

THE SLAVE-DRIVERS' WAR: BUSSA AND THE 1816 BARBADOS SLAVE REBELLION

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INTRODUCTION

On Easter Sunday, April 14th, 1816, 189 years after its colonisation by the English, Barbados – the first West Indian island to engage in large scale sugar production based upon the enslavement of thousands of imported Africans – experienced its only slave rebellion. There had been aborted insurrectionary attempts in the earlier years, such as the small scale and localised affairs of 1649 and 1701, and the more general conspiracies of 1675 and 1692, but throughout most of the eighteenth century, a period now seen by many historians of West Indian slave resistance as characterised by endemic conflict in master-slave relations, the society seemed internally more stable and the slaves subdued.

The rebellion was the first of the three slave uprisings that took place in the British West Indies between the abolition of the slave trade in 1807 and general emancipation in 1838, the other two rebellions occurring in Demerara in 1823 and Jamaica in 1831. It has also remained the least documented of the three. Watson's brief analysis was the first of the recent revised interpretations. The earlier primary analysis appeared in Schomburgk's (1848) history of the island. Since Watson, Craton has presented comparative accounts of these rebellions in three different works. As a result of Craton's comprehensive and comparative approach, however, his analyses of the Barbados uprising were not intended primarily to unravel its intricate details. The intentions of this essay are to deepen the analysis, present a wider range of data, and provide firmer empirical support to some of the themes raised by the Craton and Watson narratives.¹

1. K. Watson, *The Civilised Island, Barbados: A Social History, 1750-1816* (Barbados, 1979, Caribbean Graphics) pp. 125-135.
R. Schomburgk, *The History of Barbados* (London, 1848, 1971 ed. Frank Cass) pp. 393-400.
M. Craton, 'The Passion to Exist: Slave Rebellion in the the British West Indies, 1650-1832' *Journal of Caribbean History* vol. 13, 1980, pp. 1-20.
– 'Proto-Peasant Revolts? The Late Slave Rebellions in the British West Indies, 1816-1832' *Past and Present*, No. 85, 1981, pp. 99-125.
– *Testing the Chains: Resistance to Slavery in the British West Indies* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1982) pp. 254-267.
See also, J. Handler, 'Slave Revolt, and Conspiracies in Seventeenth Century Barbados' *New West Indian Guide*, vol. 52, 1982, pp. 5-42.

Central to Craton's analysis is the notion that the three rebellions represented attempts by the slaves to assert some influence on the general abolitionist politics of the time.² In Barbados, April 1816, the political attitude of the rebel slaves was, according to colonel Codd, commandant of the resident imperial troops, that 'the island belonged to them and not to the whitemen whom they proposed to destroy'.³ Yet, few contemporaries believed that rebellion was imminent, or that a revolutionary situation existed on the island.

The rebellion began about 8.30 p.m. in the south-eastern parish of St. Philip. A local newspaper, attempting to illustrate the topographical unsuitability of the area for such an occurrence, stated that this parish was 'the most level and fertile and least laborious, where many of the plantations were so fully stocked with slaves, that they had not sufficient work to keep them constantly employed'.⁴ The African Institute, a pro-abolitionist London based organisation, conducted an investigation of the revolt and supported this view. In its report, the Institute stated that in the first instance, 'Barbados was the very worst field for such an experiment, since in no British colony was success in an attempt to obtain even a short lived freedom by insurrection so hopeless.'⁵ In relation to the St. Philip and neighbouring parishes, the report stated: 'there are no mountains, no fastnesses, no forest. European foot, and even horse, can traverse it in all directions,' hence the obvious military advantage of the planters' armed forces in the field.⁶

Regional topography, however, while being a most important factor in the dynamics of armed rebellion, was overridden, according to the Institute, by social forces specific to Barbadian society during this period of the legislative reform of West Indian master-slave relations. The Institute noted that the Barbadian planters for over two decades 'sullenly refused to accept legislative reforms, and their 17th century slave code remained unaltered'.⁷ In addition, the Institute noted, 'in no part of the British dominions did this unhappy state of society exist in a more unmitigated form than in this island.'⁸ The rebellion, therefore, according to the Institute, was directly related to the planters' refusal to take meaningful legislative actions ameliorative of the slaves' conditions. In this sense, it was the planters' socio-political rigidity and conservatism in their slave management which resulted in the general rebellious attitudes among the slaves.

From St. Philip, the rebellion quickly spread throughout most of the southern and central parishes of Christ Church, St. John, St. Thomas, St. George and parts of St. Michael. Minor outbreaks of arson (but no skirmishes

2. M. Craton, 'Slave Culture, Resistance and the Achievement of Emancipation in the British West Indies, 1783-1838' in J. Walvin (ed.) *Slavery and British Society 1776-1846* (London, MacMillan, 1982) pp. 100-123.
3. Colonel Codd to Governor Leith, 25 April, 1816, CO 28/85, ff. 11-14.
4. Barbados Mercury and Bridgetown Gazette (B.M.B.G.) Tuesday, September 10th, 1816.
5. *Remarks on the Insurrection in Barbados and the Bill for the Registration of Slaves* (London, 1816) f. 7.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.* f. 4.
8. *Ibid.* f.1.

with the militia) also occurred in the northernmost parish of St. Lucy. No fighting between rebel slaves and the militia forces was reported for the eastern and western parishes of St. Andrew, St. James and St. Peter. In geo-political terms, more than half of the island was engulfed by the insurrection.⁹ The rebellion was short-lived. Within three days it was effectively quashed by a joint offensive of the local militia and imperial troops garrisoned on the island; included among the latter were the black slave soldiers of the 1st West Indian Regiment.¹⁰ Mopping up operations continued during May and June, and martial law, which was imposed about 2.00 a.m. on Monday 15th April, was lifted 89 days later on July 12th.

The death toll by the end of September, when the militia believed that the rebels were finally eradicated, was very unevenly balanced between blacks and whites. Governor Leith's report of April 30th stated in relation to the rebels:

'it is at present impossible with any certainty to state the numbers who have fallen; about 50 however are at present conjectured to be the amount. The number executed under martial law have been about 70, also many prisoners have been tried and still continue to be judged; there being no other mode of ascertaining the nature and extent of the conspiracy and the guilt of individuals.'¹¹

By the 21st of September he had revised his figures to 144 executed under martial law, 70 sentenced to death, and 123 sentenced to transportation.¹² The anonymous author of an account of the insurrection (written most probably in September that year) suggests that the Governor's figures represent a gross underestimation of the total fatalities. The author stated that 'a little short of 1,000' slaves were killed in battle and executed at Law.¹³ Colonel Best, commander of the Christ Church parish militia, stated that his men alone killed 40 rebels in battles during Monday 15th April and the following Tuesday morning. The reason, according to Colonel Best, why many more had to be executed in the field was because 'the numbers not only implicated but actively employed' were great.¹⁴ In addition, Colonel Best stated, many of those tried had to be executed because 'they were all ringleaders.'¹⁵

Only one white militiaman was killed in battle, one Brewster, a private of the St. Philip parish Militia.¹⁶ Several, however, were seriously injured in com-

9. See *The Report from a Select Committee of the House of Assembly Appointed to inquire into the Origins, Cause, and Progress of the Late Insurrection - April 1816* (Barbados, 1818). (Hereafter referred to as *The Report*)
10. *Ibid.* See also, Anon., *An Account of the late Negro Insurrection which took place in the Island of Barbados on Easter Sunday, April 14, 1816*. New York Public Library, Mss. Division (N.Y.P.L.)
11. Governor Leith to Bathhurst, April 30, 1816, CO 28/85, f. 8.
12. Governor Leith to Bathhurst, September 21st, 1816, CO 28/85, f. 36.
13. Anon., *An Account of the late Negro Insurrection, op. cit.*
14. Colonel John Rycroff Best to Abel Dottin, Barbados, 27, April 1816, N.Y.P.L. (The letters by Best are found, bound to the back of John Poyer's *History of Barbados* (1808) in the Mss. Division of the N.Y.P.L. See J. Handler, *A Guide to Source Material for the Study of Barbados History 1627-1834* (Carbondale, South Illinois University Press, 1971) p. 179.
15. *Ibid.*
16. *The Report*, Evidence of Major Oxley, p. 32.

