disintegration of Jamaican Slave Society, 1787–1834* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982); B.W. Higman, *Montpelier Jamaica: A Plantation Community in Slavery and Freedom, 1739–1912* (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 1998); Richard D.E. Burton, *Afro-Creole: Power, Opposition, and Play in the Caribbean* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).
6. William A. Green, *British Slave Emancipation: The Sugar Colonies and the Great Experiment, 1830–1865* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1976); Thomas C. Holt, *The Problem of Freedom: Race, Labor, and Politics in Jamaica and Britain, 1832–1938* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992); Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination, 1830–1867* (Cambridge: Polity, 2002); Michael Taylor, *The Interest: How the British Establishment Resisted the Abolition of Slavery* (London: Bodley Head, 2020).
7. Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1944), p.208

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## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).