bat, and many elderly white people died of what Mrs. Fenwick, a resident English woman, described as 'fatigue' caused by the rebellion.¹⁷ In addition, during the clashes between slaves and the imperial troops at Bayleys and Golden Grove plantations on the Monday evening, two of the 150 men of the West India Regiment were killed while forming their line to attack.¹⁸ Damage to property was estimated by the Assembly's investigative committee at £175,000. Twenty five percent of the year's sugar cane crop was burnt, as arson was used extensively by the rebels, both as an instrument to undermine the economic base of the planters, as well as to convey logistical signals to their scattered contingents.¹⁹

LEADERSHIP AND ORGANISATION

The rebellion did not proceed according to plan. It broke out three days prematurely. Unlike the 1675 and 1692 aborted attempts, however, it was not deliberately betrayed from within the ranks of the slave community. The premature uprising was an accident, caused, according to the Governor, 'by the intoxication of one of the revolters.'²⁰ This statement was also supported by Colonel Best of the Christ Church militia. No details, however, were given as to how this development occurred. It is not known whether the drunken rebel, either by his direct actions, or through incorrect information relayed to other rebels, initiated the uprising. The Governor, however, concluded his assertion by noting that

'there is every reason to believe that the premature bursting out of the insurrection on the night of the 14th instance . . . instead of the 17th instance, made it more partial than would have been otherwise the case.'²¹

The rebels had organised what seemed to be an islandwide conspiracy to overthrow the planter class and to obtain their freedom. The Governor, the Colonels of militia and the Commandant of the imperial troops were all convinced that this was the case. They denied that the rebellion was intended to be limited in nature, or directed specifically against a section of the island's planter class. Neither was it intended to be simply a collective protest by slaves against the planters, demanding the amelioration of their social and work conditions. Colonel Best stated that the rebels had intended the Monday night to be the time for the beginning of an arsonist attack upon the white community. Canes and

17. Mrs. Fenwick to Mary Hays, September 26, Barbados, 1816, in A.F. Webb, (ed.) *The Fate of the Fenwicks; Letters to Mary Hays 1798-1828* (London, Methuen, 1927) p. 179.
18. Colonel Codd to Governor Leith, 25 April, *op. cit.* See also for a detailed account of the battle at Bayleys Plantation: Extracts from a Private Letter Dated 27th April 1816, St. Anns Garrison, Barbados, CO. 28/85, ff. 22-23.
19. *The Report*, pp. 4-5.
20. Governor Leith to Lord Bathurst, 30 April, 1816, CO. 28/85, f. 9.
21. *Ibid.*

buildings were to be burnt to the ground. During the panic caused by this action, the Tuesday and/or Wednesday was for the 'murder of whitemen' across the island.²² One captured rebel who was tried by a court martial confessed that they had intended the whites to cry 'Water!' on the Monday night, and 'Blood!' on subsequent nights.²³ It was this sequential mixture of arson and warfare that lay at the base of the rebels' military strategy.

Evidence produced by prominent members of the white community suggests that the uprising was sudden and unexpected. Whites generally believed that their slaves, not having attempted any insurrections since the minor aborted Bridgetown affair in 1701, were more prone to running away, withholding their labour in protest, petitioning estate owners, attorneys and managers concerning conditions of work and leisure, than to armed insurrection. Slave owners boasted about the subduing effects upon the slaves of the ameliorations to their social condition implemented continuously since the mid-eighteenth century. They claimed that their slaves were given 'liberties' which planters in the other islands could not dare even to consider.²⁴ The ability of most slaves to travel the island extensively in pursuit of social and economic activity was held up by the planters as proof of the longstanding mildness of race relations and plantation management on the island.²⁵ John Beckles, speaker of the Assembly at the time of the insurrection, confessed that the slave laws did 'wear a most sanguinary complexion' and were a 'disgrace' to the island, but he affirmed that they were rarely applied, and in this sense they were largely 'dead letters'. Furthermore, he argued, the slaves had 'comfortable houses', were 'well fed and clothed', and were well 'taken care of both in sickness and in health', and were 'not over worked.'²⁶

The planters on the eve of the revolt, while recognising an increased level in slave unrest, seemed to have possessed an unshaken confidence in the strength and security of their regime. Robert Haynes, planter-assemblyman, stated his position in a letter dated September 1816 as follows:

'The night of the insurrection I would and did sleep with my chamber door open, and if I had possessed ten thousand pounds in my house I should not have had any more precaution, so well convinced I was of their [slaves'] attachment . . .'²⁷

This attitude seems to have been general throughout the white community. Governor Leith, in awareness of this long held complacency which he had never shared, informed the Secretary for colonies at the end of April:

22. Colonel Best to Abel Dottin, 27 April, *op. cit.*

23. *Ibid.*

24. See W. Dickson, *Mitigation of Slavery* (London, 1814), p. 439.

25. See M. Craton, *Testing the Chains, op cit.*, 254-255.

Also, K. Watson and H. Beckles 'Concessionary Politics: Slave Resistance in Eighteenth Century Barbados', unpublished ms.

26. Minutes of the House of Assembly, January 7, 1817; See also, *Barbados Mercury and Bridgetown Gazette*, March, 30th, 1816.

27. Robert Haynes to Thomas Lane, September 23, 1816, Barbados, Newton Estate Papers, 523/781, Senate House Library, London.

'the planters of Barbados who have flattered themselves that the general good treatment of the slaves would have prevented them resorting to violence to establish an elusion of material right, which by long custom sanctioned by law has been hithertoo refused to be acknowledged, had not any apprehension of such a convulsion.'²⁸

The slaves had been planning the rebellion soon after the House of Assembly discussed and rejected the imperial Registry Bill in November 1815. Watson noted that the decision was made by the rebels in February 1816 that the rising should take place in April that year.²⁹ The alleged primary leader, though this was not stated by the Assembly's investigative committee, was a slave by the name of Bussa (or Bussoe), an African born man, chief driver at Bayleys plantation in St. Philip.³⁰ As yet, no specific evidence has been found to attribute this status to Bussa, though he has remained so identified within the island's folk tradition. Biographical data on Bussa are also unavailable, but certain inductive points may be raised. Firstly, it is of much significance that an African born man should be the prime leader of a predominately creole rebellion. In 1816 at least 92% of the slave population was creole, and all the other leaders of rebel contingents were creole.³¹ Secondly, that an African should have achieved the status of chief driver, suggests that he most probably was not a young man in 1816, since the slave trade was abolished in 1807, and in general it took at least 10 years for Africans to acquire the language and managerial skills, plus their masters' confidence, in order to become the chief slave personnel on estates.

H.A. Vaughan, a local historian, has noted that Bussa met his death in battle ahead of his rebel contingent in St. Philip.³² This point, if it is correct, (Vaughan offers no evidence) suggests that Bussa was not, however, like Cuffee, the 'ancient Gold Coast negro' who was said to be the leader of the 1675 aborted rebellion, and was to the crowned king of Barbados in the traditional Akan regal manner. Cuffee was apparently elected to this status, not because of his military prominence, but as a result of forces within West African political culture which threw up figurehead leaders from the ranks of the wise and elderly.³³ Whatever the reasons, Bussa, by virtue of his socio-political prominence in a predominately creole society, must have been a man who enjoyed the personal respect and confidence of both whites and blacks.

28. Governor Leith to Lord Bathhurst, CO. 28/85, f. 8.
29. See K. Watson, *op cit.*, p. 129. The Select Committee stated in *The Report* that the slaves were engaged in the planning since December.
30. *The Report*, f. 9.
31. The 1817 census of the island recorded that only 7% of the black population was African born. Barbados Archives.
32. H.A. Vaughan, 'Joseph Pitt Washington Francklyn, 1782-1816, Part 3' *The Democrat*, Friday, January 8th, 1971.
33. The Committee which investigated the 1675 aborted revolt described Cuffee, the alleged leader, as 'an Ancient Gold Coast slave'. See H. McD. Beckles, 'Rebels without Heroes: Slave Politics in Seventeenth Century Barbados'. in *The Journal of Caribbean History*, vol. 19. No. 2, 1983.

Data supplied by rebels who confessed during their trials suggest a decentralised form of leadership. Each plantation actively involved in the insurrection threw up a rebel group which had one dominant leader. These leaders, all male slaves, met frequently to discuss logistics and strategy. Jackey, a creole slave, head driver at Simmon's plantation in St. Philip, was chiefly responsible for the overall coordination of these groups and convened the meetings, most of which took place on his plantation. The Assembly's report stated that he frequently invited the leaders of rebel contingents from plantations in St. Philip, such as Gittens, Bydemill, Nightengale, Congor Road and Sunberry to his home in order to coordinate the details of the insurrection. John, a slave and ranger at Simmons plantation, was Jackey's chief messenger. According to the Report, John frequently took messages to rebel groups throughout the southern and central parts of the island, and also kept Bussa at Bayleys plantation informed.³⁴ James Bowland, a literate slave belonging to the River plantation in St. Philip, confessed that John had been in frequent touch with Bussa since March, and that he often took instruction to rebel groups in all the 'different parishes'.³⁵ John seems to have believed that some measure of force was necessary in recruitment. During one of his visits to Bayleys plantation he threatened the slaves there that if they did not join in setting fire to the estate they (the other leaders) were determined to burn down all their houses, as well as those of other slaves on plantations that did not join the rebellion.³⁶

At Bayleys plantation the chief organisers were Bussa, King Wiltshire, Dick Bailey, Johnny the Standard Bearer, and Johnny Cooper. At Simmons plantation, they were Jackey, John, and Nanny Grigg. In addition to these individuals, the politicisation of the field slaves and the general spreading of insurrectionist propaganda were done by three literate free-coloured men, Cain Davis, Roach, and Richard Sarjeant. Davis held meetings with slaves on several plantations, such as River and Bayleys in St. Philip, and Sturges in St. Thomas. He propagated the view among slaves in these southern and central parishes that local planters were opposing metropolitan efforts to have them freed, and that if they wanted freedom 'they must fight for it.'³⁷ Sarjeant was also reported to have mobilised slaves in the central parishes using the same kind of information and techniques as Davis.

A small number of literate slaves was also reported to have recruited many slaves in a similar manner, stating that they had obtained their information from English newspapers. The most prominent of these literate slaves was Ben James, who belonged to Ayshford plantation in St. Thomas. Evidence of James' political activities is to be found in the Assembly's Report. William, a slave, and chief driver at Sturges plantation in St. Thomas, and Jack Groom, a slave, and driver at Haynesfield in St. John, both confessed to being drawn into the

34. These data are taken from the evidence of slaves who confessed to the Select Committee investigating the Rebellion. See the evidence of Daniel, Cuffee Ned, Robert, and James Bowland, in *The Report*.

35. *The Report*, f. 34.

36. *Ibid.*

37. *Ibid.*, f. 27.

rebellion after discussions with James, who frequently visited Bridgetown on Saturdays, returning with the latest information on the progress of the abolitionist movement in England.³⁸ These politicising agents had established, by April 1816, a network of committed slaves, mostly plantation officers such as drivers and tradesmen, throughout the southern and central parishes of the island. The critical role of this small number of literate slaves and free-coloured men who fomented anti-slavery sentiments was also recognised by the militia. Conrad Adams Howell, Lt. Colonel of the St. Michael Royal Regiment of Militia, after presiding over Court Martial for seven weeks, trying 150 slaves and the 4 free-coloured men, concluded his analysis of the rebellion by stating that it was the critical activity of these 'better informed' individuals which accounted for the extensive nature of the rebellion.³⁹

These men were not acting independently, but were in consultation with Jackey through messages taken by John. For example, in early April, Jackey sent a message to one of these free men 'who could read and write', to let the slaves on his plantation know what assistance they were to give in effecting the rebellion.⁴⁰ This particular freeman lived at the River plantation. In the Assembly report it is noted that he held frequent talks with Jackey. While these men were laying the ground-work for rebellion under Jackey's coordination, groups of rebels were also being organised into plantation contingents for the defeat of the local militia.

The final planning of the rebellion took place at the River plantation on Good Friday night, April 12th, under the cover of a dance.⁴¹ At this dance were Jackey, Bussa, Davis, Johnny Cooper and many of the other organisers.⁴² One of the decisions taken was that Joseph Pitt Washington Francklyn, a free coloured man, the illegitimate mulatto son of Joseph Bayley Francklyn, small planter and Justice of the Peace (owner of the small plantation by the name of Vinyard in St. Philip) was to be made Governor of this island in the revolutionary government.⁴³

On the morning of Easter Sunday, Jackey had instructed Mingo, the ranger at Bydemill plantation, to assemble his men and to rendezvous at Simmons for instructions. Mingo was also instructed to take a message to John Barnes, driver at Gittens plantation, also in St. Philip, to meet him with his contingent below his garden at Bydemill before proceeding to Simmons.⁴⁴ By 8.30 p.m. that day, the rebellion broke out. Canes were being burnt throughout most of St. Philip, signalling prematurely to rebels in the central and southern parishes that the rebellion had begun.

38. *Ibid.* ff. 36-37.

39. *Ibid.* f. 57.

40. *Ibid.* f. 29.

41. *Ibid.* f. 26.

42. *Ibid.*

43. *Ibid.* f. 9.

44. These data are also taken from the evidence supplied in *The Report*.

Principal Slave Organisers of the 1816 Barbados Rebellion

<i>Name</i>	<i>Origins</i>	<i>Sex</i>	<i>Plantation</i>	<i>Occupation</i>
Bussa	African	M	Bayleys	Driver
King Wiltshire	Creole (C)	M	"	Carpenter
Dick Bailey	C	M	"	Mason
Johnny	C	M	"	Standard bearer
Johnny Cooper	C	M	"	Cooper
John Ranger	C	M	"	Driver
Charles	C	M	Sandfords	Driver
Dainty	C	M	Mapps	?
Davy	C	M	Palmers	?
William	C	M	Sturges	Driver
Sandy Waterman	C	M	Fisherpond	Driver
Nanny Grigg	C	F	Simmons	Domestic
Jackey	C	M	"	Driver
John	C	M	"	Driver
Mingo	C	M	Byde Mill	Driver
Will	C	M	Nightengale	Driver
John Barnes	C	M	Gittens	Driver
King William	C	M	Sunberry	Driver
Will Green	C	M	Congor Road	Driver
Prince William	C	M	Grove	Driver
Toby	C	M	Chapel	Driver
Little Sambo	C	M	Adventure	?

ARMED CONFRONTATION

The image that emerges from the nature of troops and militia mobilization is not supportive of the planters' assertion that their internal defence system was very efficient. News of the rebellion did not reach Bridgetown and the St. Anns Garrison, fifteen miles away, until 1.30-2.00 a.m. on Monday. Colonel J.P. Mayers had travelled from Christ Church to inform Colonel Codd, commandant of the imperial troops at the St. Anns Garrison, of the developments. Governor Leith was off the island, and President Spooner was responsible for calling out the troops and the militia, as well as the declaration of martial law. Colonel Codd was informed that 'a perfidious league of slaves in the parishes of St. Philip, Christ Church, St. John, and St. George in their mad career, were setting fire to canes, as well as pillaging and destroying the buildings on many estates, and otherwise pursuing a system of devastation which has seldom been equalled'.⁴⁵ In spite of this information it was not until minutes before 10.00

45. Colonel Codd to Governor Leith, 25 April, 1816, CO. 28/85, ff. 11-14; also, *Barbados Mercury and Bridgetown Gazette* 30 April, 1816.

a.m. that parties of the imperial troops moved out of the garrison. The mobilization of the militia, though slow, was somewhat more efficient than the muster of the imperial troops, whose movements during the entirety of the rebellion show a certain lack of enthusiasm for combat.

The St. Philip and Christ Church militia were fully mustered by 5.00 a.m. About 6.00 a.m., the Life Guard, part of the militia force, was prepared to convey intelligence to the field Officers concerning the spread of the insurrection. According to Colonel Eversley of the St. Philip and Christ Church regiments, the first detachment moved out at 5.00 a.m., the second about 7.00 a.m., and the third, under his command, about 9.00 a.m.⁴⁶ By 9.30 a.m., the imperial troops had not yet fully mustered.⁴⁷ The battalions of the St. Philip and Christ Church militia, once in the field, moved quickly and with great confidence. The second detachment, under the command of Colonel Best, one of the largest planters in the parish of Christ Church, was subsequently highly praised by the Assembly for the efficiency of its performance.⁴⁸ In addition, it was noted that throughout the rebellion, the speedy manoeuvring of Colonel Best's detachment was matched only by the left wing of the 1st West Indian (Black) regiment under the command of Major Cassidy.⁴⁹

The core parishes of the rebellion, St. Philip and Christ Church, while being topographically unsuited to the 'hit and run' methods of warfare used by rebel slaves in the New World, were the two most densely populated outside St. Michael, where Bridgetown, the capital, was located. The islandwide census for 1817 (see table below) showed Christ Church with a total slave population of 9,915, the largest after St. Michael. Next was St. Philip with 9,475. Other parishes had slave populations of three to six thousand. Outside St. Michael, or more precisely, Bridgetown and its environs, these two parishes also contained the largest white populations. St. Philip had a total white population of 1,393, and Christ Church, 1,618.⁵⁰ These two parishes had the largest proportion of the island's white males who were able to bear arms, and consequently, at least numerically, the strongest militia. In April 1816, the total black population of the island was approximately 77,000. The free-coloured population, which under the 1812 militia act was required to contribute to militia service, was 3,007. By this time the size of the militia force was between 3,200 and 3,350 men.⁵¹

When the parishes of St. John, St. Thomas, and St. George are included, as the outer circle of the rebellion, then the estimated total slave population exposed directly to the rebellion would be about 36,700. In 1816, the sexual structure of the slave population was approximately 54% female and 46% male. Of

46. *Ibid.* Also Extracts from a private letter, dated 27th April, St. Anns Garrison, Barbados, CO. 28/85, ff. 22-23. Evidence of Colonel Eversley, *The Report*, pp. 28-29.

47. *Ibid.*

48. *Ibid.*

49. Colonel Codd to Governor Leith, 25 April, 1816, *op. cit.*

50. Census of Barbados, 1817 (31st October) CO. 28/86.

51. See Minutes of Council, 13 January 1812, CO. 31/45. Also, An account of the islands population, CO. 28/86, f. 76.

the some 16,982 males, about 30% were aged (over 60 years) and juvenile (under 16 years).⁵² This meant that only about 12,887 male slaves in these parishes were able to bear arms. By piecing together the data on the rebellion, it is possible to state, though tentatively, that no more than 30% of these men took up arms and engaged the militia and imperial troops. Therefore, based upon this calculation, about 3,900 male slaves were involved in armed combat with the militia and regular soldiers, who totalled about 4,000 men. Watson, without giving any calculation, suggested that no more than 5,000 slaves were involved.⁵³

No known evidence exists to suggests that women, though they were involved in the organisation of the rebellion, for which some of them were executed, took part in the armed clashes. Taking into consideration that a small proportion of the island's total militia forces was deployed in St. Lucy, St. Peter, and St. James, and that a detachment of the imperial troops was sent to guard Bridgetown, it is possible to suggest that the number of slaves involved in armed combat probably did not exceed the number of militia men and imperial soldiers deployed.

*Size and Distribution of the Barbados Population, 1816-1817**

<i>Parish</i>	<i>Free Coloured</i>	<i>Slave</i>	<i>Whites</i>	<i>Blacks to Whites</i>
	<i>1816</i>	<i>1817</i>	<i>1817</i>	<i>1817</i>
St. John	100	5,469	1,246	4.3:1
St. Joseph	89	3,466	1,124	3.0:1
Christ Church	82	9,915	1,618	6.0:1
St. Michael	1,933	18,193	5,038	3.6:1
St. Thomas	76	5,173	835	6.2:1
St. George	94	6,762	945	7.1:1
St. Andrew	178	3,394	630	5.3:1
St. Lucy	35	5,466	1,058	5.1:1
St. Philip	147	9,475	1,393	6.8:1
St. Peter	240	6,230	1,379	4.5:1
St. James	33	3,950	755	5.2:1
<i>Totals</i>	<i>3,007</i>	<i>77,493</i>	<i>16,021</i>	<i>4.8:1</i>

The first major battle between the militia and the rebel army took place on Lowthers plantation at noon on Monday. Colonel Eversley noted that the three detachments of the Christ Church and St. Philip militia were instructed before

52. The decennial age and sex composition of the slave population is given in the 1817 census. I have estimated that at least 30% of all slave males were under 16 and over 60 years of age. See also J. Handler, F. Lange, *Plantation Slavery in Barbados: An archaeological and Historical investigation* (Cambridge, 1978, Harvard University Press) pp. 67-72.

53. Watson suggested without providing any form of calculation, that the number of rebels did not exceed 5,000. *op. cit.* p. 132.

* Source: The 1817 census of Barbados CO. 28/86, P.R.O.

leaving the fort at Oistin Bay in Christ Church, to rendezvous at Fairy valley, immediately south of Coverley plantation in that parish. He stated:

‘it was about twelve o’clock that we met with a large body of the insurgent slaves in the yard of Lowthers plantation [1 ½ miles north of Fairy valley], several of whom were armed with muskets, who displayed the Colours of the St. Philip Battalion which they had stolen, and who, upon seeing the division, cheered, and cried out to us, “come on!” but were quickly dispersed upon being fired on.’⁵⁴

Colonel Best was accredited by the Assembly for engineering the defeat of the rebels at Lowthers – the battle which is said to have undermined the morale of the rebels and illustrated their military weaknesses.⁵⁵ His account of the battle represents to date the most detailed report on an encounter between militia forces and the rebel forces.

Colonel Best stated that on arrival at Lowthers with the 2nd detachment, they encountered a rebel contingent which outnumbered his men four to one. The militiamen, nonetheless, were confident that they could defeat the slaves, and drew great psychological strength from the realisation that, in the words of Colonel Best, ‘defeat would have been worse than death.’⁵⁶ The militiamen fought as if the entire existence of white civilization in Barbados was at stake. Reports of the rebels’ massacre of white soldiers and civilians in Haiti were common topics of discussion among Barbadian whites, and Colonel Best had no difficulty in generating a high level of courage and enthusiasm among his men. He noted that the rebels had consolidated their position at Lowthers, ‘joined by every negro belonging to the plantation.’⁵⁷ For no other plantation is there evidence that all slaves joined the rebel forces. On seeing the militia approach the estate they formed what Colonel Best described as an ‘irregular line’ before commencing their attack. The formation of lines was a common strategic technique in European military culture, and its adoption by the Lowthers slaves reflects either their military confidence, or the extreme degree of creolization experienced by the island’s slave community. Ambush and surprise attacks, the common military techniques used by West Indian slaves and maroons in their battles with white soldiers and militia men, were initially abandoned at Lowthers, though employed in other battles later that day. The militiamen also formed their line, no doubt a more regular one, and the battle was commenced. Best noted:

‘My lads were too anxious and began to fire while I was leading them close up . . . One negro was brandishing his sword which my soldiers could not witness without endeavouring to knock him over. Others were arm’d with pitchforks, on seeing which the militia commenced firing . . . They gave way immediately.’⁵⁸

54. See *The Report*, evidence of Colonel Eversley, pp. 28-29. Also, Colonel Best to Abel Dottin; two letters dated 27 April and 28 September 1816, Barbados. New York Public Library N.Y.P.L.) *op. cit.*

55. *The Barbados Mercury and Bridgetown Gazette*, 30th April, 1816 Report on the progress of the rebellion.

56. Colonel Best to Abel Dottin, 27th April. *op. cit.*

57. *Ibid.*

58. *Ibid.*

Under pressure from the militia's superior fire power, the rebel army fled in different directions, but to reassemble later for the counter-attack. Many fled north through Woodbourne, and some east into Searles. The largest group, however, fled south through Coverley, the direction which the militia took to Lowthers after it had assembled at Fairy Valley. Best continued:

'We pursued and killed some; their rapid flight however saved numbers. We had to march from estate to estate to quell the insurgents for they all set to plunder and destroy the dwelling houses. We killed about 30 men . . . [and] had not even a man wounded. Yes! One slightly by a shot from a pistol. The Villian was shot down immediately.'⁵⁹

While the Christ Church militia was pursuing the rebels, one group which had reassembled on the periphery of Lowthers 'doubled back' and proceeded to finish the destruction of that estate.⁶⁰ At Coverley, just south of Lowthers, the slaves did not assist the fleeing rebels in combat with the militia. When Colonel Best took a unit of his men through the estate in search of the fleeing Lowthers rebels, the slaves merely observed them passively. Colonel Best was not convinced, however, that this meant their non-commitment to the rebellion. He noted that the following day these Coverley slaves went on strike. Their refusal to work, Best believed, was the result 'either of fear of the rebels, or from being too deeply implicated in their plans.'⁶¹ He offered no specific explanation, but left the ambivalence for Abel Dottin, absentee owner of the estate, to reconcile.

An outstanding feature of the battle at Lowthers was the great courage and loyalty displayed by the free coloured men of the Christ Church militia under Colonel Best's command. When news of the rebellion spread throughout southern Barbados, the free coloured men, with little or no hesitation, came to the assistance of the white community. It is not known what percentage of the some 3,007 free-coloured population had enrolled for militia service, but Colonel Best had many within his detachment. Throughout the years of the war with the French, the propertied and 'respectable' members of this community had adopted a posture of support for the planter elite in order to gain political support for their own objectives. They did not aggressively confront the white community, but were generally moderate and humble in their political demands. Unlike the free-coloureds in other islands whose ideological expressions in relation to slaves and whites show much ambivalence, in Barbados their leadership was firmly pro-planter. Colonel Best believed that his free-coloured men were instrumental in the defeat of the Blacks at Lowthers and during subsequent mopping up operations. He wrote:

'The free colour'd people behaved admirably. They, as well as the white soldiers that I commanded were devoted to me . . . They would dash singly into a house full of rebels without looking behind for support and dig out the fellows. It was this intrepid courage that appalled the Blacks.'⁶²

59. *Ibid.*

60. *Ibid.*

61. *Ibid.*

62. *Ibid.*

The free-coloureds were given an extension of their civil liberties in 1817. They were allowed the right to bear witness in courts against whites, the ironic reward for their firm support of the planters during the insurrection.

The Christ Church militia, having killed 30 rebels at Lowthers on Monday afternoon, continued to track down scattered groups throughout the night and the following Tuesday morning. By Tuesday mid-day Colonel Best reported that another ten were killed in combat. He was, however, alarmed by the shift in the rebels' strategy. Unable to make any headway against the militia forces, the rebels, according to Best, resorted to a more extensive system of arson in order to inflict maximum damage upon the planters. Best wrote:

'Large quantities of canes were burnt and I think more on the second night than the first, which proved that although the rebels were subdued by arms, they were nevertheless determined to do all possible mischief. Houses were gutted and the very floors taken up. The destruction is dreadful, the plundering beyond anything you can conceive could be effected in so short a time.'⁶³

Nonetheless, Colonel Best continued,

'our success at Lowthers and our subsequent rapid movements for that day stopped the progress of the Rebellion in Christ Church. The news of our success passed quickly to the Rebels in the upper part of St. Philip and struck dismay'.⁶⁴

In comparison, however, the progress of the imperial troops was rather less than exemplary. Colonel Codd, commandant at the Garrison, stated that he had received information concerning the rebellion at about 2.00 a.m. on Monday, and at about '10.00 a.m., having waited in vain for authentic information of the strength and position of the insurgents . . . deemed it necessary to march off to the quarter of the country where the alarm had first spread.'⁶⁵ This suggests either a breakdown of military intelligence or a lack of keenness to be involved in the affair. He moved with a force consisting of three field pieces under the command of Major Brough, and in order not to expose his men to what appeared to have been fanatical slaves, he called out 150 [black] men of the first West India regiment under Major Cassidy's command to support the 200 men of the 15th regiment under the command of Lt. Colonel Davidson. Also accompanying this force were 250 men of the Royal Regiment of the St. Michael militia under the command of Colonel Mayers. Left behind was 'a force fully adequate to the protection of the Garrison and town under the command of Lt. Colonel Edwards of the Bourbon regiment.'⁶⁶

The march of the imperial troops into St. Philip, in spite of the flat and open terrain, proved a difficult one. The heat of the mid-day sun, which took a great toll on European soldiers in the West Indies, was an obstacle to their

63. *Ibid.*

64. *Ibid.*

65. Colonel Codd to Governor Leith, 25th April, 1816, *op. cit.*

66. *Ibid.*

speedy movement. The various detachments, having moved out of the Garrison at about 10.00 a.m. proceeded through Dash Valley and Boarded Hall in St. George, where they rested at mid-day to move again in the early afternoon. It was soon after this, on arrival at the St. Philip border, that Colonel Codd 'detached parties in several directions through the country where the sugar canes were blazing on every side.' All troops were halted at five, 'after a most fatiguing day's march . . . to refresh', in order to march again.⁶⁷ The tactics of Colonel Codd suggest that he wanted to protect, as much as possible, the white soldiers from the rebel army. He ordered Colonel Mayers with the St. Michael militia to march towards the Thicket, the core of the rebellion. The black soldiers of the West India regiment were also directed into the area with instructions to take up a position at Bayleys plantation where Bussa was in control. Meanwhile, he took up a safer position at the St. Philip parish Church, both to rest his soldiers and to 'observe the progress of the fires in order to direct . . . subsequent movement.'⁶⁸

On his way to the Thicket, Colonel Mayers received intelligence that a body of rebels had made a stand there.⁶⁹ But before reaching the area his detachment met up with men from the St. Philip militia, who were being attacked by a rebel group from Sandford plantation. Both militia groups withdrew and rested the night. At day-break they jointly attacked the rebels in Sandford plantation yard, and the rebels were dispersed. Some were killed and prisoners were also taken. These Sandford slaves, unlike those at Lowthers, did not form lines of attack, but tried to ambush the militiamen in the plantation yard.⁷⁰ Some of these rebels were armed with muskets. Charles, chief Driver, and also leader of the plantation, was on horseback giving orders and waving his muskets.⁷¹ It was during this battle that Brewster, the militiaman, was killed.⁷²

The West India regiment arrived outside Bayleys plantation on Monday evening before sunset. Major Cassidy sent a message to Colonel Codd, who was only seven miles away, informing him that he had identified a large party of insurgents, but as he could not ascertain their numbers he desired orders whether he should await his coming up or attack them immediately. Colonel Codd, not surprisingly, informed Major Cassidy that he must act to the best of his judgement, but that he would not bring his troops up until daybreak.⁷³ At dawn the battle commenced at Bayleys between an estimated 400 rebels and 150 men of the 1st West India regiment.⁷⁴ It was probably during this battle that Bussa was killed. One white soldier stated that the rebels, on seeing the black regiment approaching, were temporarily confused.⁷⁵ There had been many rumours in

67. *Ibid.* See also, 'Extract from a Private Letter dated 27th April St. Ann's Garrison, Barbados,' CO. 28/85, ff. 22-23. *op. cit.*

68. *Ibid.*

69. Colonel Codd to Governor Leith, 25th April, 1816, *op. cit.*

70. Evidence of Major Oxley, *The Report*, p. 32.

71. *Ibid.*

72. Confession of Robert, a slave, *The Report*, p. 30.

73. Evidence of Major Oxley, *The Report*, *op. cit.*

74. Colonel Codd to Governor Leith, 25th April, 1816.

75. 'Extract from a private letter' *op. cit.*

the slave ranks that an Haitian revolutionary army would be landing at Barbados to assist them in their struggle for freedom.

Some rebels at Bayleys on seeing the black soldiers in red uniforms were probably under the impression that these men were their Haitian reinforcements. It is also plausible that some of the rebels knew exactly who the soldiers were, but probably thought that racial solidarity might have prevailed instead. In any event, there was some initial confusion in the rebel ranks. The soldier wrote:

‘The insurgents did not think our men would fight against black men, but thank God they were deceived . . . The conduct of our Bourbon Blacks, particularly the light company under Captain Smith (an old twelfth hand) has been the admiration of everybody and deservedly.’⁷⁶

When the rebels realised that the ‘Bourbon Blacks’ were there to defeat rather than assist them, they fired and immediately killed two of them, badly wounding another. The fire was returned, and after much exchange 40 rebels were killed and 70 taken prisoner. Most were dispersed, once again, as a result of superior fire power. A large group fled north and reassembled at Golden Grove plantation, some three-quarters of a mile away. They took cover at the plantation’s ‘Great House’, owned by Assemblyman, Mr. Grasset. The ‘Bourbon Blacks’ pursued them and surrounded the house, from which the rebels fired upon them. According to the soldier’s narrative, the rebels ‘were soon dislodged, many of them killed and wounded leaping from the windows and rushing through the doors.’⁷⁷

About 8.30 a.m., after the rebels were defeated, Colonel Codd arrived at Bayleys with his white soldiers. He was quick, however, to order his men to take over the mopping up operations in the area. He informed the Governor:

‘The only plan I could then adopt was to destroy their [slaves’] houses in order to deprive them of some of their hiding places and resources, and to recover their plunder. After diligently scanting them, I set fire to and consumed several on those plantations where little else remained.’⁷⁸

During this operation, Colonel Codd noted that some of the militiamen of the parishes in insurrection, ‘under the irritation of the moment and exasperated at the atrocity of the insurgents . . . were inclined to use their arms rather too indiscriminately in pursuit of the fugitives’.⁷⁹ Slaves not in rebellion were killed in this rampage. Many of them returned to their estates having been out in hiding from the rebel forces.

During the morning, while these purges were taking place, Colonel Codd received ‘the most alarming account’ from Lt. General Haynes of the militia that the rebels were consolidating their forces in St. John where great damage was being done to the estates, and that a ‘body of insurgents had threatened the Town and thrown it into the greatest confusion’.⁸⁰ The slaves were now taking

76. *Ibid.*

77. *Ibid.*

78. Colonel Codd to Governor Leith, 25 April, 1816, *op. cit.*

79. *Ibid.*

80. *Ibid.*

the core of the rebellion into the outer regions of St. John, St. George, and St. Thomas. Some rebels who had escaped the Christ Church militia at Lowthers were preparing to make an onslaught on Bridgetown. Colonel Codd immediately called up Colonel Mayers of the St. Michael Militia to fall back on Bridgetown with a party of the 15th regiment, taking all prisoners who were captured at Bayleys, Thickets and Golden Grove.⁸¹

Colonel Codd documented his movements for Tuesday afternoon as follows: 'Having secured my position at Baileys, the rendezvous of the insurgents', 'I marched off in the direction of St. John to offer protection in that Quarter.'⁸² He arrived there about 4.00 p.m. that afternoon (Tuesday) and was soon 'perfectly satisfied' that 'the insurgents were not in a position strong enough for attack or defence'.⁸³ Still worried that rebel slaves out in the fields would double back on Bayleys, as they had done during the Lowthers battle, Colonel Codd returned there with a party of seventy men and a field piece. By Tuesday night, according to the Colonel Codd, conflagrations had ceased 'and the dismay and alarm which had seized the colonists in a great degree subsided.'⁸⁴ He returned to Head Quarters on Wednesday. By this time at least 150 blacks were killed, four free-coloureds and over 400 blacks arrested pending trial.⁸⁵ The Bridgetown scare was short-lived, and mopping up operations continued swiftly in the central parishes.

By Wednesday morning the St. Lucy rebels were also quelled. They had entered the rebellion, not on the Sunday night, but during the following Monday. The limited information relating to the rebellion in this parish suggests that a small group of slaves had set about burning selected estates. Three estates in all were extensively damaged. Bourbon plantation was the most damaged. No fighting between rebels and militia was reported. It seems that these slaves withdrew as a detachment of the St. Lucy, St. Andrew, St. Thomas and St. Peter militia arrived in the area. By mid-day Wednesday, the rebellion was perceived by Colonel Codd to be quashed, as group resistance and arson had ceased.

ASSEMBLY'S ANALYSIS OF REVOLT

On the 6th of August, the House of Assembly appointed an investigative Committee to report on the origins and causes of the rebellion. By this time, most of the rebel leaders held captive were tried and executed. The Committee was composed of Messrs. Pinder, Nurse, Jordan, Cobham and Colonels Best and Mayers. In September it was restructured, excluding Colonel Best, who did not support the committee's view that the slaves were led into rebellion by delu-

81. *Ibid.*

82. *Ibid.*

83. *Ibid.*

84. *Ibid.*

85. *Ibid.*

sion sponsored by a small rebel elite. The report was finally published on the 7th of January, 1818.⁸⁶ It reflected an opinion generally held by the planters that the rebellion originated in the campaign for slave emancipation led by Mr. Wilberforce and the African Institute. Wilberforce was accused by the investigative committee of having agents and spies in Barbados, who had informed the slaves that the process leading to their freedom was being obstructed by the planters, and that it was therefore up to them to assert pressure from their end by violent means. It stated:

‘ . . . towards the latter end of 1815, a report became generally prevalent among the slaves of this island, that the benefits of freedom would probably be extended to them through the interposition of their friends in England . . . ’⁸⁷

Furthermore, the report stated, the rebellion originated

‘solely and entirely in consequence of the intelligence imparted to the slaves, which intelligence was obtained from the English Newspapers, that their freedom had been granted them in England . . . These reports first took their rise immediately after the information of the proposed establishments of Registries in the British Settlements in the West Indies . . . and in the mistaken idea that the Registry Bill was actually their Manumission . . . ; these hopes were strengthened and kept alive by the promises held out, that a party in England, and particularly Mr. Wilberforce . . . were exerting themselves to ameliorate their condition, and ultimately effect their emancipation.’⁸⁸

An anonymous planter, referring to Wilberforce and other members of the African Institute as a ‘dangerous crew’, wrote a letter to the *Barbados Mercury and Bridgetown Gazette*, stating that they

‘have pierced the inmost recesses of our island, inflected deep and deadly words in the minds of the black population, and engendered the Hydra, Rebellion, which had well nigh deluged our fields with blood.’⁸⁹

The *London Times* suggested that the Rebellion was due primarily to the ‘impolite’ and thoughtless interference of Wilberforce in the political business of the Barbadian planters. It informed its readers:

‘The principal instigators of this insurrection, who are negroes of the worst dispositions, but of superior understanding, and some of whom can read and write, availed themselves of this parliamentary interference and the public anxiety it occasioned, to instill into the minds of the slaves generally a belief that they were already freed by the King and Parliament . . . ’⁹⁰

The slaves, or at least the more informed among them, were aware,

86. See R. Schomburgk, *The History of Barbados, op. cit.*, pp. 398-9.

87. *The Report*, p. 6.

88. *Ibid.* pp. 10, 12.

89. Anon; Letter to the *B.M.B.G.*, 7, September, 1816.

90. *The London Times*, June 5th, 1816.

especially after the abolition of the slave trade in 1807, of Wilberforce's hostility to slavery. His success in 1807, and his ability to mobilise parliamentary support in order to impose amelioration measures upon the planters, established him as a hero among West Indian slaves. By January, 1816, the leaders of the rebellion, who according to the Assembly, 'had gained an ascendancy over their fellows by being enabled to read and write', had obtained a reasonable amount of information concerning the political situation both in Barbados and the London West India Community.⁹¹ This information was obtained from both local and English newspapers, which were read throughout the slave communities by the literate few. In the confessions of Robert, for example, a slave from Simmons plantation, it is stated that Nanny Grigg, a domestic slave on the plantation, frequently read English and local papers, and informed other slaves on the developments in Haiti and in the metropolis. Barbadian newspapers carried reports on the progress of the Haitian revolution, which while incensing whites, no doubt excited the blacks. For example, *The Barbados Mercury and Bridgetown Gazette* carried the following summary on the 9th of April 1805.

'It now seems beyond all doubt that . . . St. Domingo . . . that ill-fated country . . . has again become the theatre of massacre and bloodshed, and the last remnants of French power almost completely overthrown.'⁹²

Information concerning Wilberforce's campaign, distorted and sometimes totally inaccurate, filtered through the slave communities, adding flame to the burning issue of the day – general emancipation. Daniel, a slave from the River plantation where Bussa had met with Jackey, Davis and Sarjeant on the Good Friday night, confessed that Davis had informed him and others that the English newspaper carried reports to the effect that 'Mr. Wilberforce had sent out to have them all freed, but that the inhabitants of the island were against it . . . and that they must fight for it.'⁹³ To exemplify the view held by many slaves of Mr. Wilberforce as a 'hero', Thomas Harris, a free man of colour, confessed before the Assembly's committee that

'he heard many negroes say they were to be free, and that Mr. Wilberforce was a father to them, and when they obtained their freedom their children would all be called after him.'⁹⁴

News of the rebellion reached Parliament during the discussions concerning the tactics necessary to secure the Spanish abolition of their slave trade. Wilberforce considered the planters wholly responsible for the propaganda which ignited rebelliousness within the slave community in early 1816, and expressed these views firmly. In a letter to Babington, dated 7th June, he stated that from the very earliest abolition efforts, the Barbadian planters kept clamouring,

'it is emancipation you mean, you mean to make our slaves free, we all

91. *The Report*, p. 6.

92. *B.M.B.G.*, 9, April, 1805. CO. 28/72, f. 91.

93. Examination of Daniel, a Slave on the River Plantation, *The Report*, p. 26.

94. The Deposition of Thomas Harris, *The Report*, p. 39.

the time denying it. At length – wonderful that not before – the slaves themselves begin to believe it, and to take measures for securing the privilege; in short, the artillery they had loaded so high against us, bursts among themselves, and they impute to us the loading and pointing of it.’⁹⁵

The Barbados newspapers were not alone in suggesting that the Registry Bill was in some way connected to a wider emancipation plan. The *Jamaica Royal Gazette* of March 1816, stated that the Bill was founded upon emancipation views well calculated to produce insurrection among the slaves.⁹⁶ Yet, though Barbadian slaves were not the only ones exposed to this equation, they alone revolted. Planters went to great lengths to provide evidence that the slaves had no material causes for revolt. The report stated:

‘The year 1816 was remarkable for having yielded the most abundant returns with which Providence had ever rewarded the labours of the inhabitants of this island. The rich and extensive Parish of St. Philip, in particular, is peculiarly qualified, from the nature of the soil, for the production of corn and other provisions; and the liberal allowance to the negroes, and abundant supplies in the granaries (of the estates on which revolt occurred), evidently prove that the Origin of the Rebellion must be sought for in some other than in any local and peculiar cause.’⁹⁷

One plantation manager, Joseph Gittens, went as far as to state that the revolt occurred because the slaves were too well treated. He told the Commissioners that the slaves had

‘great indulgences granted them by proprietors and overseers, such as, permitting them to have dances frequently on Saturdays and Sundays evenings, easing their burdens by the use of every species of machinery which they could effect . . . all of which induced them to assume airs of importance, and put a value on themselves unknown amongst slaves of former periods.’⁹⁸

By dismissing the material-deprivation thesis, the Commissioners implied that the slave rebellion was directed specifically against the entire system of slavery and white domination. In the words of Colonel Best, the blacks sought ‘to become masters, instead of the slaves of the island.’⁹⁹ The rebels were therefore attempting to preempt the metropolitan reformist campaign by posing a revolutionary solution to the issue of emancipation in vogue. In support of this, Thomas Moody, a local planter noted in October 1816, that the rebellion was an attempt by ‘the mass of the slaves . . . to gain independence’.¹⁰⁰ Col-

95. R. and S. Wilberforce, (eds.) *The Life of Wilberforce*, *op. cit.* p. 288.

96. *Remarks on the Insurrection*, *op. cit.* f. 4.

97. *The Report*, p. 15.

98. The Examination of Joseph Gittens, Manager at Padmore Plantation, *The Report*, pp. 46-47.

99. Colonel Best to Abel Dottin, 2nd September 1816, *op. cit.*

100. Thomas Moody to H. Goulburn, 14 October 1816, CO. 28/85, f. 44. Moody made this statement in relation to continued slave unrest after the rebellion, specifically after the minor skirmish in September 1816.

onel Codd's view that the rebel slaves had planned to destroy all the white men on the island, taking the females for their own use, was also supported by Colonel Best.¹⁰¹ To effect this revolution, the slave leaders, according to Colonel Best, had emissaries throughout the island.¹⁰² Revolution had succeeded in Haiti in achieving freedom, and the slaves knew this. Nanny Grigg, a prominent slave woman on Simmons plantation where Jackey coordinated the rebellion, held the view, which she expressed to other slaves, that if freedom was to be obtained they would have 'to fight for it'.

From the beginning of the nineteenth century slaves in Barbados were becoming increasingly anxious and restless, as they perceived the possibility of obtaining legislated freedom to be, unlike in all previous times, fairly good. Parliamentary discussions in England were serious and fruitful, as seen in the 1807 Abolition Act and subsequent amelioration measures. Then there was also the example set by the Haitians, which, according to Watson, though it is difficult to measure, must not be undervalued in terms of its psychological impact upon slaves in the region. Mrs. Fenwick stated that in the years prior to the rebellion, the slaves did not only seem very restless, but many were visibly refusing to be co-operative. This was especially so among the artisans and domestics, the elite slaves who were closer to both full freedom and political information.¹⁰³ These were the ones who seemed to have had much political and social influence over their communities. Some planters were aware of the growing agitation and increasing social tension. During the House of Assembly debate of 10th December, 1810, it was noted that 'the increase of arrogance and vice among the slaves', particularly those in Bridgetown who were more aware of the activities of Mr. Wilberforce, 'has occasioned, nay demanded, punishment.'¹⁰⁴ For the first time since the early eighteenth century, serious discussions were taking place in the Assembly concerning the 'relaxed state of the police and the effects which it produces amongst the slaves.'¹⁰⁵ From 1804, when the Haitian revolutionaries declared their independence from France, House of Assembly debates became increasingly focused upon the apparent increase of insolence among the slaves. Robert Haynes, planter-assemblyman, stated that he knew there was something 'brewing up in their minds', but never suspected it to be of rebellious proportions.¹⁰⁶ It was generally thought that a tightening of police systems was all that was necessary to restore the traditional order.

Between 1808 and 1815, the system of slave control came under increased pressure, and this resulted in the development of new forms of social control. Slave unrest reached a stage whereby plantation managers were unable to impose discipline in an effective manner without resort to public facilities, such as prisons and the Bridgetown cage. The latter was an institution which was used

101. Colonel Codd to Governor Leith, 25 April, 1816, *op. cit.*

102. Colonel Best to Abel Dottin, 27, April, 1816, *op. cit.*

103. Eliza Fenwick to Mrs. Fenwick January 10th 1812, Also, December 11, 1814 to Mary Hays, in A.F. Webbs (ed.) *The Fate of the Fenwicks op. cit.* pp. 75-76, 163-164.

104. Minutes of Assembly, 10th December 1810, CO. 31/45.

105. See Lord Camden to Governor Seaforth, 24 November, 1804, CO. 29/29, f. 43.

106. Robert Haynes to Thomas Lane, September 23, 1816 *op. cit.*

from the seventeenth century to confine runaway slaves while the process of law was being implemented.¹⁰⁷ In April 1811, the speaker of the House of Assembly, John Beckles, while accepting the need to improve the efficiency of slave control, the result of increased slave resistance, informed the House that the practice of owners sending their slaves to the Cage as a general punishment was illegal.¹⁰⁸ Beckles insisted that only captured runaway slaves, and not generally insubordinate slaves, should be confined to the Cage.¹⁰⁹ The Bridgetown Cage was soon reported to be filled with captured runaways and other rebellious slaves. This was a new development. One constable informed the House that for the following month of May, 1811, 28 slaves were imprisoned in the Cage for running away, 24 lodged there by their owners for general insubordination, and 9 legally committed for committing serious public offenses.¹¹⁰ Between 1811 and 1816, the names of over 200 slaves were listed in the *Barbados Mercury and Bridgetown Gazette* as captured runaways, some of whom were executed for rebellion. Many owners refused to repossess their captured slaves, and some insisted that the full force of the law be applied, that is, capital punishment, especially for those who committed public crimes while absent.

An analysis of the above lists illustrates that a substantial proportion of runaways were elite slaves, particularly artisans, and also that many were mulattos. These were the elite slaves upon whom the plantations depended for smooth operation and social stability. Their increasing restlessness and hostility to planter authority was illustrated by the full range of actions, from negative work attitudes to open rebellion. Many advertisements for elite slave runaways appeared in the newspaper in 1815-1816. For example, notices appeared for Ben Stuart, 'a runaway mulatto carpenter, who looks very much like a white man with light straight hair and grey eyes';¹¹¹ for Joe, a fisherman, popularly known in Bridgetown, St. Thomas and Christ Church,¹¹² for April, who 'has a very English tongue.'¹¹³ Also listed in the Minutes of Council were those runaways executed at law. For example, in 1811 Isaac Parfitt and James Moore petitioned the Council for £ 25 each, the value of their rebellious slaves executed at law.¹¹⁴ The increased number of executions suggests that this upsurge of maroon activity was not simply the result of slaves' desire for a few hours or days respite from the plantations. These were the elite slaves who led the rebellion.

107. Minutes of the Assembly, 13 April, 1811, CO. 31/45.

108. *Ibid.*

109. *Ibid.*

110. *Ibid.*

111. *B.M.B.G.*, January 13, 1816.

112. *Ibid.*, May 6, 1815.

113. *Ibid.*, May 20, 1815.

CONCLUSION

The rebellion failed to fulfil its immediate objective, but the anti-slavery movement in the metropolis succeeded in pushing emancipation bills through Parliament in 1833 and 1838, legally ending slavery and terminating almost half a century of intense and heated debate. The rebellion was the contribution of Barbadian slaves to that debate. It was their attempt to influence the future path of their society. They proved to the English Parliament that, contrary to the planters' assertions, they were not content with their status as slaves, and that their intention was to free themselves by force of arms, as imperial reformist means seemed unduly slow, if not unreliable.

The premature uprising of the slaves ensured some chaos and disarray at the levels of strategy and logistics. Many organisational shortcomings can be identified in the slaves' offensive. Firstly, their refusal or inability to obtain substantial support among the free coloured population weakened the impact of their onslaught upon the planter class. In both the Haitian Revolution and the Fedon uprising in Grenada during the 1790's, large numbers of free coloureds played critical roles in the organisation of popular anti-planter sentiments. In Barbados, the bulk of the free-coloured people threw their firm support behind the whites. The rebels did not expect their loyalty to be otherwise, and indeed some prominent assemblymen expected such solidarity.

Secondly, the inability of the rebels to secure sufficient arms rendered them an easy opposition for the militia and troops. Rumours concerning a successful raid upon the St. Philip magazine have not been verified. The data show that not many rebels had muskets, and most were armed with swords, cutlasses, pitchforks and other such agricultural weapons. The militia men were therefore able to attack with confidence and efficiency. For example, during the battle at Lowthers plantation Colonel Best noted that the rebels were mostly armed with agricultural implements, and few had muskets. King William, the leader of the rebel contingent from Sunberry plantation, was seen armed with a gun, as was Toby, the leader of the contingent from the Chapel plantation, and a few others. But the rank and file of the slave regiments were not so armed.¹¹⁵

Thirdly, the inability of the organisers to secure, probably as a result of the premature uprising, the continued support of the majority of the slaves, allowed the militia to move quickly in pursuit of fleeing rebels. In St. Philip, where the rebels were in need of solid support to combat the imperial troops, commitment was scanty.

The problems experienced by the rebels in obtaining greater support probably resulted from the elitist nature of the leadership. Much is not known about the daily social relations between skilled elite slaves and common field slaves, but it seems possible that the preferential treatment received by the former led to much resentment, jealousy and suspicion among the latter. The resort to

115. Colonel Best to Abel Dottin, 27 April, *op. cit.* Also, *The Report*: evidence of Colonel Eversley. Here it is cited that at Lowthers, 'several' rebels had muskets.

force and threats by the leaders in order to raise popular support suggests that they too felt the field slaves to be docile, and held for them a measure of contempt. It is also possible that the field slaves were probably not convinced that the leadership was honest, and suspected that opportunism was the dominant force behind their actions. Their refusal to support the rebellion could therefore be seen as a rejection of the elite slaves' assumption of socio-political leadership.

The rebellion as an isolated military event was quickly suppressed, but the process of resistance continued. On the 30th of April, the speaker of the Assembly stated:

'this commotion, as was naturally to be expected, has been suppressed, and we sincerely wish that the fate of those deluded men who have fallen victims of their rashness and folly may be a salutary warning to those who have returned to their duty, and that they may hereafter be impressed with this feeling that it is only by a faithful performance of it that they can look for that protection and those comforts which every master is desirous of offering his slave.'¹¹⁶

The Governor was more forthright in his address to the slave population on the 26th of April. He informed them that slavery could be abolished only 'by a wise unremitting system of amelioration by which it will gradually produce its own reformation. By such means alone, and not by the attempting of a rash and destructive convulsion has slavery . . . happily changed.' In addition, the Governor continued,

'I cannot omit to express my satisfaction at the good sense and feeling of so large a proportion of you who rallied around your masters and their families . . . I trust, however, that the example . . . of those who lost their lives . . . save me from the painful task of using the ample power at all times in my hands to crush the refractory and punish the guilty.'¹¹⁷

Some slaves were obviously not impressed by the Governor's analysis of the events nor disturbed by his threats, and continued to express their hostility to slavery, both in and out of the production process. In June 1816, a white Barbadian described the post-rebellion feeling among blacks, and the dangers it posed for white society as follows:

'The disposition of the slaves in general is very bad. They are sullen and sulky and seem to cherish feelings of deep revenge. We hold the West Indies by a very precarious tenure – that of military strength only. I would not give a year's purchase for any island we now have.'¹¹⁸

Under martial law during June and early July, slaves continued to be arrested and tried. In September some were arrested for trying to organise a second insurrection. Colonel Best, who sat on the court martial which tried slaves arrested for planning this aborted September rebellion, informed Abel Dottin:

116. Reproduced in *B.M.B.G.*, Tuesday 30 April, 1816.

117. *Ibid.*

118. An anonymous letter sent from Barbados to London, dated, 6 June, 1816, CO 28/85. See also, M. Craton, *Testing the Chains op. cit.* pp. 265-266.

‘The negroes have hatched up another conspiracy . . . Murder was to have been the order of the day. As on the former occasion, the drivers, rangers, carpenters, and watchmen were chiefly concerned and few field labourers . . . I am under no apprehension as to the consequences . . . It is no longer delusion amongst the slaves . . . I once thought before, I am now convinced that they were not entirely, if at all, led away in the last business by delusion. They conceived themselves to be sufficiently numerous to become the masters . . . of the island.’¹¹⁹

The captives, according to Best, confessed that on the last occasion their tactics were wrong. Instead of engaging the entire militia in open combat, they should have aimed at and killed only the mounted officers, and by this means the rank and file would flee.¹²⁰ This was the plan for the September affair, but it was betrayed by one slave who informed the militia that he was offered any position in the rebel organisation which he desired.

Thomas Moody stated that this September affair, which originated in the parish of Christ Church, ‘excited much alarm and uneasiness in the minds of the inhabitants.’¹²¹ When the Secretary for colonies, however, requested Governor Leith to send all information relating to the insurrectionary attempt, it seems to have caused him much difficulty. He replied:

‘It does not . . . appear that the affair in question is of any extent to cause alarm, and may more properly be regarded as the result of one or two turbulent men, disappointed at their failure, endeavouring ineffectually to reproduce insubordination.’¹²²

The aborted September affair suggests, however, that slaves persisted in attempts to overthrow the planter regime and by that means gain their freedom. It became clear to the planters that much greater repression was necessary to keep the slaves in subjection. John Beckles summed up the debate in the House concerning the crisis in slave control by stating that the rebellious ‘spirit’ of the slaves was

‘not subdued, nor will it ever be subdued whilst these dangerous doctrines [of the abolitionist lobby] which have been spread abroad continue to be propagated among them. It behoves us to be upon guard, to keep a watch that we may not again be caught so shamefully unprepared. The comfort and happiness of our families require it – the safety and tranquility of the island call for it. It is a duty which we owe our constituents – it is a duty which we owe our country.’¹²³

119. Colonel Best to Abel Dottin, 28th September, 1816, *op. cit.*

120. *Ibid.*

121. Thomas Moody to H. Goulburn, 14 October, 1816, *op. cit.*

122. Governor Leith to Bathurst, 21 September, 1816, CO 28/85, f. 36.

123. *B.M.B.G.*, 25 January, 1817. See also, E. Stoute, ‘Glimpses of old Barbados’ *Advocate* – *News*, 18 October, 1970.

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